

ART. II.—"TAKE HEED HOW YE HEAR."

Take heed therefore how ye hear.—ST. LUKE viii. 18.

THE general scope and intention of these words of our blessed Lord is, doubtless, the same as that of St. James where he says, "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only."¹ The end and purpose of all religious teaching is to produce action on the part of the hearer. For if any man be a hearer, and not a doer, he deceives himself. It has been said of the eloquence of Cicero, that when he had concluded a speech, men would have exclaimed, "What a magnificent orator!" but when Demosthenes had spoken, the people would have cried, "Up! Let us march against Philip!" and so when we hear the Word preached, the result ought not to be only the expression of our approbation or disapprobation; but we should rather say, "Up! Let me conquer this sin—let me neglect that duty no more!" For, indeed, the only way of hearing profitably is to hear and do.

When we read in the New Testament of the Word being preached, we must not, however, suppose that the phrase "preaching" was used in the technical and official sense which it has acquired amongst us. The word was then *preached* by the social intercourse of Christians with their heathen friends and relations; by the conversation of fellow-travellers; by the private discussions of students and moral philosophers; by the writings of Christian apologists; and, above all, by the constancy of Christian martyrs. And in this manner all Christians are Christian ministers, and may go everywhere preaching the Word; but since we have confined the phrase "preaching" to the formal preaching of the clergy, we will narrow our thoughts down to this point, and touch briefly on what constitutes an ill hearer and a good hearer. And, in so doing, we shall perhaps meet with some thoughts which will for the future help us to fulfil the precept of our text, and "take heed how we hear."

I. In the preface to Bishop Butler's "Three Sermons on Human Nature"—one of the most valuable contributions that was ever made to moral science—there occurs this passage: "Though 'tis scarce possible to avoid judging, in some way or other, of almost everything which offers itself to one's thoughts, yet 'tis certain that many persons, from different causes, never exercise their judgment upon what comes before them in the way of determining whether it be conclusive and holds. They are perhaps entertained with some things, not so with others

¹ St. James i. 22.

—they like and they dislike; but whether that which is proposed to be made out be really made out—whether a matter be stated according to the real truth of the case, seems to the generality of people merely a circumstance of no consideration at all." And this is the first of the ill-ways of hearing which I would to-day bring under your notice. People do not come to hear, or care to hear, *truth as such*. One man likes to listen to anything that will confirm his own opinions. He has been brought up in one set of ideas, and it would distress him much to alter them. He listens, therefore, eagerly to anything which seems to confirm the truth of his own notions; but he is equally impatient of anything which seems to contradict them. When Paul preached on the stairs of the castle¹ at Jerusalem, the Jews gave him audience until he announced God's intention of including the Gentiles in the Church; but they would listen no longer. Such a contradiction of the ideas in which they had been educated they could not and would not bear. The truth of the matter was a question into which they did not care to enter; the confirmation of their prejudices was much more important.

Then, again, there is another hearer, who listens in a less serious spirit. He is willing to be entertained by what is brought forward, but it is almost a matter of indifference to him whether what is said be true or false, or in what measures truth and falsehood may be mixed. To him, as to the Athenians of old, amusement is the main point. "May we know what this new doctrine whereof thou speakest is?"² is the question. And that description of the Athenians, which paints them as spending "their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing,"³ applies pretty accurately to the man of "itching ears." The attainment of truth is not the thing at which he aims. In St. Chrysostom's days the same thing was common. "The bulk of our congregations," says he, "do not choose to look upon the preacher in the light of a teacher; but, overstepping their proper place as learners, they prefer to occupy that of spectators at public shows, for the people at public shows take up with different exhibitors—some admire one and some another. It is just the same in the Church. The congregations fall into parties. Some are admirers of one preacher, some of another, and they attend to what is said according to these likes or dislikes, for most hearers are not in the habit of hearing in order to be edified, but to be gratified, as if they were sitting to judge of the merit of some public actor or singer."⁴

¹ Acts xxii.

² Acts xvii. 19.

³ Acts xii. 21.

⁴ St. Chrysostom De Sacerdotio, Bk. v., c. i.

Then, again, there is the man who is so wrapt up in self-approval that, if the arrow shot by the preacher chances to go home and touch some flaw or weak point in his character, he resents it almost as a personal affront—like Ahab, who hated Elijah for denouncing him; like the scribes and Pharisees, who sought to kill Jesus because He told them the truth: he cannot bear an unpleasant veracity, but prefers infinitely an agreeable flattery.

And these three classes get little or no good from hearing, because they do not take care *how* they hear: they do not hear with the desire of getting at the truth about themselves and their faith and their duty.

There are also others who get little good from hearing, not because they do not care about truth in general, but because they are so sure that they already have it. Their truth is the truth; and by that standard they judge all things. They have none of that teachableness which is always willing to be instructed and corrected, if it be but done kindly; but on the assumption of their own infallibility they dispense unerring judgments. Does Paul preach the resurrection? They set that matter at rest with "What will this babbler say?"¹ or they assert charitably that he is "beside" himself.² That there might be "more things in heaven and earth than were dreamed of in their philosophy," was a thought that had never suggested itself to such men. Too critical and dogmatical a temper spoiled them as hearers of an inspired apostle, and it is to be feared that the same temper hinders many in these days from getting all the good they might from the preaching of the Word. On this point I may be forgiven for quoting the poet Herbert's well-known line:

Judge not the preacher, for he is thy judge.³

Then, again, there is the man who listens with a kind of contemptuous inattention. He attends church more for the sake of humouring the prejudices of society than for anything else. He hears the Word, but the Word not being mixed with faith in him that hears it, is unproductive and abortive.

