

Responsibility of Hearing the Gospel

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of taking heed how we hear the gospel, as our salvation depends on the manner of our hearing.

Scripture: Proverbs 4:20, Matthew 13:9, Luke 8:18, Romans 10:17, Hebrews 2:1, James 1:22

Topics: "Spiritual Responsibility", "Hearing the Gospel"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the critical responsibility of how we hear the Gospel, urging listeners to take heed and be attentive to God's word. He explains that the manner of our hearing directly impacts our understanding and spiritual growth, as well as the salvation of ourselves and others. Finney warns that neglecting to hear with seriousness can lead to misunderstanding and spiritual decline, and he outlines specific ways to approach hearing the Gospel, including deep attention, reverence, and a sincere desire to understand. He concludes by stressing the eternal consequences of our hearing and the importance of responding to God's call with urgency and obedience.

Transcript

"Take heed therefore how ye hear: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have." --Luke 8:18.

These words follow almost immediately after the parable of the sower--a parable which was intended to represent the various classes of hearers and the diverse results of their different or opposite courses.

Immediately after recording that parable, Luke subjoins.

"No man, when he hath lighted a candle, covereth it with a vessel, or putteth it under a bed, but setteth it on a candlestick, that they which enter in may see the light."

"For nothing is secret, that shall not be made manifest; neither any thing hid, that shall not be known and come abroad."

The idea of this seems to be that in the ultimate results of this state of probation, God will show who have improved their opportunities and who have not. These things, however secret now, shall be made manifest. All the workings and results of our present hearing or refusing to hear, shall in due season be spread out before the universe.

Hence the solemn injunction--"Take heed, therefore, how ye hear." How forcible, if it be indeed the case that all its consequences are to be revealed before the universe!

Luke adds also--

"Take heed therefore how ye hear: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have."

From this and the parallel passages we infer that whoever improves the instruction proffered him shall have grace needful to understand it. He shall also have more truth revealed to him. The Providence, the word and the Spirit of God may perhaps all combine to fulfil this promise--more to him that improves what he has. So also will God take away from him who does not improve.

My remarks on the text will be confined chiefly to the first clause--"Take heed how ye hear." I shall, enquire;

I. WHAT IT IS TO TAKE HEED.

II. WHY PERSONS OUGHT TO TAKE HEED HOW THEY HEAR.

III. SHOW IN SEVERAL PARTICULARS HOW MEN OUGHT TO HEAR AND MUST HEAR IF THEY WOULD EVER PROFIT BY HEARING.

I. What it is to take heed.

To take heed is to be wakeful, attentive, to be very considerate. It implies that we seriously ponder the word of the Lord and consider attentively its meaning and its application to ourselves.

II. Why is this injunction given? Why should we take heed how we hear?

You will observe that it respects especially the word of God. It does not require special attention to every thing which we can hear on all possible subjects and from any source whatever; No, it only requires us always to listen when God speaks; always to hear with the utmost attention what God may say.

Now the reasons of such a requirement are surely very plain.

1. Because it is God who speaks. We are to consider that it is really God who speaks to us through his word, and through the faithful and sound preaching of his gospel. He may employ human organs; he may use the language and the types or the living voice of man--yet it is still the voice of God, for it is his chosen mode of revealing himself to mortal man.

And now how ought all men to listen to the word of God! With what profound and solemn attention!

And do any ask why we should thus listen when God speaks? I answer. Because He always has something important to say. Because he never speaks in vain. He is not an incessant talker--is not a trifler--never speaks unless to communicate truths of infinite moment for mortal man to hear and know.

How then ought men to hearken when the Infinite Jehovah speaks!

Suppose you were apprised of the fact that the Great God--the Infinite Maker of the Universe, had appointed the time and the place where he would audibly speak to mortal men--in language intelligible to

them and of course on subjects of infinite concern to them. Would not you and would not every man living stand on tiptoe to hear every word that should go forth from the eternal God?

But what would you think if men should pay no attention? if the notice should not draw together even a respectably large congregation? What would you think if there were some who would not hear at all?

But again--God speaks to you--to you as if it were by name; as if he were to call out your name, and make his communications particularly to you. Suppose now it were known that God was about to address someone in this congregation by name--but no one knows who the individual is. How every heart would quiver with intense interest to know who it should be--each one anxious almost to agony and saying--Is it I? Will that majestic voice pronounce my name? And what will he say?

