

Hebrews 2:1-4

Giving Earnest Heed to What We've Heard

Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard – v. 1

If we are to give the more earnest heed to the things we've heard then the question that quite naturally arises is – What have we heard? And the contents of what we've heard (as well as the contents of what the Jewish Christians heard) can be summarized in a word – we have heard the gospel. We have heard and learned of the person and work of Christ.

God in these last days has spoken to us by His Son and His Son has preached the gospel to us. The Son of God, who is the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person – the Son, who is the only begotten Son of God who is greater than the prophets and greater than the angels – the Son, who by Himself accomplished what He preached by fulfilling the law and purging our sins through His atoning death has communicated to us the good news of salvation by grace through faith in Him. To adopt the phrase of v. 3 we could say that Christ has spoken to us regarding *so great salvation*.

These Jewish Christians would have heard the same things that you and I have heard. They would have heard Christ's invitation – *Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest*. They would have heard Christ's promise in Jn. 5:24 *Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life*. And they would have heard Christ's word of assurance in Jn. 10:28 *And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand*.

Failure to give heed to the Son of God, then, amounts to failure to submit to the highest authority in the universe. It amounts to an action of casting away the promises of God. And it amounts to an abandonment of assurance. It's no wonder Paul will say later in this epistle with regard to those who fail to heed what Christ has spoken: *For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries* (10:26,27).

We should begin to appreciate even this early into this epistle to the Hebrews how turning away from Christ amounts to an insolent affront and open and high-handed defiance to God Almighty. The Jews, one might argue, were treating the matter as lightly as we might treat a Baptist becoming a Presbyterian, or a Methodist becoming a Baptist. The issue before these Jewish believers was much more serious than that. They were on the brink of turning away from God Himself and although such a turning away may have provided a temporary reprieve from their difficult circumstances in life – in the end it would have robbed them of their ease in life because of the voice of their conscience which would not let them escape that certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation.

And so the exhortation in our text provides the alternative to turning away from Christ. In our last study I suggested that the example of angels served, by way of implication, to provide the Jewish Christians with an alternative to turning away from Christ. In our text this morning we see the alternative presented even more forcefully by way of this exhortation. So instead of giving less heed to the gospel that they had heard by turning away from that gospel, they should instead *give the more earnest heed* to what they had heard.

It's a good exhortation for us all especially when you consider what's at stake in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are talking about the issues of heaven and hell. We are dealing with the issue of the eternal destiny of your soul. In the preaching of the gospel you are brought face to face with everlasting life or everlasting death. What issues in life should call for more careful attention than the issues raised by the gospel?

I remember hearing a preacher several years ago point out how ironic he found it that young men and young women in particular would spend years in school receiving a degree or receiving technical training in some field so that they could control the next 40 years of their lives. Four years, or more, in order to control in some measure that brief span in your life when you'll embark on your career – but little or no time to spend on the issue of where you'll be forever?

How we should take the exhortation of our text to heart and give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard. One commentator notes that the word *more* in our text at other times carries the meaning of *most*. In other words we should give the most earnest heed to the things we have heard. I want to focus on this exhortation this morning by considering the theme:

Giving Earnest Heed to What We Have Heard

Consider with me first of all:

I. Our Obligation to Give Earnest Heed

We find a term of obligation in our text when we read *we ought – we ought to give the more earnest heed*. Underscore that word *ought*. It's a term that conveys to us our obligation before God. The word speaks of something that is necessary by the very nature of the case. And since the nature of the case before us pertains to so great salvation it becomes necessary for us to give the more earnest heed.

I find it interesting that this word at times is used by Christ to describe His obligations in terms of the covenant of grace. So He says in Lk. 9:22 *The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be slain, and be raised the third day. He must suffer many things. He is bound to suffer many things. He is obligated to suffer many things and to be rejected and slain and then raised. These are all obligations that Christ took to Himself.*

And when Christ was risen from the dead and He met those two disciples on the Emmaus road and expounded the Scriptures to them, He said in Lk. 24:26 *Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? Was not Christ obligated to suffer these things? Did not the Scriptures tell of these sufferings, in other words, and thus obligate Christ to fulfill the Scriptures?*

When the Apostles preached Christ, they did so in such a way as to demonstrate Christ's obligation to suffer and die. So we read of Paul in Acts 17:2,3 *And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ.*

A little later in chp. 2 down in v. 17 we find a different term but with the same idea of obligation when we read in v. 17 *Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto [his] brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things [pertaining] to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.* If salvation was to be accomplished then it behoved Christ to be made like unto his brethren – i.e. He became obligated to take to Himself our human nature. Salvation could not otherwise happen unless Christ met such an obligation.

When you think of salvation, then, in terms of the obligations that Christ took to Himself it should certainly magnify the sense of obligation that you and I feel toward Christ. Because He *must needs* have suffered, or because He, by His grace, obligated Himself to suffer – you and I *ought* to give the more earnest heed – i.e. we are obligated to give the more earnest heed to the things that we have heard.

