**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**MATTHEW-080**. **EARS AND NO EARS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Who hath ears to hear, let him hear."*

*Matthew 13:8*

This saying was frequently on our Lord's lips, and that in very various connections. He sometimes, as in the instance before us, appended it to teaching which, from its parabolic form, required attention to disentangle the spiritual truth implied. He sometimes used it to commend some strange, new revolutionary teaching to men's investigation--as, for instance, after that great declaration of the nullity of ceremonial worship, how that nothing could defile a man except what came from his heart. In other connections, which I need not now enumerate, we find it. Like printing a sentence in italics, or underscoring it, this saying calls special attention to the thing uttered. It is interesting to notice that our Lord, like the rest of us, had to use such means of riveting and sharpening the attention of His hearers. There is also a striking reappearance of the expression in the last book of Scripture. The Christ who speaks to the seven churches, from the heavens, repeats His old word spoken on earth, and at the end of each of the letters says once more, as if even the Voice that spoke from heaven might be listened to listlessly, He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.

**I. We all have ears.**

Now, it is a very singular instance of the superficial, indolent way in which people are led away by sound rather than by sense, that this saying of my text has often been taken to mean that there is a certain class that can listen, and that it is their business to listen, and there is another class that cannot, and so they are absorbed from all responsibility. The opposite conclusion is the correct one. Everybody has ears, therefore everybody is bound to hear. Which being translated, is that there is not a man or woman among us that has not the capacity of hearing in the sense of understanding, and of hearing in the sense of obeying the word that Jesus Christ speaks to us all. Every one of us, whatever may be our diversities of education, temperament, natural capacity in regard to other subjects of study and apprehension, has the ears that are capable of receiving the message that comes to us all in Jesus Christ.

For what is it that He addresses? Universal human nature, the universal human wants, and mainly and primarily, as I believe, the sense of sin which lies dormant indeed, but capable of being awakened, in all men, because the fact of sin attaches to all men. There is no man but has the needs to which Christ addresses Himself, and no man but has the power of apprehending, of accepting, and of living by, the great Incarnate Word and His message to the world. So that instead of there being a restriction implied in the words before us, there is the broadest implication of the universality of Christ's message. And just as every man comes into the world with a pair of ears on his head, so every man comes into the world with the capacity of listening to, and accepting, that gracious Lord. That is the first thing that our Master distinctly declares here, that we all have ears.

**II. If we have ears we are bound to use them.**

Let him hear. In all regions, as I need not remind you, capacity and responsibility go together; and the power that we possess is the measure of the obligation under which we come. All our natural faculties, for instance, are given to us with the implied command, See that you make the best use of them. So that even these bodily organs of ours, much more the higher faculties and capacities of the spirit of which the body is partly the symbol and partly the instrument, are intrusted to us on terms of stewardship. And just as it is criminal for a man to go through life with a pair of ears on his head, and a pair of eyes in his forehead, neither of which he educates and cultivates, so is it criminal for a man having the capacity of grasping the great Revelation of God, who at sundry times and in divers manners hath spoken unto the Fathers by the prophets, but in these last days hath spoken unto us by the Son, to turn away from that Voice, and pay no heed to it.

It is universally true that obligation goes with capacity. It is especially true with regard to our relation to Jesus Christ. We are all bound to hear Him, as the great Voice said on the Mount of Transfiguration. The upshot of all that manifestation of the divine glory welling up from the depths of Christ's nature, and transfiguring His countenance, the upshot of all that solemn and mysterious communion with the mighty dead, Moses and Elias, the end of all that encompassing glory that wrapped Him, was the Voice from Heaven which proclaimed, This is My beloved Son; hear ye Him. Moses with his Law, Elijah with his Prophecy, faded away and were lost. But there stood forth singly the one Figure, relieved against the background of the glory-cloud, the Christ to whom we are all bound to turn with the vision of longing eyes, with the listening of docile ears, with the aspiration of yearning affection, with the submission of absolute obedience.

