

HOW THE WORD IS TO BE READ AND HEARD.

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

THIS is an admonition inferred by our Lord from the parable of the sower in the preceding part of the chapter, in which he had shewn the very different events of people's hearing the word. To some it is effectual, to more it is not: *Take heed therefore how ye hear*, says he. Much depends on the right manner of hearing the word; and the case is the same as to the reading of it, for therein we are to hear God speak by his word. Men may hear what is very good, yet get no good by it, unless they hear in the due manner.

The doctrine of the text is,

DOCT. 'As the hearers of the word would profit by it, they should take heed how they hear it.'

Here I shall consider that one point, How we should hear? or 'How the word is to be read and heard, that it may become effectual to salvation?' *Ans.* 'That the word may become effectual to salvation, we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation, and prayer; receive it with faith and love; lay it up in our hearts; and practise it in our lives.'

There are three things necessary to be heeded and practised, if we would so manage these ordinances, as they may become effectual for our salvation.

I. Some things are to go before hearing.

II. Some things are to go along with it.

III. Some things are to follow after it.

I. Some things are to go before hearing; namely, preparation and prayer.

First, Preparation. We should prepare ourselves for the ordinances, as Jacob said, Gen. xxxv. 2, 3. 'Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments. And let us arise, and go up to Bethel; and I will make there an altar unto God, who answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me in the way which I went.' It is true, God may by his sovereign grace catch the unprepared heart by his word, as he says, Is. lxxv. 1. 'I am sought of them that asked not for me; I am found of them that sought me not:' and there are not wanting instances of such a surprising dispensation of grace. But it is the way of preparation in which we have ground to look for good by it, Is. lxiv. 5. 'Thou meetest him that rejoiceth, and worketh righteousness; those that

remember thee in thy ways;' otherwise we are not in the way of getting good by it.

This preparation lies in these five things.

1. Getting the heart impressed with an awful sense of the majesty and holiness of that God into whose presence we are going, and whose word we are to hear, Psal. lxxxix. 6. Though the voice is on earth, the speaker is in heaven, and we should consider it so as to come to hear what God says to us, Acts. x. 33. And the more this be on our spirits, we may expect the more good by the word, Isa. lxvi. 2.

2. Banishing out of the heart worldly cares that are lawful at other times, Matth. xiii. 7. We should say to all these as Abraham did to his young men, 'Abide ye here,—and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, Gen. xxii. 5. The heart going after the world at such a time, renders the word ineffectual: but a contrary disposition is a token for good.

3. Application of the blood of Christ to the soul for removing guilt, and doing away any controversy betwixt God and the soul, Amos iii. 3. 'How can two walk together, except they be agreed?' Psal. xxvi. 6. 'I will wash mine hands in innocency: so will I compass thine altar, O Lord.' The laver stood before the entrance into the temple, that they might wash there who were to go in: so spiritually, 'before the throne there is a sea of glass like unto crystal,' in which filthy polluted souls are to wash, ere they be admitted to the throne, Rev. iv. 6. And happy they who come thus washed to hear the word; for they may expect to hold communion with Christ therein.

4. Purging the heart of carnal and corrupt lusts and affections, 1 Pet. ii. 1, 2. This is to put off one's shoes when coming on the holy ground, laying by the earthly frame, and putting on a heavenly one. For what good effect can be expected on the heart, filled with corrupt lusts, passions, and prejudices, nourished and not striven against; surely none at all. Whereas, if the heart be purged from these, the happiest effects may be looked for. It is impossible to profit by the word, where the heart is full of vain and carnal thoughts and projects.

5. *Lastly*, Stirring up in the heart spiritual desires, 1 Pet. ii. 2. 'As new-born babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby, longing for communion with God, seeing his glory in the sanctuary, the supply of soul wants, and particularly for something suitable to our case. And therefore a deep consideration of our own case is a necessary part of preparation, 1 Kings viii. 38. and, if properly attended to, would be attended with great blessings.

