

Hearing the Word

The Lord Jesus Christ demonstrated the importance of hearing the Words which he spoke:

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death to life” (Jno. 4:24).

It is plain then, that in order to inherit life, we must give attendance to the Words of Christ, believing and hearing them – as Paul expressed it: “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom” (Col. 3:16). Today’s New Testament reading also illustrates the same point: “so then, faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God” (Rom. 10:17).

But notice that here, the reference is not only to hearing the Word, but that hearing itself is a consequence of studying it: “hearing *by* the Word of God”. “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). It follows therefore, that he seeker of Truth must change his mindset in order to receive the Divine concepts of the expressed Word: “be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind ...” (Rom. 12:2). Jesus taught that “no man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day” (Jno. 6:44). All things are of God (2 Cor. 5:18), even from the very beginning of a seeker’s conversion. “It is God which worketh in you both to will, and to do of his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). It is God whose Word enables us to discern spiritual things: “the hearing ear, and the seeing eye, Yahweh hath made even both of them” (Prov. 20:12). It is only by applying himself to the Revealed Word that such a mental transformation can occur in the seeker of Truth. The more he applies the cleansing effect of that Word, the more his thoughts and mind-set become purified: “Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to thy Word” (Psa. 119:9).

The Word of God then, is a powerful thing. Its basic principles are enshrined in the system of doctrines called the Gospel, which is: “the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). It is living and powerful (Heb. 4:12), and can save our lives. Hence James exhorts: “lay aside all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted (implanted) word, which is able to save your souls” (Jas. 1:21).

To use the language of Messiah’s parable of the sower, the Word-Seed is sown into men’s hearts, and is met by different responses, according to the varying conditions thereof. Some are hard and rocky, preventing the Seed to grow deep. Others have thorns which constrict the growing Seed. But notice that those thorns (vs 18-19) are not the difficulties that life brings: it is the over consideration of this life’s affairs: “These are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, and *the cares of this world*, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lust of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful” (Mrk. 4:19). Hence the Master exhorts elsewhere: “take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and *cares of this life*, and so that day come upon you unawares” (Lu. 21:34). But for the faithful, the seed sown remains in their heart (1 Jno. 3:9), and enables them to overcome sin: “these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred” (Mrk. 4:20). The bringing forth of fruit is the end of the process, which takes time to be accomplished. The growing seed must be nurtured so that it can develop and bear the desired fruit. And that fruit is defined as the “Fruit of the Spirit”, which “is in all goodness and righteousness and truth” (Eph. 5:9, see also Gal. 5:22-23).

SERPENT SPEAK

By contrast to hearing the Word of God which can impart life, Genesis chapter 3 recounts the Serpent’s word, which brought death. Paul’s desire was to present the ecclesial bride to Messiah as a “chaste

virgin". But, he says, "I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ." (2 Cor. 11:2-3). The mind will become corrupted by hearing corrupting words, instead of God's Words. The serpent's lie was "thou shalt not surely die" because of sin, and millions have believed that lie ever since. Teaching that death is not really the end of life, but a transition into an immortal disembodied experience in Heaven, the serpent's teaching is active in common church philosophy. Hence it is written of them: "the poison of asps is under their lips, Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness" (Rom. 3:13-14). Promising life and liberty, the modern teachers of apostate Christendom are no better than the serpent of old: that which proceeds from their lips is poison, which will slay those who receive it. Hence, the "chaste virgin" became a mother of Harlots (Rev. 17:5), a mother-church which seduces the nations to partake of her chalice of blood.

The antidote to this poison is prayerful recourse to the Word of God:

"the commandment is a lamp, and the law is light; and reproofs of instruction are the way of life: **To keep thee from the evil woman**, from the flattery of the tongue of a strange woman" (Prov. 6:23-24).

The simple, who are not made "wise unto salvation" however, will be led astray by her:

"With her much fair speech she caused him to yield, with the flattering of her lips she forced him. He goeth after her straightway, as an ox goeth to the slaughter, or as a fool to the correction of the stocks; Till a dart strike through his liver; as a bird hasteth to the snare, and knoweth not that it is for his life" (Prov. 7:21-23).

We must therefore choose wisdom over simplicity, knowledge above ignorance, and faithfulness over unbelief.

The importance of adhering to the sound doctrine of the Word can be seen in Paul's words to Timothy, who was appointed to oversee the affairs at the Ephesian ecclesia:

"Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine ... take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine: continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee" (1 Tim. 4:13, 16).

The "reading" here is evidently public reading for in doing this, Timothy was told he would save himself, and those who heard him. Reading the word is here associated with giving attendance to doctrine – hence the need for both. Those who are wise in the Word are those who feast upon the solid food thereof:

"... strong meat belongeth unto them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil" (Heb. 5:14).

