

Listening when the Lord Speaks

“Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip.”

—*Hebrews 2:1*

THE ABILITY TO LISTEN IS

a great asset even in human relationships. He who never listens to what another says shuts himself up in the small world of his own thoughts. Probably all of us are to some extent guilty of this habit. Are

we good listeners, or are we discourteous toward those with whom we converse by almost always interrupting them in the midst of thoughts they endeavor to relate to us?

The story is told that on one occasion two brethren in Christ were conversing, and one was trying to express a certain thought to the other. The conversation went on for fully half an hour, because time after time the brother trying to express the thought he had in mind was continually interrupted by his friend. Finally he gave up, and the other brother walked away without knowing what it was he had failed to listen to. Indeed, he likely did not realize what he had lost. He was probably satisfied in that

he had managed to express what he had in his own mind and did not realize that he had lost a blessing by not being a good listener.

In our fellowship with the brethren it is especially important that we cultivate the habit of being good listeners, for each of them has thoughts that will refresh and strengthen us as New Creatures, if given the opportunity to express them. Some of the richest spiritual gems of thought have been expressed by those who are not considered teachers in the church. Let us realize this, and try not to monopolize conversations in which we participate.

The ability to listen is also important in our meetings, especially our study and testimony meetings. It is possible to be concentrating on some supposedly important thought of our own and miss a blessing from what someone else is saying. None of the Lord's people willfully do this, but it is so easy to fall into habits which tend to rob us of blessings which the Lord provides for us when we meet together with his people.

A COMPARISON

The loss of blessings through failure to listen to each other emphasizes the still greater importance of giving ear to the truths the Lord expresses to us through his Word. It is unfortunate if we show a lack of courtesy to our brethren by constantly interrupting them when they endeavor to converse with us, but we are both discourteous and irreverent to the Lord when we fail to give attention to him, or treat lightly what he has to say.

Throughout the Old Testament particularly, the Lord pleads with his people to give ear to his

instructions. To be impressed with this fact, consult a concordance and note how many times the word “hearken” is used by the Lord in exhortations to give heed to his Word. One of the Hebrew words used in these exhortations is explained by Prof. Strong to mean hearing with intelligence, and with the implied object of obeying.

In the New Testament, we have that well-known exhortation, “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.” (Rev. 2:7) This admonition is used in connection with the messages to each of the “seven churches” referred to in chapters 2 and 3 of the Book of Revelation. This repetition should impress us with the importance of hearkening unto the Lord. If he has given us “ears” that are capable of hearing and obeying his instructions and admonitions, how serious it would be not to listen to “what the Spirit saith unto the churches.” While these messages to the seven churches have special chronological application, yet in principle they all apply throughout the present Gospel Age, and it is primarily in this regard that we examine each of these messages from God through his son Christ Jesus.

In each of the messages to the seven churches there are commendations and condemnations. These messages are directed to the professed followers of the Master, some of whom are true to their profession, and some are not. To a large extent the first of these messages, given to “the church of Ephesus” is one of commendation, but not altogether. “I have somewhat against thee,” said the Master, “because thou hast left thy first love.”—Rev. 2:4

Could this be true, or even partially true, of any of us? Certainly we should search our hearts to see if this message is directed to us. Looking back to the time when we first dedicated our lives to the Lord, and remembering how zealous we were then, do we now find that there has been a cooling of our “first love”? Paul wrote, “Call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions.”—Heb. 10:32

Perhaps the loss of our first love is manifested by our inability to endure hardships resulting from the faithful carrying out of our consecration vows. It may be that the “light affliction” of the “former days” now seems to be an extremely burdensome trial. (II Cor. 4:17) If to any extent a change like this has occurred, we should take the Master’s warning seriously to heart, and endeavor by divine grace, not only to remember the former days, but also to regain our original first love and enthusiasm for the Lord, the Truth, and the brethren.

FEAR NOT

God’s message through Jesus to “the angel of the church in Smyrna” (Rev. 2:8-11), reveals the presence “of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are of the synagogue of Satan.” These, apparently, were as the “tares” which had grown up amongst the “wheat.” (Matt. 13:30) The true disciples were encouraged to remain faithful despite the opposition which might be leveled against them by those of “the synagogue of Satan.”

“Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer,” Jesus said. While Jesus was still with his disciples in the flesh, he said to them, “Fear not,

little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32) One of the purposes of what "the Spirit saith unto the churches" is to remove fear from the hearts of the Lord's people. However, this objective will not be accomplished in us as individuals unless we give ear to what the Spirit says through the Word of God.