Now such a course would be striking--would be thrilling. It would doubtless startle some into wakefulness who are rarely wakeful under the ordinary mode of divine communication. But yet God as really speaks now to mortal men as if he were to call out with audible voice their very names. And, my hearer, he just as really speaks now to you, as if he were to pronounce your very name before this whole assembly.

This is one of those great truths which you need to know and fully realize. When God speaks through his word, through his providence, or through his gospel preached by his servants, he really speaks to you.

Again, you should take heed because if you do not you will certainly misunderstand what the Lord says. You cannot understand without giving your attention, and surely you must know that if God speaks to you, he will say something which is vitally important for you to know.

It is well for you to consider the fact that multitudes fail to understand these messages of the Lord, and hence go on to the judgment under a fatal mistake. God spake to them; they gave no such heed as would secure a right understanding of his message, and hence they go to perdition.

Again, you should take heed how you hear because God speaks on subjects of infinite importance to your soul. Life and death hang on every word he utters. He speaks to tell you of salvation--to show you what you must do to secure everlasting life. And should a single young man or young woman in this house be indifferent?

Your salvation does and must depend on the manner of your hearing. If you hear so as not to understand, you can never be saved. The very things of which God speaks are the conditions on which you can be saved. How can you be saved if you fail to understand these conditions? These conditions you are yourself to fulfill;--how then can you do them and be saved unless you understand what they are?

Again, not only is your own salvation depending on your hearing the truth of God attentively, but the salvation also of many others. Perhaps thousands of persons may be deeply and personally interested in your hearing as you should. You cannot neglect to hear as you ought without wronging your family, your friends, your posterity, your whole generation. All these will have reason to blame,--yea, to reproach, and even to curse you if you do not hear as you ought.

Consider further that God is offering you eternal life. It is on this subject that he speaks to you, offering you life and threatening you with death if you will not attend and obey. When God is about to speak on such a subject, is it not fitting that he should introduce his communication with the solemn admonition--"Take heed how ye hear?"

Consider also that every thing may depend upon your present hearing. Perhaps some of you are hearing the word of the Lord now for the last time. Death may lock up all your senses forever, ere you shall enter the sanctuary or open your Bible again.

Or it may be that though you should hear the word of the Lord a thousand times hereafter, yet God may withdraw his Spirit henceforward, never to bestow it any more upon you. There is the more reason to fear it in your case since you are now solemnly warned of your responsibility and of your danger. Your whole eternity therefore may now be suspended upon the manner of your hearing the word of God this day. Will you slight that solemn word and put in peril the salvation of your soul forever?

III. I am to show in some particulars how you ought to hear and must hear if you would ever be saved.

It is perfectly plain that you cannot possibly be saved only by means of understanding and obeying the word of God. There is only one possible way of being saved, and that is by becoming holy, since "without holiness, no man shall see the Lord." Nor can you become holy only as you obey the truth, nor can you obey the truth only as far as you understand it. Hence the immense importance of understanding and obeying the truth of the Lord.

If this is so, then certain other things follow and must be true.

1. You must hear with very deep and fixed attention when the word of God is spoken to you. You must give your mind up most deeply and thoroughly to understand and obey it.
2. You must hear with reverence and awe. Nothing is more displeasing to God than a state of levity of mind when He is speaking. You can readily understand this. If you were a father, think how you would feel if your children received your most solemn remarks or appeals to them with insulting levity.
3. You must hear with a most sincere desire to understand what God says. How many persons are there in this house who have never set yourselves with seriousness really to understand the Gospel as if you felt it to be a matter of infinite concernment to you? How many are there here who have never really pondered the plan of salvation--saying "I must know how I may be saved--I must understand the will of God concerning myself--I must know whether I am still held guilty and still doomed to hell, or whether I am pardoned?" Some of you perhaps have never said this honestly in all your life. Yet you have had the Bible in your hands; and you have heard sermons enough to have enlightened unto salvation a thousand heathen souls. Who of you have come to the house of God to day with an intense desire to understand every thing said to you? But how can you expect ever to understand these great things of salvation unless you give up your minds to this study in solemn earnestness?

I am often astonished to hear persons saying--"The Bible is a mysterious book; I don't understand it."

Have you ever studied it as you do your class books? Do you ever give your whole mind to understand it as you do to understand Euclid or Cicero?

Yet with what intense interest should you desire to understand it! Nothing in all the universe is so important to you as to understand this way of salvation. Your state of mind therefore by no means corresponds to your responsibilities, or to the subject you have to study;--and how can you expect the Lord to bless you?

