

Directions How to Hear Sermons

By George Whitefield

Sermon 28

Luke 8:18 — “Take heed, therefore, how ye hear.”

The occasion of our Lord's giving this caution, was this: Perceiving that much people were gathered together to hear him out of every city, and knowing (for he is God, and knoweth all things) that many, if not most of them, would be hearers only, and not doers of the word; he spake to them by a parable, wherein, under the similitude of a sower that went out to sow his seed, he plainly intimated, how few there were amongst them, who would receive any saving benefit from his doctrine, or bring forth fruit unto perfection.

The application one would imagine should have been plain and obvious; but the disciples, as yet unenlightened in any great degree by the Holy Spirit, and therefore unable to see into the hidden mysteries of the kingdom of God, dealt with our Savior, as people ought to deal with their ministers; they discoursed with him privately about the meaning of what he had taught them in public; and with a sincere desire of doing their duty, asked for an interpretation of the parable.

Our blessed Lord, as he always was willing to instruct those that were teachable, (herein setting his ministers an example to be courteous and easy of access) freely told them the signification. And withal, to make them more cautious and more attentive to his doctrine for the future, he tells them, that they were in an especial manner to be the light of the world, and were to proclaim on the house-top whatsoever he told them in secret: and as their improving knowledge already imparted, was the only condition upon

which more was to be given them, it therefore highly concerned them to “take heed how they heard.”

From the context then it appears, that the words were primarily spoken to the Apostles themselves. But as it is to be feared, out of those many thousands that flock to hear sermons, but few, comparatively speaking, are effectually influenced by them, I cannot but think it very necessary to remind you of the caution given by our Lord to his disciples, and to exhort you with the utmost earnestness, to “take heed how you hear.”

In prosecution of which design I shall,

First, prove that every one ought to take all opportunities of hearing sermons. And,

Secondly, I shall lay down some cautions and directions, in order to your hearing with profit and advantage.

First, I am to prove, that every one ought to take all opportunities of hearing sermons.

That there have always been particular persons set apart by God to instruct and exhort his people to practice what he should require of them, is evident from many passages of scripture. St. Jude tells us, that “Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied (or preached) concerning the Lord's coming with ten thousand of his saints to judgment.” And Noah, who lived not long after, is stiled by St. Peter, “a preacher of righteousness.” And though in all the intermediate space between the flood and giving of the law, we hear but of few preachers, yet we may reasonably conclude, that God never left himself without witness, but at sundry times, and after diverse manners, spoke to our fathers by the patriarchs and prophets.

But however it was before, we are assured that after the delivery of the law, God constantly separated to himself a certain order of men to preach to, as well as pray for his people; and commanded them to inquire their duty at the priests mouths. And thought the Jews were frequently led into captivity, and for their sins scattered abroad on the face of the earth, yet he never utterly forsook his church, but still kept up a remnant of prophets and preachers, as Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Daniel, and others, to reprove, instruct, and call them to repentance.

Thus was it under the law. Nor has the church been worse, but infinitely better provided for under the gospel. For when Jesus Christ, that great High-priest, had through the eternal Spirit offered himself, as a full, perfect, sufficient sacrifice and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world, and after his resurrection had all power committed to him, both in heaven and earth, he gave commission to his Apostles, and in them to all succeeding ministers, to “go and preach his gospel to every creature;” promising “to be with them, to guide, assist, strengthen, and comfort them always, even to the end of the world.”

But if it be the duty of ministers to preach, (and woe be to them if they do not preach the gospel, for a necessity is laid upon them) no doubt, the people are obliged to attend to them; for otherwise, wherefore are ministers sent?

And how can we here avoid admiring the love and tender care which our dear Redeemer has expressed for his spouse the church? Who, because he could not be always with us in person, on account it was expedient he should go away, and as our forerunner take possession of that glory he had purchased by his precious blood, yet would not leave us comfortless, but first settled a sufficient number of pastors and teachers; and afterwards,

according to his promise, actually did and will continue to send down the Holy Ghost, to furnish them and their successors with proper gifts and graces “for the work of the ministry, for the perfecting of the saints, for the edifying of his body in love, till we all come in the unity of the spirit, to the fullness of the measure of the stature of Christ.”

O how insensible are those persons of this unspeakable gift, who do despite to the Spirit of grace, who crucify the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame, by willfully refusing to attend on so great a means of salvation? How dreadful will the end of such men be? How aggravating, that light should come into the world, that the glad tidings of salvation should be so very frequently proclaimed in this populous city, and that so many should loath this spiritual manna, this angels food, and call it light bread? How much more tolerable will it be for Tyre and Sidon, for Sodom and Gomorrah, than for such sinners? Better, that men had never heard of a Savior being born, than after they have heard, not to give heed to the ministry of those, who are employed as his ambassadors, to transact affairs between God and their souls.

We may, though at a distance, without a spirit of prophesy, foretell the deplorable condition of such men; behold them cast into hell, lifting up their eyes, being in torment, and crying out, How often would our ministers have gathered us, as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings? But we would not. O that we had known in that our day, the things that belonged to our everlasting peace! But now they are for ever hid from our eyes.