This preparation for the ordinances is necessary, considering two things especially. (1.) The greatness of him with whom we have to do, Heb. xii. 28, 29. 'Let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: for our God is a consuming fire. One would not rush without consideration into the presence of his prince: why then should one rush thoughtlessly into the presence of his God?' (2.) The weight of the work. To hear God's mind declared to us is a business of the greatest importance; eternity depends on it to us; life and death hang upon our improving or not improving it, 2 Cor. ii. 16. 'To the one (says the apostle) we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life.' And were this duly considered, it would stir us all up to the most diligent preparation.

Secondly, Prayer. We should be much in prayer before we go to ordinances, family prayer and secret prayer, and therefore ought not to spend the Lord's day morning so as not to have time for these. If ye would have good of the word read or preached, pray, and pray earnestly before it. Pray,

1. For assistance to the minister. Hence the apostle says, 'Brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified,' 2 Thess. iii. 1. Pray that the Lord himself would come out with him, directing him, instructing him, and exciting him, what to speak, and how to speak. It is rare to see a lively people under a dead ministry; and therefore people's own interest should engage them in concern for ministers.

2. For a meal to yourselves, Psal. cxix. 18. 'Open thou mine eyes, that I may see wondrous things out of thy law.' Pray that God would direct the word to your case, and send it home on your hearts with his blessing, that ye may be enlightened, sanctified, strengthened, humbled, or raised up by it, as your case requires. And in order to attain this, pray and wrestle earnestly,

3. For an outpouring of the Spirit in his own ordinances, agreeably to the Lord's own promises, Prov. i. 23. 'Behold, I will pour out my Spirit unto you; that yourselves and others may be bettered by the word.' Every one should be concerned for the success of the gospel, not to themselves only, but to others also. Love to God and our neighbours' souls should engage to this, 2 Thess. iii. 1. above cited.

Now, both this preparation and prayer beforehand being done, beware ye lean not on them, but remember that all depends on the Spirit's influences, and that he is debtor to none, Cant. iv. 16. 'Awake, O north wind, and come thou south, blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out.' John iii. 8. 'The wind blow-

eth where it listeth.' Cry therefore that the Spirit may render the word effectual.

II. Some things are to go along with hearing.

First, Attending unto the word diligently. This implies,

1. Waiting diligently upon the ordinances, so as people make it their business to catch opportunities of the word, and let none slip which Providence will allow them to overtake. That they hang on about the Lord's hands in the galleries of ordinances, labouring to keep the tryst which God makes with sinners there, 1 Tim. iv. 13. They that are only chance-customers to ordinances, whose attendance is ruled by their own conveniences, without conscience of duty, causing them to take them only now and then as their fancy takes them, cannot expect good of them. 'Blessed is the man (says the personal Wisdom of God) that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors,' Prov. viii. 34.

3. Diligent attention to the word, Isa. lv. 2. 'Hearken diligently unto me;' listening carefully to it, as a matter of the greatest weight, keeping the mind off other things in the time, and bending it wholly unto the word. In this there are four things comprehended.

(1.) Outward gravity and composure, without which attention is marred, Luke iv. 20. If men do believe it to be God's word which they are hearing, this is as little respect to it, as they can shew, namely, outward gravity; and therefore they are not to lay down their heads and sleep, nor to gaze hither and thither, far less to laugh, or to go out and in, here and there, in the time. This kind of behaviour, is not without contempt of God, who speaks to men by his word.

(2.) A fixing and bending of the ear and mind to what is spoken. Hence is that counsel of the wise man, Prov. ii. 1, 2. 'My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee; so that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding.'—People must take care that they be not wandering in their heart while the Lord's words sound before them. If the heart wander, and be thinking on other things, how can the word do them good, while Satan has thus stolen away the heart?

(3.) A discerning of what they hear, so as to distinguish betwixt truth and error, the corn and the chaff, Mark iv. 24. 'Take heed what ye hear;' and therefore to mark always the agreement betwixt what is preached and the written word, for which the Bereans are highly commended, Acts xvii. 11. For they attend not rightly to the word who do not thus endeavour to discern what they hear.

(4.) An endeavouring to know the mind of God in his word, to

hear with understanding. This is to attend not only to the words, but to the things wrapt up in these words; as Lydia did, 'whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul,' Acts xvi. 14. It is not enough to hear the words, but the message from the Lord is to be weighed and seriously considered, and the mind of God taken up therein.