So, also, there is one who hears, but does not hear well, for precisely the opposite reason: he does not despise the preacher, but admires him too much. He is the friend, not of God's Word, but of its mouthpiece, and he cares more for his favourite orator than for the message which he brings. "After their own lusts they heap up teachers to themselves."⁴ The partial hearer may also be enumerated among those who do not "take heed how they hear." He hears the Word but

¹ Acts xvii. 18.

² Acts xxvi. 24.

³ George Herbert's "Church Porch."

⁴ 2 Tim. iv. 3.

now and then, and most probably carries away very erroneous notions of what he does hear, because he is not aware of the numberless qualifications which any one portion of truth must receive from other portions. He judges on a mere fraction of the evidence, and what wonder if he errs! And has not our Lord Himself taught us the character of weak hearers of the Word? Without depth and firmness of character, rather lovers of pleasure, easily led—they are always forming good resolutions and as regularly breaking them. The devil, in the shape of worldly thoughts, or mistaken judgment, flies down and devours the good seed of the Word ere it can take root; or that horrible chain of habit binds them so strongly that, though they see and approve the good, they cannot break their bonds and become free to do it; or the fear of a little persecution scorches up the springing promise of holiness and leaves them like the rock—barren even under the highest culture.

All these, and such as these, are those who do not “take heed *how* they hear.”

II. Let us turn now to those who do hear well. And first among them I would place the man who listens in a charitable spirit towards the preacher. And it must be confessed that sermons need often to be listened to charitably, for they are often wanting in that power which commands attention. But the wonder is, not that sermons are so bad, but that they are so good as they are, and do so much as they do. To address the same audience week after week, perhaps for years, always with the same object, and often with the same subject, is a very severe test of any man’s ability; and it is only because the minister of Christ does *not* trust to his own ability, it is only because the Word which he preaches is *not* his, that he claims the attention of those committed to his charge. Encompassed with infirmity, himself exemplifying the very faults against which he warns others, how should he *dare* to assume the functions of a herald of the Gospel and a preacher of righteousness unless he had received a power and authority from above as the ambassador of Christ? The wise hearer will, therefore, always remember this, and forgive the meanness of the casket for the worth of the jewel within. He will strip off the poor husk of that which is human, and feed on the fruit of God’s Word, which is embedded within it. Out of the very worst sermon he will get *some* good, and wash out the pure ore from the earth with which it is encumbered.

The wise hearer will, moreover, apply what he hears to himself. He will not consider that all the warnings he listens to are meant for his neighbour and all the consolations for himself. If he hears some evil character of Scripture described, he will consider whether it might not justly be, in

some respects, a sketch from life in his own case. If some good man is portrayed, he will therefrom try to discover the graces he himself lacks. The good of his *own* soul, the instruction of his *own* mind, the confirmation and systematizing of his *own* faith, will be his object in hearing; and such a hearer will very rarely go empty away from the services of the Church. And after all that has been said and written of late years on the subject of preaching, is not this the truth: that the real usefulness of sermons depends more upon the spiritual condition of the hearer than on their own intrinsic merit? Of course it is not meant that a bad sermon will do as much good as a good one; but even the most able, searching, spiritual sermon, will do less for a bad man than a very inferior sermon will do for a good man. Sow *good* wheat in *bad* ground, and it will deteriorate; plant *bad* wheat in *good* ground, and it will improve.

Of the importance of hearing, as one among other means of grace, there can be no doubt. "He that is of God," said our Lord, "heareth God's words;"¹ and in Isaiah it is said: "Hear, and your soul shall live."² It has, indeed, pleased God to save many by the "foolishness of preaching."³ Death was whispered into Eve's ear by Satan; and through the ear it is that life has come to many. It was Daniel who awoke King Nebuchadnezzar to a sense of his sin. It was the parable of Nathan which tore the veil of self-deceit from royal David's heart, and left him an abased and stricken penitent. Felix trembled as the preacher reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come. God's power has exercised, and does exercise itself, by the lips of men—yea, of sinful men. But still we must repeat that the state of a man's own soul is that on which the fruitfulness of the word sown mainly depends. Among the heathen who listened to the Gospel, some believed and some believed not. But where lay the difference? In *how* they heard; in the condition of their own hearts; in the use they had made of their own mental and moral faculties. If, therefore, brethren, we would profit by hearing the Word, let us ask for God's blessing, that we may hear aright. His grace is like the mist which spread over Eden, and blest its glades with fruitfulness; *that* is the cause of spiritual increase, *that* the means whereby we may bring forth some thirty, some forty, and some an hundredfold. Paul may plant, Apollos may water, but it is the presence of God's grace in the hearer which can alone give the increase.

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¹ St. John viii. 47.

² Isa. lv. 3.

³ 1 Cor. i. 21.