To the church at Smyrna, the Master said, "The devil shall cast some of you into prison, . . . and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." (Rev. 2:10) Literal imprisonment is not part of the experiences of a majority of the Lord's people today, but as few as seventy years ago hundreds of the brethren were suffering in prisons and concentrations camps in Europe. We do not know if and when conditions in this chaotic world might change to such an extent as to bring about a similar situation again, whether in Europe, America, or elsewhere.

We are not to "borrow trouble." "Fear not," is the Master's admonition. We know that strength will be given for our every time of need. Ofttimes it requires greater courage and stamina to endure the little vexing daily trials than it does to stand up against severe persecution. It is not for us to determine the experiences which are best suited to our needs. Our chief concern is that we remain faithful even unto death. If we do, we shall receive "a crown of life."

MORE THAN THE FIRST

The message of the Lord to "the angel of the church in Pergamos" reveals that there was much in this assembly which he did not approve. However, even here there were some fervent and pure-hearted

individual followers of the Master who held fast to his name, not denying the faith, but suffering as “faithful martyrs.” (Rev. 2:13) There were those faithful ones “of the church in Thyatira,” who had increased in “charity, and service, and faith,” also in their patience and works. “The last” was “more than the first,” the message said.—vss. 18,19

This information is not given merely as an item of interest, but rather that we might endeavor to be like these faithful brethren, who, amidst all the unfavorable circumstances which surrounded them in the Thyatira period of the church, progressed in grace and in godlikeness. They did not permit the iniquities in the professed church around them to cause their zeal to “wax cold.” (Matt. 24:12) Even if our greatest trial is simply in waiting for the outworking of the divine plan, may we actively wait, and continue to increase in love, and service, and faith, and patience, and works.

The message to the unfaithful in the Thyatira church is a drastic one. Dire punishment was to fall upon those who practiced evils of various kinds. Speaking of symbolic Jezebel, or Babylon, the Master said, “I will kill her children with death.” One of the purposes of this, the Lord explains, is that “all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.”—Rev. 2:23

The glorified church of Christ beyond the veil will be made up of those who, individually, were faithful unto death. God is not taking groups into the kingdom to live and reign with Christ. It is blessed to fellowship and work together in our ecclesias, and to cooperate nationally and internationally in

a general service of the brethren and proclamation of the Truth. However, participating in a local or worldwide fellowship does not, in itself, assure us joint-heirship with Christ. The Master said, “I will give unto every one of you [as individuals] according to your works.” On the other hand, one of the tests which the Lord permits may well be how humbly we obey the instructions of his Word to “be subject one to another.” (I Pet. 5:5) This is essential if we are to work together to the glory of his name. We might be very faithful in serving the Lord independent of association with others, but the Lord who “searcheth the reins and hearts” might be more pleased if we worked together with others of like precious faith.

The general fellowship of the brethren in meetings and in the service of the Truth is God’s arrangement. It began at Pentecost, and was encouraged in the Early Church by the apostles. The spirit of division and of going separate ways was deplored. However, individual faithfulness to the Lord was then, and still is, required of each one who proves worthy to live and reign with Christ. May we realize at all times that the Lord sees into our hearts, and that only if they are pure and fully dedicated to him, will we enjoy his approval and, as a joint-heir with Jesus, receive “power over the nations.”—Rev. 2:26,27

EVEN IN SARDIS

The mingling of the true and the nominal (that is, “in name only”) disciples of the Master throughout the various stages of the church’s development, as illustrated by the “seven churches which are in

Asia,” is again clearly indicated in the message “unto the angel of the church in Sardis.” (Rev. 3:1) The Lord said, “I have not found thy works perfect before God.” (vs. 2) However, the Lord also said to this church, “Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.”—vs. 4

To this church, the Lord also said, “Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.” (vs. 1) Here, apparently, is described a state of spiritual lethargy on the part of many in this church which is such a crippling malady in any Christian’s life. This is a timely reminder to all of us of the possibility of becoming spiritually drowsy. We do not actually have to practice wrong in order to lose the Lord’s favor. Permitting our first-love enthusiasm to cool, and drifting aimlessly along, will do it. We should be hearing this message from the Lord’s Word and profiting by it.

