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The Responsibility of Hearing the Word of the Lord

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"I will destine you to the sword, and ye shall all bow down to the slaughter; because when I called, ye did not answer; when I spake, ye did not hear; but ye did that which was evil in mine eyes, and chose that wherein I delighted not." Isaiah 65:12.

"Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things that were heard, lest haply we drift away from them." Hebrews 2:1.

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock: 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... He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches... He who testifieth these things saith, Yea: I come quickly. Amen: come, Lord Jesus." Rev. 3:20,22; 22:20.

The Lord is constantly coming to His people. He comes to them every time that there is a living Word from Him. This familiar passage in Revelation 3 is impressive when you note that the knock, the voice, the ear and "the Spirit saith" are all one. "I knock"; and if you listen, it is not a tapping but a Voice, a Voice that could only be heard by the inner ear because it is the Voice of the Spirit and what the Spirit says is all one language. "My knock is My voice and My voice is what the Spirit says", and that requires an inner ear giving heed to what the Spirit says, so that every time a living Word comes, the Lord has come, and coming in His Word by His Spirit, He comes expecting a response.

There is a practical issue bound with every drawing near of the Lord in His Word and it is only as that issue is taken up definitely that the real meaning of the Lord's drawing near is entered into and secured. The Lord may be there in His Word, the Spirit may be there speaking by that Word, the Word of the Lord bringing the Lord near may visit us, may be with us; and all that may be wonderfully true, as true as ever it was in those days of which it is written "The word of the Lord came by the mouth of" this one and that one, as true as ever it was true as a prophet said "Thus saith the Lord". It may be just as true as that today, and yet at the same time result in nothing; that is, so far as the Lord's purpose and intention is concerned. That is always the peril which lies alongside of a Word of the Lord coming, that it may, after all, result in nothing so far as that which the Lord intended is concerned.

"Herein is My Father glorified that ye bear much fruit..." not that ye know much truth, that ye hear many expositions of the Word, that the Word of the Lord indeed has come to you, but "Herein... much fruit". And that can only be as we recognise the issue bound up with the Word and definitely lay hold of it. The response which the Lord expects when He comes in His Word is the response of Life, not merely of assent, agreement or pleasure. We have from Him the parable of the sower, a fourfold response from the Lord being present with His Word, for He is the sower, and the seed is the Word. The Lord is present with His Word, and He is sowing in expectation, and His expectation is disappointed very largely, whenever there is any kind of response to Him other than the response of real fruit, and that is taking hold of the issue into the heart. That is the very core of the parable, it is taking it into the heart; I think I can say: taking it to heart. There may be some kind of reaction that is not the response the Lord is seeking. He wants a heart response, not in emotion, but in fruit: that which becomes the embodiment of the Life that is in the Word which He brings so that the Word, having the Life, being planted in our hearts, means that that Word expresses itself in a living way in us. Such is the response which the Lord is seeking every time He comes to us in His Word.

The apostle said to Timothy, "Give thyself wholly unto them that thy progress may be manifest to all"; "the things thou hast heard and received of me, give thyself wholly unto them". As you give yourself wholly to them, the fruit, the progress, shall be seen of all. That is the only way to spiritual progress and it is the only response which satisfies the Lord. That is the response which He is seeking. Therefore it means utterness as well as immediacy.

Another peril is always present when the Lord comes with His Word. It is somehow indefinitely in the mind to postpone the issue. If it is not a deliberate postponement - for very few perhaps do that - it is a postponement all the same, for every failure to take hold and follow up is a postponement.

I do feel that there is much room with the Lord's people as a whole for immediate transaction on the basis of every word which comes to us which we have any reason to believe is the Lord's. This is the way of fruitfulness, this is the way of progress, this is the way of enlargement. I am sure you are concerned very much about the matter of spiritual growth, advancement, progress. I am sure you, in your own life with the Lord, often ask Him for spiritual increase in you, progress, that you might go on, that you might come to maturity. I am sure there is much in your prayer in that direction. Now, may I suggest to you a way in which you may co-operate with the Lord in answering such prayer? It is that you make a practice, whenever the Word of the Lord has come, of going immediately and dealing with the Lord on that matter, with the practical issue bound up with that Word. If you wait until tomorrow you will get into that vicious course that there will be another message presented and the last one has simply gone past, and so you go on.

Each message is intended to have an issue, but it becomes an accumulation of messages, of words, with the weeks and months and years, and the great responsibility being piled up inasmuch as we are going to be judged by the Word. "The word that I have spoken unto you, it shall judge you" (John 12:48). The piling up of a great responsibility, because for some reason or other - not deliberately, not intentionally - we never square immediately to the practical issue bound up with the Word. If you will at once give yourself wholly for an application to the Word as well as of the Word, your progress will be seen of all. Here is a man or a woman who deals with God at once upon any issue raised by His Word. God takes that one on wonderfully; it is honest thoroughgoing dealing with the Lord immediately. The Lord is a Lord who requires prompt response. If you like to go through the Word, you will see what is bound up with a prompt response to the Lord. The blessing of the Lord is there. You will see the trouble that is bound up with the postponement, the increased difficulty, and you will see the loss that eventually comes when the thing is passed: "Because I called and ye did not answer". "Behold... I knock, if any man will hear My voice" - what the Spirit says. That is speaking to the Church, as you know, not to the unsaved; it may be true there, but this word was a word to the Church.