Hear ye Him. For just as truly as light is meant for the eye, so truly are the words of the Incarnate Word, and the life which is speech and revelation, meant to be the supreme objects of our attention, of our contemplative regard, and of our practical submission. We are bound to hear because we have ears; and of all the voices that are candidates for our attention, and of all the music that sounds through the universe, no voice is so sweet and weighty, no words so fundamental and all-powerful, no music so melodious, so deep and thunderous, so thrilling and gracious, as are the words of that Word who was made flesh and dwelt among us. We are bound to hear, and we hear to most profit when it is Him that we hear.

**III. We shall not hear without an effort.**

Christ says in my text, Let him hear, as if the possession of the ear did not necessarily involve that there should be hearing. And so it is; Having ears, they hear not, is a description verified in a great many other walks of life than in regard to religious matters. But it is verified there in the most conspicuous and in the most tragic fashion. I wonder how many of us there are who, though we have heard with the hearing of the outward ear, have not heard in the sense of attending, have scarcely heard in the sense of apprehending, and have not heard at all in the sense of obeying? Friend, what is it that keeps you from hearing, if you do not hear? Let me run over two or three of the things that thus are like wax in a man's ears, making him deaf to the message of life in Jesus Christ, in order to bring out how needful it is that these should be counteracted by an effort of will, and the vigorous concentration of thought and heart upon that message.

What is it that keeps men from hearing? Being busy with other things is one hindrance. There is an old story of St. Bernard riding along by a lake on his way to a Council, and being so occupied with thoughts and discussions, that after the day's travel he lifted up his eyes and said, Where is the lake?And so we, many of us, go along all our days on the banks of the great sea of divine love, and we are so busy thinking about other things, or doing other things, that at the end of the journey we do not know that we have been travelling by the side of the flashing waters all the day long. Everybody knows how possible it is to be so engrossed with one's occupations or thoughts as that when the clock strikes in the next steeple, we hear it and do not hear it. We have read of soldiers being so completely absorbed in the fury of the fight that a thunderstorm has rattled over their heads, and no man heard the roll, and no man saw the flash. Many of us are so swallowed up in our trade, in our profession, in our special branch of study, in our occupations and desires, that all the trumpets of Sinai might be blown into our ears, and we should hear them as though we heard them not; and what is worse, that the pleading voice of that great Lord who is ever saying to each of us, Come unto Me, all ye that labour, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest, passes us by, and produces no effect, any more than does the idle wind whistling through an archway. Brethren, you have the need, the sin, the weakness, the transiency, to which the Gospel appeals. You have the faculties to which it addresses itself. Jesus Christ is speaking to every one of us. I beseech you to ask yourselves, Do I hear Him?If not, is it not because the clatter of the world's business, or the more refined sounds of some profession or study, have so taken up your attention that you have none to spare for that which requires and repays it most?

Then there is another thing that makes attention, and concentration, and a dead lift of resolution necessary, if you are rightly to hear, and that is the very fact that, superficially, you have heard all your days. You do not know the despair that sometimes comes over men in my position when we face our congregations of people that are familiar to weariness with everything that we have to say, and because they are superficially so familiar with it, fancy that there is no need for them to give heed any more. What can a poor man like me do to get through that crust of familiarity with the mere surface of Christian truth and teaching which is round many of you? You come and listen to me, and say, Oh! he has nothing original to say. We have heard it all before. Yes, your ears have heard it. Have you heard? Jesus Christ died for me, you have been told that ever since you were a little child; and so the thousand-and-first, the million-and-first, repetition of it has little power over you. If once, just once, that truth could get through the crust of familiarity, and touch your heart, your bare heart, with its quick naked point of fire-shod love, I think there might be a wound made that would mean healing. But some of you will go away presently, just as you have gone away a thousand times before, and my words will rebound from you like an india-rubber ball from a wall, or run off you like water from the sea-bird's plumes, just because you think you have heard it all before--and you have never heard it all your days. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

Then there is another hindrance. A man may put his fingers in his ears. And some of you, I am afraid, are not ignorant of what it is to have made distinct and conscious efforts to get rid of the impressions of religion, and of Christ's voice to us.