How wonderful is the reward that is promised to those who overcome. The Lord says, “The same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.” (vs. 5) Can we think of anything more wonderful than to have our names confessed before the Heavenly Father, and before his angels? This is one of the rewards for obediently hearkening to “what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”

MESSAGE TO PHILADELPHIA

In delivering his message “to the angel of the church in Philadelphia,” the Master mentions some

of his own qualifications to speak. We read, "These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth."—Rev. 3:7

Jesus is both "holy" and "true." We can depend upon his Word. How unwise it would be not to give ear to him, especially since he has the "key of the house of David." (Isa. 22:22) This is the antitypical house of David in which Jesus himself is the supreme Ruler, and the overcomers of the Gospel Age are joint-heirs with him. He possesses the "key," the authority, to open this door of special opportunity to whomsoever he will, and to close it whenever he desires to do so. What "the Spirit saith unto the churches" is that this door is opened only to the overcomers.

As we have noted, there are those who have been associated with each of the seven churches who have practiced the evils mentioned in these messages. The door to the "house of David" is closed to these, and no man can open it for them. It cannot be opened by human philosophy, or by an outward show of righteousness. Likewise, it cannot be closed to those whom the Lord judges to be overcomers, although some have attempted to do this.

Let us give ear to the Lord, rather than to human philosophy, and continue on zealously to do his will, that we may be among the overcomers. The Lord says, "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, . . . and I will write upon him my new name."—Rev. 3:12

It has been true of the called of God in every part of the present age that they have set before them an open door of opportunity to prove worthy of joint-heirship with the Master. Human philosophies cannot close this door. "Thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name," the Master said. (Rev. 3:8) None of the Lord's people have sufficient strength of their own to be overcomers, but all must make the endeavor. If our hearts are in harmony with the Lord's Word and we are willing to acknowledge him and accept the opportunity of suffering and dying with him, he will give us the needed strength for every time of need. This is what the Lord is saying to us, but if we fail to listen we will not receive this much needed encouragement, and may faint by the wayside.

LAODICEA

The Lord's message to the Laodicean church indicates that, like the others, it is also made up of the nominal and the true. "I know thy works," he said, "that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth." (vss. 15,16) In one sense, this is addressed to the nominal believers who fail to prove worthy. What a realistic illustration the Lord uses to indicate lack of faithfulness on the part of nominal believers. A drink that is hot or cold is palatable and enjoyable, but distasteful if lukewarm. Nominal Laodiceans are like the lukewarm drink, so they are rejected by the Lord.

Their claim is that they are "rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing." The reason

they say this is because they have not hearkened unto the voice of the Lord, but have followed their own philosophies. This has left them outside of God's love and care. While they feel secure in their own wisdom and strength, they do not realize that from the Lord's standpoint they are "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked."—vs. 17

In another sense, these same words could apply to any one of us as individuals. Such would be the case if we were to embrace the same viewpoint and attitude of self-reliance, and in our spiritual pride fail to give proper heed to the voice of the Lord. Let us not have the attitude of the Pharisee of Jesus' parable who thanked the Lord that he was not like the publican, assuming that the Lord's favor to us is a certainty. (Luke 18:9-14) Rather, let us "fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest," any of us should seem to come short of it, by failing to hearken unto the voice of the Lord, and to obey his instructions.—Heb. 4:1

"Behold, I stand at the door, and knock," Jesus said, "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." (Rev. 3:20) "If any man hear my voice" is addressed to individuals, and it is the individuals who hear his voice, and obey it, who make up the overcoming class.

Let us be careful lest outside influences of one sort or another be allowed to shut out the voice of our Heavenly Father. It is not a matter of hearing his voice once, accepting his invitation, and being thereafter secure. It is a matter of continuous hearkening to God's Word, and that of his son Christ Jesus, if we are to continue feasting at the banquet table provided by his love.

From a chronological perspective, we are now living in the Laodicean period of the church, and the Lord's statement, "I stand at the door, and knock," alludes to the belief that we are now living in the time of Christ's Second Presence. This makes it all the more important that we give heed to his voice and that he "sups" with us. This includes the privilege of feasting with him on the precious "meat in due season" provided during this Harvest time of the Gospel Age.—Matt. 24:45

How humble it should make us to realize that he has given us "ears" to hear the "knock" of his presence. Having been given ears to hear, however, it is necessary that we continue hearkening to the Lord's voice. Only by so doing can we hope to be overcomers. To those who are thus faithful, Jesus said, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne."—Rev. 3:21■