But there is a need to continue to study and meditate upon the Word, in order to accomplish this. Paul described the virtues of "... the gospel which I have preached unto you, which also ye have received, an wherein ye stand: by which also ye are saved, **if ye keep in memory** what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain" (1 Cor. 15:2). We must not be forgetful hearers, but "doers of the work" in order to be blessed (Jas. 1:25) – and we can only be doers of the Word if we know what that work is! So Paul exhorted Timothy:

"Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

Those who accordingly "labour in the word and doctrine" are to be given "double honour" (1 Tim. 5:17), and will not need to be ashamed.

Paul also wrote to Timothy of the effect and profit of so studying the Word:

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

The lessons for us from this verse are obvious!

Again, we have the similar words of the sweet Psalmist of Israel:

“the Law of Yahweh is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of Yahweh is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of Yahweh are right, rejoicing the heart, the commandment of Yahweh is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Psa. 19:7-8).

The Testimony of Yahweh will make the simple wise. Some extol the virtue of a “simple faith,” but the word of Scripture instead describes how we must change and progress from simplicity to wisdom. This is a lifelong process of giving heed to the healing effect of the Word, which is “perfect”, “sure”, “right”, and “pure”. Verse 11 of this Psalm returns us to the theme of reproof: “Moreover by them is thy servant warned: and in keeping of them there is great reward”. The Word therefore, sounds a warning. To strip this aspect out from our preaching is to remove a vital aspect of the Word, that we must warn men and women of the consequence of not obeying the call of the true Gospel.

In approaching the Word of the Most High God, we must seek to learn, understand, and be instructed in Divine things. “Apply thine heart unto instruction, and thine ears to the word of knowledge” counsels the proverb (Prov. 23:12). We must seek out instruction and understanding more than the treasures of this life. Again, the spirit of wisdom in the Proverbs teaches:

“I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me ... my fruit is better than gold, yea, than fine gold; and my revenue than choice silver” (Prov. 8:17-19).

HEARING THE VOICE

It is a characteristic of sheep, that they learn to recognise, and trust in, the voice of their Shepherd:

“... to him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice” (Jno 10:3-4).

And again:

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (Jno. 10:27).

It is only by listening to, and being acquainted with the word of Christ that we can learn the unique characteristics of his voice. These words of the Great Shepherd echo the sentiments of Psalm 95:

“for he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and ***the sheep of his hand***. Today if ye will ***hear his voice***, Harden not your heart, as in the provocation and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness” (Psa. 95:7-8).

True sheep will recognise and follow the shepherd’s voice. They will come at his call, and will follow him wherever he leads them to - but that is not what Israel did. This verse is cited as an exhortation in the New Testament to hold fast “the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end. Wherefore (as the Holy Spirit sayeth, Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness ...” (Heb. 3:7-9).

It is evident that to “hear” the voice is more than a recognition of the sound it makes. It is to understand that which is spoken, hence the expression used many times in the Scriptures: “if any man have ears to hear, let him hear” (cp. Mat. 13:43, Mrk. 4:9, 23, 7:16, Lu. 8:8, 14:35).

The apostle continues in Hebrews, of Israel: “for good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were united by faith with those who listened” (Heb. 4:2 ESV). Notice the difference between hearing and listening: the words they heard did not profit them, because there were not joined those who listened to them. Hence, although they physically heard the spoken sounds, the meaning was lost on them.

They were not “united by faith” to the listeners, and so fell in an example of faithlessness: they were excluded from the land of promise “because of unbelief” (Heb. 3:19). But by contrast, the listeners are addressed by Peter as “them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:1). True followers of Christ are united in their endeavours to follow their Shepherd. They “stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the Gospel” (Phil. 1:27). They are “likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind” (Phil. 2:2). In short, they are joined and united by faith to those who listen.

The Lord Jesus Christ was himself the word “made flesh”. His ears were always open to his Father’s Words: “... the Lord Yahweh hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary; he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth my ear *to hear* as the learned. The Lord Yahweh hath *opened mine ear*, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away back” (Isa. 50:4-5).

The Lord’s “ear” was therefore “opened” by his Father, to “hear” the words imparted to him. And this Word was understood and obeyed: he was not rebellious, but made his Father’s Will his own. Hence Hebrews 10 describes him as saying: “Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me), to do thy Will, O God” (Heb. 10:7,9). And the apostle continues: “by the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb. 10:10). His is the supreme example of hearing the Word of God: “he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned,” the effect of which “the Jews marvelled, saying, How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?” (Jno. 7:15).

Herein lies the thrust of our exhortation: upon the basis of the word heard, understood and believed, God will be with the followers of Christ: “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them; and their sins and iniquities will I remember no more” (Heb. 10:16-17). Let us cause the words of Christ to dwell in us richly: for then we will reap benefits which are more to be desired than anything the World has to offer.

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