And then there are some of us who, out of sheer listlessness, do not hear. It is not because we are too busy. It is not because we have any intellectual objection to the message. It is not because we have made any definite effort to get away from it. It is not even because we have been so accustomed to hear it, that it is impossible to make an impression on our listless indifference. Go down into Morecambe Bay when the tide is making; and, as the water is beginning to percolate through the sand, try to make an impression with a stick upon the tremulous jelly. As soon as you take out the point the impression is lost. And there are many of us like that, who, out of sheer stolid listlessness, retain no fragment of the truth that is sounding in our ears. Dear friends, If the word spoken by angels was steadfast, how shall we escape if we--what? Reject? Deny? Fight against? Angrily repel? No;--if we neglect so great salvation?That is the question for you negligent people, for you people who think you know all about it and there an end, for you people who are so busy with your daily lives that, amidst the hubbub of earth, heaven's silent voice is inaudible to your ears. Neglect stops the ears and ruins the man. But you will not hear, though you have ears, unless you make an effort of will and concentration of attention.

**IV. And now the last thing that I have to say is:--If we do not hear, we shall become deaf.**

That is what Christ said in the context. The sentence which I have taken as my text was spoken at the close of the Parable of the Sower; and when His disciples came and asked Him why He spake in parables, His answer was in effect that the people to whom He spoke had not profited by what they had heard, hearing, they heard not, and therefore He spoke in parables which veiled as well as revealed the truth. It was not given to them to know the mysteries of the Kingdom, because they had not given heed to what had been made known to them. The great law was taking effect which gives to him that has and takes from him that has not; and that law applied not only to the form of Christ's teaching, but also to the faculty of receiving it. That diminished capacity is sometimes represented as men's own act, and sometimes as the divinely inflicted penalty of not hearing, but in either case the same fact is in view--namely, the loss of susceptibility by neglect, the dying out of faculties by disuse.

Just as in the bodily life capacities untrained and unexercised become faint and disappear; just as the Indian fakir, who holds his arm up above his head for years, never using the muscles, has the muscles atrophied, and at last cannot bring his arm down to his side;--so the people who neglect to use the ears that God has given them by degrees will lose the capacity of hearing at all. Which, being put into plain English, just comes to this: that if we do not listen to Jesus Christ when He calls to us in His love, we shall gradually have the capacity of hearing diminished until--I do not know if it ever reaches that point here--until its ultimate extinction.

Dear friends, this word of the love and pity and pardon and purifying power of God manifest in Jesus Christ for us all, which I am trying to preach to you now, is not without an effect even on the men by whom it is most superficially and perfunctorily heard. It either softens or hardens. As the old mystics used to say, the same heat that melts wax hardens clay into brick. The same light that brings blessing to one eye brings pain to another. You have heard, and hearing you have not heard; and you will cease to be able to hear at all; and then the thunders may rattle over your heads, and be inaudible to you; and that Voice which is as loud as the sound of many waters, and sweet as harpers harping on their harps, and which says to each of us, Come to Me, and I will be thy peace and thy rest and thy strength, will no more be audible in your atrophied ears. Dear friends! I do not know, as I have said, whether that ultimate tragic result is ever wholly reached in this world. I am sure that it is not reached with some of you as yet. And I beseech you to obey that voice which says, This is My beloved Son; hear Him, and to let there not be only outward hearing, but to let there be inward acceptance, attention, apprehension, and obedience. And then we shall be able to say, Blessed are our ears, for they hear; blessed are our eyes, for they see. Many prophets and righteous men desired to hear the things that ye hear, and heard them not, take care that, since you are thus advanced in the outward possession of the perfect word of God, there be also the yielding to, and reception of it.