

RESPONSIBILITY OF LISTENING

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on Sept. 18, 1960 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

For many generations in our educational system we have emphasized the development of certain skills: reading, writing, figuring, speaking, and others. Only in recent years, however, have we done very much to emphasize the importance of listening. Perhaps we have realized its importance all along, but only recently have we seriously undertaken to instruct the students in our schools in the skill of hearing that which is said by their teachers and others.

Listening also plays a key role in God's plan of salvation. Those who will not hear the gospel of Christ have no chance of eternal salvation. Those who do listen with an open mind and with an understanding heart have the beginning of salvation. In this vein someone has said, "The most important part of the body is the ear." In the sense that the ear is the doorway to the mind, the ear certainly is important. When Christ was on the earth there were many who did not "hear" him. Those who did were blessed; those who did not hear him cursed themselves.

"Hear Ye Him"

One of the great events in the earthly life of Christ was the transfiguration, which is described in the 17th chapter of Matthew. Peter, James, and John went up the mountain with Jesus, and there before their eyes he was transfigured. His face shone as the sun and his garments became white as the light. There then appeared with him Moses and Elijah. At this point Peter said, "Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, I will make here three tabernacles; one for thee, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." At this point one of the most significant sentences in the entire Bible unfolds. "While he was yet speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold, a voice out of the cloud, saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him." (Matthew 17: 4-5.) This is God's emphatic way of saying that we must heed the teachings of Christ.

"God's plan of salvation includes the following: (1) The sending of his only begotten Son into the world to redeem man. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16.) (2) The proclaiming of the gospel of Christ. "And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned." (Mark 16:15-16.) (3) The hearing and the heeding of the gospel. The responsibility is placed upon the hearer. For example, "For, Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? and how shall they preach, except they be sent? even as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that bring glad tidings of good things!" (Romans 10:13-15.)

Still another passage is James 1: 22, "But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deluding your own selves." Still another passage emphasizing this same vital responsibility is Matthew 7: 24-27, "Every one therefore that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them, shall be likened unto a wise man, who built his house upon the rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon the rock. And every one that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them not, shall be lik-

ened unto a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and smote upon that house: and it fell: and great was the fall thereof."

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"He That Hath Ears Let Him Hear"

The thirteenth chapter of Matthew contains a number of the great parables of Jesus concerning the kingdom. The first of these remarkable stories is generally known as the parable of the sower. Its theme emphasizes the vital role that the hearer has in the plan of salvation. It might well be called the parable of the soils, because the crucial element in the story is the way that the various soils receive the seed. Some seed fell upon the wayside and the birds carried it away before it had time to take root. Other seed fell upon the rocky places and bore no fruit because it had no deepness of earth. Still other seed fell upon thorny ground and failed to produce because it was choked by thorns. Finally, some of the seed fell in good soil and brought forth thirty, sixty, and one hundred-fold.

A little later when Jesus was asked by his disciples to explain the parable he said the following, "And unto them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall in no wise understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall in no wise perceive: For this people's heart is waxed gross, And their ears are dull of hearing, And their eyes they have closed; Lest haply they should perceive with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart, And should turn again, And I should heal them. But blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, that many prophets and righteous men desired to see the things which ye see, and saw them not; and to hear the things which ye hear, and heard them not. Hear then ye the parable of the sower." (Matthew 13: 14-18.) In the original telling of the story it had closed with the words, "He that hath ears, let him hear." (Matthew 13:9.)

Deaf Ears

There is the tragically disappointing story of a rich young ruler who came to Jesus. He had many qualities that were very fine. He had known the Mosaic law from his youth and had kept it. However, when Jesus told him what he yet needed to do in order to have eternal salvation, the scripture says, "But his countenance fell at the saying, and he went away sorrowful: for he was one that had great possessions." (Mark 10:22.) His failure lay in the fact that he was not willing to hear and to heed Christ's instructions.

A similar story is recounted in Mark 12. A scribe came to Jesus and asked certain questions. As the story closes Jesus says, "And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." (Mark 12:34.) There have been many who almost came to Christ, who were not far from the kingdom, but who have turned away failing to heed that which they have heard.

Ordinarily when we speak of the great events on Pentecost, as recorded in the second chapter of Acts, we emphasize the three thousand who became Christians. For a moment consider the other thousands who heard the gospel on that great birthday of the church, yet who did not heed what they heard. The "others" of Pentecost are tragic indeed. There were many others during Christ's lifetime who did not hear in the sense of heeding the things that our Lord spoke.