4. You must hear with candor, and be willing to know the worst of your case. Your heart must be really open to hear the whole truth.

Few persons have really come to understand how much importance is to be attached to this state of mind. Many seem not to be sensible of being prejudiced.--Perhaps they have not even dreamed of being committed against the truth of God; but yet they are, full of committal--and most resolutely fixed in their false opinions. They are by no means candid.

I doubt whether a really candid man ever came to the reading of the Bible or to the hearing of the preached gospel, without being infinitely benefited by such hearing and reading. Now in revivals I have always noticed that however wicked and prejudiced men may have been yet if they could be persuaded to lay aside their prejudice and be candid, they are at once enlightened and are usually converted. They did not know really that they were not candid; yet if they had used the least reflection they must have seen that they did not give up their whole mind honestly and search for truth. So much at least they must have known.

And how is it here in this matter? Are there not persons here who know they do not give up their minds to understand the truth--who know they have not heard the gospel this morning with any real desire to learn their duty that they may do it? I wish I could go round to every individual here, with this question--Did you come here this morning with an intense desire to open your whole heart to the truth, and to give yourself up to be carried by it just where the truth might carry you? Without so much candor and so much earnestness as this, how can you hope ever to be enlightened by the truth? How can you rationally expect ever to be converted?

5. The Bible represents it as important that you should hear with fear and trembling lest you fail to understand. Surely nothing can be more reasonable than this. How would you feel if you were actually to hear the voice of Jehovah proclaiming to you your duty, or your doom? Would you not tremble?

How did Israel hear at Sinai, when the awful voice of the Lord of Hosts shook the solid mountain, and smote every heart with fear and awe! O they felt then that they could not stand before that awful Lord God! How earnestly did they implore that they might not themselves hear that dread voice again, but that Moses might stand between themselves and the Lord and hear from Him and communicate to them?

And is it not most fit that you no less than they, should hear the word of God with fear and solemn awe?

6. You should hear with an intense desire to learn what the will of God is that you may do it whatever it may be. Now if you do not hear with a determination to obey, your hearing is only tempting God. It is an insult to God of the foulest stamp. Willing and ready to know your duty--but your heart fully set to disregard it however clearly known! What can be more horrid impiety than this!

7. You should hear with your heart set upon present obedience. You should not merely intend to do at some future time the duty you may learn to day; but you should fully determine to do present known duty immediately.

Moreover your heart should be thoroughly set to do your duty fully--not partially; and perpetually,--not merely for the present hour.

8. You must also hear with penitence for past neglect. How many times have you heard in vain? And is it not fit that for this you should stand before God with a broken heart?

9. You must hear with implicit confidence in God. Else of what use can it be to you. The Bible says the Jews were not benefited by their hearing because it was not mixed with faith. So unless you really believe God, of what possible use can it be to you to listen to his word?

This reveals the secret why so many hear without any real profit. If they truly believed God, it would be of use to hear; but having no faith in God, all is to them as an idle tale. May it not be so with many of you?

But let us try to appreciate this subject. Imagine to yourself how you should listen if God should send an angel to speak to you, or should come to speak to you himself. Suppose that I were now to take my seat, and that God should fill this house with his own voice. You would see no physical form but you would hear a voice, and know it to be the voice of the great God. How would awe and wakeful attention hold your mind in such dread moments! Oh, you would say--this is the great God! This is that Being in whose hand our breath is, and whom by our sins we have offended! O will he forgive us graciously for Christ's sake, or frown upon us in his righteous wrath?

Or again, suppose God speaks by an angel. The angel comes and takes his position before you. Suppose you were to see him come down from heaven in robes of dazzling light and glory; you see he holds in his hand a book and every page of it is luminous with unearthly radiance. He opens it, assuring you that God sends it to you to tell you the plan of salvation and show you what you must do to be saved. Suppose the angel opens that book and expounds to you its contents;--would you not listen as for your very life? Would not the scene and its solemn responsibilities make an impression on your mind which you could never forget? Aye, indeed, as if it were embossed on your very soul;--there the living remembrance and impression of the truths he should explain to you would stand as if they were written with the point of a diamond.

But again, let us suppose, that an apostle should come or one of the prophets of yet more ancient time; suppose one of them to be sent from the other world and you were assured of the fact; would you not listen with amazing attention?

Or still again, suppose that God should send to you an inspired man, and you knew him to be inspired; would you not even then listen with wakeful, thrilling interest? Would you not yield your utmost attention to such messages from the living God?