There is great need of attending unto the word with diligence, and making serious work of it. For,

(1.) The matter in hand is of the greatest weight; it concerns eternity; it is a treaty of peace betwixt God and our souls; the proposal of a method to preserve our souls from ruin, Luke xvi. 29. 'They have Moses and the prophets: let them hear them;' and this proposal is not to be carelessly managed. And God himself is the Speaker; and what he speaks should be diligently attended to, for his sake; to prevent the breaking out of his wrath, which is threatened against those who do not hearken to him.

(2.) Because at best we will have much ado to hear well as we ought. We are naturally dull of hearing the Lord's word, Isa. lviii. 4, 5. 'They are like the deaf adder that stoppeth her ear, which will not hearken to the voice of the charmer, charming never so wisely.' And oft-times there is a locked door between him and us. Hence he is represented thus, 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock,' &c. Rev. iii. 20. And there is a thick wall of separation also betwixt him and us, Isa. lxix. 2. 'Your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.' And there is always much noise about us as long-as the tempter is to the fore. Therefore the highest attention is requisite.

3. *Lastly*, If we do not thus attend, we lose, and our loss is great. Thomas missed one occasion of meeting with Christ, and unbelief got in upon him. And that word which we miss may be the most suitable to our case, which therefore Satan watches to carry off from us. Therefore we should never miss one occasion of hearing the word.

Secondly, Receiving the word rightly. This lies in two things.

1. Receiving it with faith, Heb. iv. 2. It is the mouth of the soul, by which one receives the sincere milk of the word, and drinks water out of the wells of salvation, and without which one gets no good of it to his salvation; but it is as water spilt upon the ground, which cannot be gathered up again. It must be received,

(1.) With a faith of assent, believing it to be true and right, assenting to the truth and righteousness of the precepts, promises, and threatenings of it, Psal. cxix. 123, 160. 'I esteem all thy precepts

concerning all things to be right. Thy word is true from the beginning.' It has a divine authority; itself is God's testimony, which therefore for itself is to be believed; and where the power of it comes, it captivates the soul into the belief of it, 2 Cor. x. 5. This is to receive the kingdom of God as a little child, Luke xviii. 17.

(2.) With a faith of application, applying it to ourselves, Job v. ult. 'Hear it, and know thou it for thy good.' The Lord's word is compared to the falling rain or dew, Deut. xxxii. 2. The soul in receiving it should be as the dry and gaping ground swallowing it up as it falls, Psal. cxliii. 6. 'My soul thirsteth after thee as a thirsty land.' But most people are like the smooth stones, which send it off themselves to those about them. Now, this application is that which makes the plaister stick, and nothing else will do it. If the word be not applied, it can do no more good, than a plaister unapplied can heal the wound.

Now, the word is to be applied by us, for all the ends for which it is appointed, namely, for our conviction, Acts ii. 37. our conversion, John iv. 45. our edification in holiness, 1 Pet. ii. 2. and comfort, Rom. xv. 4. for the informing our judgments, and rectifying our will and affections; in short, for all the purposes of our salvation; otherwise we receive it in vain.

2. Receiving it with love, 2 Thess. ii. 10. Faith receives the word as true, love receives it as good, and good for us, Isa. xxxix. ult. 'Good is the word of the Lord which thou hast spoken,' said Hezekiah to the prophet. It is good for us in all the parts of it, for we need them all; the threatenings as well as the promises; its reproofs as well as its consolations. And there is a threefold love which we owe to the word of God.

(1.) A love of esteem, highly prizing it, Job xxiii. 12. 'I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food.' Psal. cxix. 72, 'The law of thy mouth is better unto me than thousands of gold and silver.' (2.) A love of desire after it, 1 Pet. ii. 2. 'As new born babes desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby;' a longing for it. (3.) A love of complacency in it, Psal. cxix. 162. 'I rejoice at thy word as one that findeth great spoil.'

We owe this love to the word for the author's sake, Psal. cxix. 159. 'Consider how I love thy precepts;' for its intrinsic excellency, Psal. cxix. 140. 'Thy word is very pure; therefore doth thy servant love it;' and for the necessity and usefulness of it to us, as 'light that shineth in a dark place,' 2 Pet. i. 19; as our food, Job xxiii. 12. forecited; nay, as our very life and breath. Deut. xxxii. 47.