One of the longest chapters in the entire Bible is the sixth chapter of John. It is also one of the saddest. Early in the chapter we read about Christ being followed by multitudes of people. In the fifteenth verse there is the amazing sentence, "Jesus therefore perceiving that they were about to come and take him by force, to make him king, withdrew again into the mountain himself alone." (John

5:15.) Yet, after Jesus had spoken to them and had sifted them by the spiritual discourse of the hour, there came the tragic departure of almost the entire multitude, "Upon this many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him. Jesus said therefore unto the twelve, Would ye also go away?" (John 6:66-67.) The disappointment of Christ must have been overwhelming as he saw the deaf ears that were turned to his gospel of salvation.

Luke 9:51-56, tells the sad story of Christ being turned down by a Samaritan village where he had wished to lodge. When the people realized that he was going toward Jerusalem, they shut the gates of their city against him and the apostles who were traveling with him. Christ pronounced no curse upon this Samaritan village for its exclusiveness, but the village was cursed. It cursed itself, because it shut Christ out. None of its blind would be given their sight; none of its lame would walk; none of its dead would be raised. Even more important, none of the great teachings of Christ would be heard in that village, because they had closed their ears against the gospel.

On Paul's first great mission journey he came to the city of Antioch of Pisidia and there preached in the Jewish synagogue. The result was that the Jews were filled with jealousy and contradicted the things which Paul spoke. At this point the apostle said, "It was necessary that the word of God should first be spoken to you. Seeing ye thrust it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles." (Acts 13:46.) The tragedy of our world is that there are many who have "judged themselves unworthy of eternal life" by failing to hear the gospel.

Two Basic Attitudes

There are really just two basic attitudes in this whole matter of hearing. One is the attitude of the closed mind. It is an attitude of stubbornness on many occasions, with man's pride closing the door of his heart. It is often also a matter of being too busy. There is an interesting story concerning Robert Fulton, inventor of the steamboat. During the time when Napoleon Bonaparte was planning his invasion of England, Robert Fulton came to him to explain to him the possibilities of this new invention--the steamboat. Napoleon, busy with his own plans, said that he could give Fulton only two minutes of his time. These two minutes were hardly enough time for Fulton to talk convincingly of the possibilities of the steamboat. Napoleon was not convinced. How differently the outcome of his invasion might have been if he had only had more time to hear Fulton talk of his strange invention. How differently the lives of many might be and how different their eternal destiny, if they would only take more time to listen when God speaks.

Men are often so preoccupied with other things that they do not give the gospel of Christ a chance. It is so easy to say no. It becomes almost automatic. When we say no it means we have no further entanglement with whatever work it is that we are discussing. There is such a temptation to say no and close the door and "not to be bothered." So many deal thus with the gospel. Similarly, parents often fall into the no habit with their children. Men, as they grow older, tend to fall back on the saying of no and thereby removing themselves from any further work. Yet the saying of no often means lost opportunities, just as the saying of no to the Lord may be the easy way now but the costly way throughout eternity. There are times when man must say yes and certainly one of those times is when the gospel is preached.

The other attitude is that of the open mind. It is an attitude of willingness to consider whatever it is that is presented to one. It is an attitude involving the willingness to take time for whatever one is called upon to examine. In I Thessalonians 5: 21 Paul says, "Prove all things; hold fast that which is

good." The best advice that we can give is to prove or examine all things and then accept that which is good.

Conclusion

The lesson of this hour has an application to students, who are starting another school year. Listen carefully to all that your teachers say and accept that which is good. It has an especial application to college students, who are entering for the first time upon this great era of their lives. Listen carefully and discriminatingly to all the things that are said; choose that which is worthy. This theme also is applicable to young people, who need to listen carefully to the instructions and admonitions of their parents.

But most of all, this theme is applicable to those who are not yet Christians. Do not judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life by being deaf to the appeal of the Lord. Open your hearts and let Christ come in. Listen to his words, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me." (Revelation 3:20.) Open the door of your heart and give heed to the things that the Lord has spoken.

Come down the aisle now, confess your faith in Christ as the Son of God before men, repent of your past sins, and be buried with your Lord in baptism for the forgiveness of your sins. The invitation of our Lord is extended. Hear ye him.