But here you have the living oracles of Jehovah. Here they are in the language of men: and yet you know they come from God. Suppose it to be the fact that God has chosen to reveal himself to you just in this way, rather than by making his own voice distinctly and awfully audible, or rather than by an angel radiant with glory--or rather than by sending from the other world a prophet or an apostle, or rather than by sending to you an inspired preacher; and the reason of his choice has been that he might put you on a more effective trial and see whether you would believe him on such evidence as your reason tells you is adequate, and see moreover whether you will under such circumstances search for truth as for hid treasures. Suppose you understand the precise nature of your trial; you know that it turns very much upon the point whether you will hear the voice of God through his word and his preached gospel or not;--now, knowing all this, will you give heed to the warning voice of God and listen to his truth? O how you would search this truth if you understood the results of the trial by which the Lord is now trying you to see if you will indeed obey his voice though it comes to you through the silent words of the book and the merely human voice of one who is a frail mortal, like yourselves!

REMARKS.

1. Many seem to pay as little attention to the word of God as if no such injunction were found in the bible. They act as if they had never thought of the solemn responsibility of hearing with serious attention to the word of the Lord. It would seem from their conduct as if they were not aware that God had over and over again reminded them of this solemn responsibility.

Even among us, there are those who pay not half so much attention to a solemn message which God sends by one commissioned to preach his gospel as they would to a young man's commencement speech, or to the monthly declamations; not half so much as they would to a stump speech on politics!

How can this be? Do such persons at all consider the contempt they thus pour upon God? Would they treat their Governor or their President, as they do God? And do they know that this is that God in whose hand their breath is?

2. Men ought to know that all their hearing of the gospel, is either "a savor of life unto life, or a savor of death unto death." Do you realize this, dear hearer? Are you aware how much this hearing affects your moral state?

You might watch this point, and mark how your hearing of the gospel affects your moral state. You might doubtless notice how your heart becomes hardened by careless, inattentive hearing, and how declension steals on apace while you get no strength from the preached gospel.

Or on the other hand you might notice how your spiritual strength is renewed when your heart takes hold of the sermons you hear as the hungry man takes hold of suitable food set before him. By a figure at once fit and beautiful, does Paul say--"We are unto God a sweet savor of Christ in them that are saved and in them that perish. To the one we are a savor of death unto death, to the other, a savor of life unto life." So to some of you, no doubt, the gospel preached is "death unto death"--accumulated guilt and damnation; while to others it is "life unto life," increasing knowledge and piety, and augmented glory.

3. We may see how it is that many become so exceedingly hardened. Such persons often seem not aware that they are becoming greatly hardened, or perhaps that they have become so already. They seem not sensible of the fact that the hearing of the gospel is altogether vain and worse than vain, and that they really hear so as to resist the truth and acquire the habit of being utterly insensible to its claims.

It may be so with some of you. You may have taken so little heed to what you hear that now it does you absolutely no good at all to hear a sermon or to read your bibles. You might hear or read, but the truth has utterly ceased to make any impression.

If you have reached a state so hardened, you are in as bad a predicament as you need to be this side of hell.

4. How exceedingly mad persons are for taking credit to themselves for going to the house of God, when really they have no intention of "taking heed how they hear." They come with no desire whatever of obeying the word of God; indeed nothing is farther from their thoughts than this. They go to church only that they may have it to say they have been there. They go for the credit of going--because they do not like to incur the disgrace of not going.

Suppose your child should come to you each morning and say--Father, what do you want that I should do today? But having heard, he goes his way, and never thinks for a moment of doing the first thing you desire him to do. So he does day after day--hearing, but never doing, and withal congratulating himself for

having done so nobly. O, indeed, who had done like him--every morning he came and asked his parent what he should do:--but never in one instance did he obey.

So that young man or woman in this assembly, may have gone a hundred times to hear what God, the Lord will say--but having heard and learned, they never in one instance have done it. So does the devil go to meeting;--the bible says he goes:--but does he hear and obey? Not he--and suppose he too should strut about and glory in his good deeds inasmuch as he goes to meeting! As well might he do this, as any of those careless hearers and proud formalists who glory in it that they do the same thing.

5. Every seventh day is a sabbath. Every seven years of your life makes up one year of sabbaths. Every sabbath school child seven years old has therefore seen one year of sabbaths. Each youth fourteen years old has spent two full years of sabbaths--time enough to go half through college. Have those youths now fourteen years old, been learning of God and of his truth so that they can pass examination?