Thus wretched, thus inconceivably miserable, will such be as slight and make a mock at the public preaching of the gospel. But taking it for granted, there are but few, if any, of this unhappy stamp, who think it worth their while to tread the courts of the Lord's house, I pass on not to the

Second general thing proposed, to lay down some cautions and directions, in order to your hearing sermons with profit and advantage.

And here, if we reflect on what has been already delivered, and consider that preaching is an ordinance of God, a means appointed by Jesus Christ himself for promoting his kingdom amongst men, you cannot reasonably be offended, if, in order that you may hear sermons with profit and advantage,

1. Direct or entreat you to come to hear them, not out of curiosity, but from a sincere desire to know and do your duty.

Formality and hypocrisy in any religious exercise, is an abomination unto the Lord. And to enter his house merely to have our ears entertained, and not our hearts reformed, must certainly be highly displeasing to the Most High God, as well as unprofitable to ourselves.

Hence it is, that so many remain unconverted, yea, unaffected with the most evangelical preaching; so that like St. Paul's companions, before his conversion, they only hear the preacher's voice with their outward ears, but do not experience the power of it inwardly in their hearts. Or, like the ground near Gideon's fleece, they remain untouched; whilst others, who came to be fed with the sincere milk of the word, like the fleece itself, are watered by the dew of God's heavenly blessing, and grow thereby.

Flee therefore, my brethren, flee curiosity, and prepare your hearts by a humble disposition, to receive with meekness the engrafted word, and then it will be a means, under God, to quicken, build up, purify, and save your souls.

2. A second direction I shall lay down for the same purpose, is, not only to prepare your hearts before you hear, but also to give diligent heed to the things that are spoken from the word of God.

If an earthly king was to issue out a royal proclamation, on performing or not performing the conditions therein contained, the life or death of his subjects entirely depended, how solicitous would they be to hear what those conditions were? And shall not we pay the same respect to the King of kings, and Lord of lords, and lend an attentive ear to his ministers, when they are declaring, in his name, how our pardon, peace, and happiness may be secured?

When God descended on mount Sinai in terrible majesty, to give unto his people the law, how attentive were they to his servant Moses? And if they were so earnest to hear the thunderings or threatenings of the law, shall not we be as solicitous to hear from the ministers of Christ, the glad tidings of the gospel?

Whilst Christ was himself on earth, it is said, that the people hung upon him to hear the gracious words that proceeded out of his mouth. And if we looked on ministers as we ought, as the sent of Jesus Christ, we should hang upon them to hear their words also.

Besides, the sacred truths that gospel ministers deliver, are not dry insipid lectures on moral philosophy, intended only to amuse us for a while; but the great mysteries of godliness, which, therefore, we are bound studiously to liken to, lest through our negligence we should either not understand them, or by any other means let them slip.

But how regardless are those of this direction, who, instead of hanging on the preacher to hear him, doze or sleep whilst he is speaking to them from God? Unhappy men! Can they not watch with our blessed Lord one hour? What! Have they never read how Eutychus fell down as he was sleeping, when St. Paul continued like discourse till midnight, and was taken up dead?

But to return. Though you may prepare your hearts, as you may think, by a teachable disposition, and be attentive whilst discourses are delivering, yet this will profit you little, unless you observe a

3. A third direction, not to entertain any the least prejudice against the minister.

For could a preacher speak with the tongue of men and angels, if his audience was prejudiced against him, he would be but as sounding brass, or tinkling cymbal.

That was the reason why Jesus Christ himself, the Eternal Word, could not do many mighty works, nor preach to any great effect among those of his own country; for they were offended at him. And was this same Jesus, this God incarnate, again to bow the heavens, and to come down speaking as never man spake, yet, if we were prejudiced against him, as the Jews were, we should harden our hearts as the Jews did theirs.

Take heed therefore, my brethren, and beware of entertaining any dislike against those whom the Holy Ghost has made overseers over you. Consider that the clergy are men of like passions with yourselves: and though we should even hear a person teaching others to do, what he has not learned himself; yet, that is no sufficient reason for rejecting his doctrine: for ministers speak not in their own, but Christ's name. And we know who commanded the people to do whatsoever the Scribes and Pharisees should say unto them, though they said but did not. But

4. Fourthly, as you ought not to be prejudiced against, so you should be careful not to depend too much on a preacher, or think more highly of him than you ought to think. For though this be an extreme that people seldom run into, yet preferring one teacher in apposition to another, has often been of ill consequence to the church of God. It was a fault which the great

Apostle of the Gentiles condemned in the Corinthians. For whereas one said, "I am of Paul; another, I am of Apollos: are ye not carnal," says he? "For who is Paul, and who is Apollos, but instruments in God's hands by whom you believed?" And are not all ministers sent forth to be ministering ambassadors to those who shall be heirs of salvation? And are they not all therefore greatly to be esteemed for their work's sake.