So the obligations Christ took to Himself magnifies our obligation to give heed to Him. In 2:2-4 Paul is going to press again the argument that he begins in the opening verses of this epistle. You remember the argument – *God has in these last days spoken to us by His Son.* And then everything that follows in chp. 1 emphasizes the glory of the Son of God and adds weight to the argument that we ought to hear and heed what He's said.

Paul takes up this argument again now in 2:2-4 and he presses the matter by magnifying the authority of the One who has spoken. Notice again vv. 2,3 *For if the word spoken by angels was stedfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompence of reward; How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him;*

I have pointed out in earlier studies that the word spoken by angels refers to a communication chain through which God's word has come down to us. So we read in Ps 68:17 *The chariots of God [are] twenty thousand, [even] thousands of angels: the Lord [is] among them, [as in] Sinai, in the holy [place].* And when Stephen preached to the Jews right before they executed him he referred in Ac 7:53 to the Jews *Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept [it].*

The point Paul is now pressing home is that the gospel has come to us from a higher and more immediate authority by being spoken to us by Christ and if the word of God which

was communicated through a lesser authority than Christ was still binding to the point that every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward how much more the word which has come directly from Christ? – A word which came directly by Christ and then was confirmed to us by those who heard Christ and whose word was witnessed to by God Himself through the signs and miracles He enabled the Apostles to perform.

We know in the Civil realm of government that when a word is handed down from authorities on high that word is binding and we become obligated to it. How much more, then, should we view our obligation to give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard from God's Son?

If we are going to give heed to what we've heard, then – we must appreciate in fuller measure the obligation that is upon us to hear and heed what Christ communicates. You wouldn't think this would be a difficult obligation to meet especially when you consider that Christ words are words of grace and truth that convey to us the good news of salvation. But when life gets hard – as it was for these professing Jews – then it becomes necessary to bear in mind all the more the authority of the One who has communicated the gospel to us.

We see, then, our obligation to give earnest heed to what Christ has spoken. Would you consider with me next:

II. How We Give the More Earnest Heed

William Gouge provides a good analysis of what it means to give earnest heed. He writes: *The duty here intended is a serious and fixed setting of the mind upon that which we hear: a bending of the will to yield unto it: an applying of the heart to it, a placing of the affections upon it, and bringing the whole man into a holy conformity thereunto. Thus it compriseth knowledge of the Word, faith therein, obedience thereto, and all other due respect that may any way concern it.*

Notice first – a serious and fixed setting of the mind. This takes beyond the realm of casual perusal when we read our Bibles. We are not only to give heed to God's word but we're to give *the more earnest heed*. We need to be mentally focused on what God has said. We need to be alert, in other words, and we need to apply concentration to our reading. I can remember a college professor who use to challenge us to make our brains sweat. We live in a day when it's become quite popular for men and women to exercise their bodies. And don't misunderstand me – working out is a great thing to do – I wish I could rise to the habit. And one of the reasons I would aspire more to bringing my body under is because when the body is in good condition you also gain mental strength.

I'm afraid that the weakness of our mental strength becomes readily apparent when we try to apply ourselves to the word of God. How often do we drag our eyes over the words but see nothing? How often do we fight sleepiness when it comes to reading our Bibles. Perhaps no other book is so effective for putting many of us to sleep.

And the reason for this is not hard to trace – there is spiritual opposition to God’s word and the devil’s forces find a ready ally in our carnal natures. So in order to give the more earnest heed to the word of God not only must our minds be involved but there must be, to use Gouge’s phrase *a bending of the will to yield to it*. And this bending of the will not only involves our willingness to submit but it also involves the will’s involvement in strengthening our resolve to read and to concentrate on what we’re reading.

I love what Acts 17:11 says about the Christians in Berea. *These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so*. There was a readiness of mind and a resolution of will to search the word of God and to test all things by the word of God. I think the Berean Christians illustrate to us something of what it means to give the more earnest heed.

Gouge also mentions as a part of giving more earnest heed an applying of the heart to God’s word. Applying the heart certainly takes into account an opening of the heart to receive the word of God. And in order for such a thing to be accomplished we must resort to prayer. We need enabling power to open our hearts to the word of Christ. We read of Lydia in Ac 16:14 *And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard [us]: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul*.

And so we need to make Paul’s prayer for the Christians at Ephesus our own prayer. Each time you sit down with the word of Christ before you your prayer should be *Lord, grant to me the spirit of wisdom and revelation into your word – the eyes of my understanding (or heart) being open that I might know the hope of my calling, and the riches of the glory of Christ’s inheritance in the saints and the exceeding greatness of His power toward me as I believe*. Simply put – you need to pray for spiritual illumination so that the truth of the gospel will not simply reach your mind but it will work its way through your mind to the very depth of your being. *Thy word have I hid in mine heart*, the Psalmist says in Ps 119:11 *that I might not sin against thee*.