Another class have lived twenty one years. These have filled up three years of sabbaths--time enough to have gone three fourths of the way through college. O think of your examination. Are you ready to meet it and to pass it honorably?

Others have lived twenty eight years--making four years of sabbaths--time enough to go through college--time enough to get a college education in the principal branches of literature and science.

Now suppose you had studied your Algebra and Latin as you have your bibles, and heard scientific lectures as you have sermons;--how much science would you now have?

But let us come up among the fathers--the men of gray hairs; how many years of sabbaths have you lived? Think of it; how many whole years made up of Sabbaths! O! have you taken heed? Have you studied the great things of the bible with the utmost diligence and intensity? What do you know of God's word? How many of its promises do you really understand?

6. How perfectly shocking and astounding is the manner in which many persons treat the word of God! Suppose an angel should visit this place--should really come down among yourselves with a message from the great God! He summons the people together, and the most of them come. But instead of attending with all your souls to what he may bring from God relating to your salvation, many of you are gazing about upon one another, and during the whole time he is speaking to you, you are thinking about any thing and every thing else except the very thing of which he is speaking, so that it would be hard to say which is the most stupid--the people that sit before him, or the seats they sit on. O, surely there is not another world in the universe where this would not be looked upon as perfect madness! What do they think of it in heaven? Suppose an angel should pass among those shining hosts and tell them how the messages of God are received in this world. And suppose he should speak of it in some such manner as this. It is common there for men to pay the least possible attention to the messengers whom God sends among them, and all this is natural enough too. O, you see the Lord is only telling them some things of little consequence about their salvation--that is all--you know all that is really nothing to them.

O tell me;--what would they think of such an angel as this? What shuddering amazement would run through all their ranks to hear such words, in such a strain!

But if such a state of mind ought to seem strange and even horrid in heaven, how ought it to seem here among you?

7. There are some here as to whom I have little hope of making any impression on their minds. O how astonishing, I have often said to myself--how astonishing that they should be always hearing, and only going still farther and farther away from God and from heaven! O how will they stand before God in the great day of trial!

Others hear with so much scepticism, it can do them no good. How surpassingly strange it is that men should be skeptical respecting the revealed word of God! Surely God has made the evidence in support of his bible clear enough to convince any unprejudiced mind.

8. In view of the solemn responsibilities of giving heed to the word of the Lord, I want to ask the listeners here to day, how will you yourselves regard it when you come to your death bed? What are your anticipations now of that solemn hour and of its reflections? Do you now expect that then, your conscience will pronounce its approving "well done?"

And how will it be with you when you pass beyond that death bed scene to your final account before the great God? Are you ready for that dread account? If you were then to pass an examination as to your attainments in divine science, as some of the professors here examine their pupils in human science and literature, could you pass the examination? Are you quite clear that you have at least been diligent, so that you shall have no occasion to reproach yourself for culpable neglect?

9. It is infinitely important that you should make up your mind at once to hear God's truth as you know you should. Every thing depends on your coming to this determination now, and saying--"I will at once and henceforth listen to God as for my life."

You who are professors of religion, how do you hear? Can you go before God now in your closets and say;--"Lord, I have heard thy word as for my life--I have given up my whole soul to understand and to obey all thy truth." Who of you can say this in the deep sincerity of your souls?

And what sinner in this house can say this? Who of you is prepared to say solemnly,--"O Lord God Almighty, the great and heart-searching God, I have heard thy words now these many days, and I have always listened with serious attention; my mother taught me about thee my God, and my duty to thee, and my young heart hailed the first knowledge of God with joyful welcome."

Who of you can say, "I have always been a prayerful student of the bible--I have always obeyed its heaven-sent truth?" Must you not rather say,--"I have been guilty--I am covered with shame--I have treated thy word with contempt--I have turned away my ear and my heart from hearing thy words; thou hast risen morning by morning, and sent me line upon line and precept upon precept, but my heart has always been as an adamant stone; Alas, I am still in my sins, although thou hast sent me thy word and thy Son--although thou hast done all for me that could be done, yet am I still in my sins, condemned, and ready to sink down to hell."

Sinner, let me ask you here to day, if this shall be your course any longer? Do you say No; by the grace of God it shall be so no longer--from this good hour, I give my being up to be influenced by the word of God? So do, dear hearer, and it shall be your life. By all the peril of a guilty soul in its sins, I beseech you, give up your heart now to most solemn and fixed attention to the word of the Lord your God.

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