The Apostle, it is true, commands us to pay double honor to those who labor in the word and doctrine: but then to prefer one minister at the expense of another, (perhaps, to such a degree, as when you have actually entered a church, to come out again because he does not preach) is earthly, sensual, devilish.

Not to mention that popularity and applause cannot but be exceedingly dangerous, even to a rightly informed mind; and must necessarily fill any thinking man with a holy jealousy, lest he should take that honor to himself, which is due only to God, who alone qualifies him for his ministerial labors, and from whom alone every good and perfect gift cometh.

5. A Fifth direction I would recommend is, to make a particular application of every thing that is delivered to your own hearts.

When our Savior was discoursing at the last supper with his beloved disciples, and foretold that one of them should betray him, each of them immediately applied it to his own heart, and said, "Lord, is it I?" And would persons, in like manner, when preachers are dissuading from any sin, or persuading to any duty, instead of crying, this was designed against such and such a one, turn their thoughts inwardly, and say, Lord, is it I? How far more beneficial should we find discourses to be, than now they generally are?

But we are apt to wander too much abroad; always looking at the mote which is in our neighbor's eye, rather than at the beam which is in our own. Haste we now to the

6. Sixth and last direction: If you would receive a blessing from the Lord, when you hear his word preached, pray to him, both before, in, and after every sermon, to endue the minister with power to speak, and to grant you a will and ability to put in practice, what he shall show from the book of God to be your duty.

This would be an excellent means to render the word preached effectual to the enlightening and enflaming your hearts; and without this, all the other means before prescribed will be in vain.

No doubt it was this consideration that made St. Paul so earnestly entreat his beloved Ephesians to intercede with God for him: "Praying always, with all manner of prayer and supplication in the spirit, and for me also, that I may open my mouth with boldness, to make known the mysteries of the gospel." And if so great an Apostle as St. Paul, needed the prayers of his people, much more do those ministers, who have only the ordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Besides, this would be a good proof that you sincerely desired to do, as well as to know the will of God. And it must highly profit both ministers and people; because God, through your prayers, will give them a double portion of his Holy Spirit, whereby they will be enabled to instruct you more fully in the things which pertain to the kingdom of God.

And O that all who hear me this day, would seriously apply their hearts to practice what has now been told them! How would ministers see Satan, like lightning, fall from heaven, and people find the word preached sharper than

a two-edged sword, and mighty, through God, to the pulling down of the devil's strong holds!

The Holy Ghost would then fall on all them that hear the word, as when St. Peter preached; the gospel of Christ would have free course, run very swiftly, and thousands again be converted by a sermon.

For "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and for ever." He has promised to be with his ministers always, even unto the end of the world. And the reason why we do not receive larger effusions of the blessed Spirit of God, is not because our all-powerful Redeemer's hand is shortened, but because we do not expect them, and confine them to the primitive times.

It does indeed sometimes happen, that God, to magnify his free grace in Christ Jesus, is found of them that sought him not; a notorious sinner is forcibly worked upon by a public sermon, and plucked as a firebrand out of the fire. But this is not God's ordinary way of acting. No, for the generality, he only visits those with the power of his word, who humbly wait to know what he would have them to do; and sends unqualified hearers not only empty, but hardened away.

Take heed, therefore, ye careless, curious professors, if any such be here present, how you hear. Remember, that whether we think of it or not, "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ;" where ministers must give a strict account of the doctrine they have delivered, and you as strict a one, how you have improved under it. And, good God! How will you be able to stand at the bar of an angry, sin-avenging judge, and see so many discourses you have despised, so many ministers, who once longed and labored for the salvation of your precious and immortal souls, brought out as so many swift witnesses against you? Will it be sufficient then, think you, to alledge, that you went to hear them only out of curiosity, to pass

away an idle hour, to admire the oratory, or ridicule the simplicity of the preacher? No; God will then let you know, that you ought to have come out of better principles; that every sermon has been put down to your account, and that you must then be justly punished for not improving by them.

But fear not, you little flock, who with meekness receive the ingrafted word, and bring forth the peaceable fruits of righteousness; for it shall not be so with you. No, you will be your minister's joy, and their crown of rejoicing in the day of our Lord Jesus. And they will present you in a holy triumph, faultless, and unblameable, to our common Redeemer, saying, "Behold us, O Lord, and the children which thou hast given us."

But still take heed how you hear: for upon your improving the grace you have, more shall be given, and you shall have abundance. "He is faithful that he promised, who also will do it." Nay, God from out of Zion, shall so bless you, that every sermon you hear shall communicate to you a fresh supply of spiritual knowledge. The word of God shall dwell in you richly; you shall go on from strength to strength, from one degree of grace unto another, till being grown up to be perfect men in Christ Jesus, and filled with all the fullness of God, you shall be translated by death to see him as he is, and to sing praises before his throne with angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim, and the general assembly of the first-born, whose names are written in heaven, for ever and ever.

Which God, &c.