It is only my purpose to help towards the end which I am always trying to keep in view for myself and for you: how can we come to that maturity, to that growth, to that enlargement? The Lord puts His finger upon this point and just hedges it about and says, "Now I want immediate and definite response in action, a transaction with Me on the issue that is raised by this word". If we would do that every time instead of letting it go, and would beware of all those things which are ever waiting to dissipate God's Word when He has drawn near in His Word, we should grow. You need not move out of your seat before someone will talk to you about something of tomorrow or the past, something which has nothing whatever to do with what the Lord has just been saying. You have only to get to the door and find yourself in general conversation. That kind of fellowship may be good and I am not in any way against the real fellowship of the Lord's people, for it is a great help to be able to meet and talk; but beware because no sooner is the Word spoken than it is snatched away and for all practical purposes it might be as though it had never been spoken. That could never be if we immediately got down before the Lord and said, "Now Lord, there is a practical issue bound up with this and that issue has got to be possessed!" That is the way of growth. Bear the Word. As I say, it is only to help towards the end which we have in view.

There is a great value in immediacy, and that response of course will call for utterness for the Lord. Such a response will test our utterness. If anybody really does have the Word of the Lord, seriously and immediately we must get before the Lord about it, meaning business; not just attending meetings and listening to addresses, but out for the Lord, bringing up this question: "What is it that the Lord has said? How does that apply to me? What is the Lord after in me concerning that? I may see it or I may not, but that is not the point. The point is, Lord is there something there that I do not see? Is there something You are trying to say to me and I am not yet alive to it?" How often, sometimes afterwards, we have seen that the Lord said something at a certain time and really it touched upon something in our lives, but at the time we did not see it. Now we see how that was fitted for our case. If we had gone to the Lord, might we not have seen it? That is utterness for the Lord in our response to His Word. There must be a taking hold and a keeping hold until the thing is settled, until it is established, because it is possible even to have exercise over a Word, to follow the point of the Word, to feel the weight of it and feel it getting into us and touching us and then for it to fade. We felt it and we always look back and say, "Yes that was a word that came to us; we felt something in that word; it moved us!" But we have to say that it fell short of the actual issue. What

we have to do is to take hold and to keep hold. Has the Lord said something to us? Are we holding on to that until the matter is secured and established and the Lord has got that in us?

Note that word in Hebrews 2: "Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we heard, lest haply we drift away from them." I have often pointed out that that word has behind it the picture of a man in the boat taking up his moorings. There is a current running and he comes up on his moorings, reaches out with his boat hook, takes his moorings on his boat hook, but he does it carelessly; he does it without all his attention bent upon it. The tide is running fast, the current is strong, and he has not given the more earnest heed and before he knows what has happened, he has slipped his moorings inadvertently and is drifting away. He had them, he came into touch with them, they were on his hook, and he lost them. It is so often like that. The Word of the Lord comes; we make contact, we even would say we have got it, but where is it after a bit? After a while, what about it? "Therefore... give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest haply we drift away from them." That is the kind of response that the Lord is seeking all the time.

Now, it would never be right to leave things there without another word. Such a response to the Lord which He is seeking will always be costly. The Lord will see to that. The things of the Lord are not had cheaply; God's purpose is a costly purpose and any fresh movement in relation thereto will be costly. You know that Hebrews 13:13 is the summary of the practical issues of going on. The exhortation throughout the letter is "Go on". The summary is this: "Let us therefore go to Him without the camp, bearing His reproach." That is what we are going to get for going on. Down here that is just what you are going to get if you go on. It all looks so glorious to go on, all that we are going on to is wonderful. We can romance about the eternal purpose and reigning and having dominion. Yes, but the present side of that is outside the camp bearing His reproach. There is a cost attached to going on with the Lord. There will be a cost bound up with every step. It will make demands; it will only be men of faith who will go on. That is what drives it in. It is that which makes it ours and makes it a part of us.

The Lord comes looking for response; the Word demands it and everything hangs upon it. There is nothing so established that it cannot be set aside by God if it ceases to respond to His purpose. "I... will remove thy lampstand out of its place, except..." (Rev. 2:5). God planted those churches in Asia, those lampstands; He blessed them, He used them; they were vessels of testimony; and then there came the crisis in which God said, "That which I have planted, that which I have blessed, that which was the work of My Spirit, and had My Spirit in it, I will move it out of its place". There is a sense in which we are always on trial for our life and the nature of the trial is this: immediate response to every visitation of the Lord in His Word. "If any man will hear..."