Thirdly, Laying it up in our hearts, Our hearts and memories

are to be storehouses for the word, and there we are to lay it up, as it comes to our hands, Psal. cxix. 11. 'Thy word have I hid in mine heart, (says the Psalmist), that I might not sin against thee.' How can those expect good of the word who let it go just as it comes? But we should catch hold of it, retain it and not forget it.

We should lay it up as a precious and enriching treasure, Col. iii. 16 'Let the word of God dwell in you richly:' As a thing that we are in hazard of losing, and being robbed of, Matth. xiii. 4; and as what we will have use for afterwards, Isa. xlii. 23. 'Who will hearken and hear for the time to come?' Suppose it reach not your present case, it may be useful for what will be your case. You are travelling through the wilderness: lay up the word as the traveller does his directions for the way.

The best way to lay it up is, to let it have deep impression on your spirits while you hear it, and to lift up your eyes to the Lord, that he may fix it in your heart, Psal. cxix. 93. 'I will never forget thy precepts,' 2 Tim. i. 12. 'I know in whom I have believed.'

III. Some things are to follow after hearing the word.

1. Meditation on it in your hearts, Psal. i. 2. The Psalmist thus describes the good man: 'In his law doth he meditate day and night.' This is the harrowing of the seed sown, and the mean to sink it down in the soul, to keep it fast, Luke ix. 44. 'Let these sayings sink down into your ears.' This is the way to guard the word, that it may not slip away, Heb. ii. 4; and a sovereign help to a leaking memory. Ensure yourselves to meditation on the word, and ye will find your memories surprisingly strengthened: one particular will bring on another, and one truth meditated on will recal another to your remembrance, and afford you vast delight and pleasure.

2. Conferring of it on your discourse. This was enjoined to the Israelites by Moses, Deut. vi. 6, 7. 'The words which I command thee this day shall be in thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.' Luke xxiv. 14. 'And they talked together of all those things which had happened.' The repeating over again of the Lord's word, has sometimes had a relish with it, more taking than at its first coming to the man. Hence says the spouse, Can. ii. 10. 'My beloved spake and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.' Talking of it thus on your way from the church, and in your own houses, will be most beneficial to you.

3. *Lastly*, The main thing is practising it in your lives, Luke viii. 15. 'That on the good ground are they which in an honest and good

heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience :’ wiping off your spots, and adorning yourselves in holiness of life, by the glass of the word, Jam. i. 25. ‘ Whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the word,’ &c. The word heard, but not practised, will sink men deeper in damnation ; but heard and practised too, will bring them into eternal salvation. O then be careful to practise what you hear, otherwise it will do you no good.

I shall conclude with an inference or two.

Inf. 1. No wonder most of the hearers of the gospel get no good of it. They are at no pains to prepare for hearing it, wrestle not in prayer for the Lord’s blessing upon it, receive it neither with faith nor love, are not solicitous to lay it up in their hearts, and as little to practise it in their lives. How then can they reap benefit by it, when they use not these commanded means ?

2. Here is the way to get good of the word, however little good is done by it this day. Prepare for hearing it ; pray earnestly for the blessing of God to accompany it : receive it with faith and love ; lay it up in your hearts : and reduce it to practice in your lives.

THE DUTY OF ATTENDING ORDINANCES ENFORCED.

ACTS x. 33.—*Immediately before I sent to thee : and thou hast well done that thou art come. Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God.*

As attendance upon the public ordinances is one of the special means whereby Christ communicates the benefits of redemption to us, I have chosen this text in order to enforce, farther upon you, the duty of a diligent attendance upon them.

Our Lord Jesus, the only King and Head of his church, hath appointed ministers his ambassadors to declare his mind unto his people ; and though he could teach his people without them, yet the ministry is his ordinance, and by the foolishness of preaching he saves them that believe. Here we have,

1. A call to Peter related. The person calling is Cornelius, a soldier. A Gentile he was, yet a proselyte : a good man, but one who as yet knew not the doctrine of Christ crucified. The person called was Peter ; him God honoured to break the ice for the calling of the Gentiles, and to take down the first stone in the partition