Oh it’s good to read the word and it’s good to memorize the word but in the process of reading and memorizing something deeper must be accomplished – the reality of what you understand must reach the depth of your soul because when the word reaches your heart your life will be transformed. Love to Christ will become a genuine driving force in your life because you’ll know His love for you not just in theory but in truth. Gratitude will fill your soul because you’ll know more than just the story of Christ who died for you – you’ll know the reality of His love being shed abroad in your heart.

So there is a serious and fixed setting of our minds upon the word of Christ and there’s a bending of our wills to the word of Christ. There’s an applying of our hearts to the word of Christ. All of these things are involved when it comes to giving the more earnest heed to the word of Christ. And then there’s also a placing of our affections on the word of Christ. If the Psalmist could say in Ps. 119:97 *O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the*

day! – how much more should the Christian be able to say of the gospel of Christ that he loves God’s word. I love the word that brings me peace and joy. I love the word that tells me of my Savior’s love to me. I love the word that exposes my sin and then leads me to Christ for forgiveness and I love the word that teaches me the way to walk in the ways that are pleasing to God.

Giving the more earnest heed, then, calls for the use of our minds and our wills and our hearts and our affections. Or as Gouge puts it *Thus it compriseth knowledge of the Word, faith therein, obedience thereto, and all other due respect that may any way concern it.* I wonder this morning are you giving the more earnest heed to the things that you have heard? It is certainly your obligation to give the more earnest heed – I trust that it will also be your desire.

It remains for us to consider:

III. The Consequences of Failing to Give Earnest Heed

Notice at the end of v. 1 the specific consequence that’s given to us. *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.*

The phrase *let them slip* is translated in other versions in a variety of ways. One version reads *we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard lest we drift away from it.* Or – *lest we may glide aside* another version reads. One commentator makes reference to a marginal reading which says *lest we run out as leaking vessels.* He then quotes a number of scholars who give their renditions: "lest we let them flow out of our minds." "lest at any time we should slight them." "that they may not entirely slip out of our memories."

The Septuagint translators have used the word but once. #Pr 3:21, "Son, do not pass by, but keep my counsel;" that is, do not pass by my advice by neglect, or suffer it to be disregarded.

Of all the translations and interpretations suggested for the phrase the one that strikes home with me is the phrase *we drift away.* This is a phrase that speaks of carelessness and it would certainly find its counter part in the word *neglect* in v. 3 *How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation.*

We can apply v. 3 in a number of ways. We can apply it in an ultimate sense by saying How shall we ultimately escape the damnation of hell if we neglect so great salvation and simply let the truths of the gospel slip away from us. Ultimately there is no escape from hell if the truths of Christ are neglected and not applied. For there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved.

But we can also apply the verse in a practical sense by saying – How shall we escape being dominated by the world and the flesh if we let the truths of the gospel slip through our negligence? How will escape the same despair that the world knows if we become spiritually careless? Peace and joy will not be our portion because we don’t give enough heed to the things that make for our peace and joy.

How shall we escape being mistaken for those that are lost when there's nothing about us to make us stand out because through our negligence we fail to shine brightly in this world the way we should. How shall we escape being plagued and driven by guilt when we neglect the gospel of Christ which is designed to keep us free from guilt?

You begin to get the picture, I trust, of the consequences of spiritual negligence. The problem often arises from the fact that the consequences don't always take place immediately. You may miss a day in prayer and a day away from the gospel of Christ and discover that you don't feel any worse for it. And the next day you're distracted by some urgent and pressing matter in the world. And the day following you sleep in too long and you again fail to give heed to the things you've heard.

It's not that you repudiate those things – on the contrary – you believe them strongly. But the challenges of life become so demanding that it becomes an easy thing in very subtle fashion to let the things of God slip. And before you know it the Bible becomes a sealed book to you. You've neglected it for so long that when you try to rush through a chapter or two you find that it has no real effect on you. You've been negligent to the point where you lose your spiritual sensitivity. And it becomes practically impossible to escape such a condition.

I'm reminded of that scene from Pilgrim's Progress when Pilgrim and his companion are locked in Doubting Castle and held prisoner by the Giant Despair. The Giant won't slay them himself but he drives them and holds them in such despair that they're on the brink of taking their own lives. After a prolonged season of captivity Christian at last remembers the key of faith. And taking the key and attempting to unlock the door to doubting castle he discovers that it has become (to use his phrase) damnable hard to unlock the door of doubt.

This is what happens to the Christian following a season of spiritual negligence. He finds it damnable hard to exercise faith because he's gone so long without exercising it. He's gone too long without feeding his faith. Do you see, then, the importance of this exhortation to give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard? We cannot afford spiritual negligence. The effect it has on us and the effect it has in our homes is too damaging. Our lives are effected and our testimonies are effected. Our usefulness in Christ's service is effected.

And so we must, instead of letting things slip through negligence, we must instead give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard. Christ met His every obligation toward us – we must, in turn, meet our obligations to Him. And we meet those obligations by giving earnest heed to what we have learned of His person and work. We devote ourselves – our minds, our wills, our affections, our hearts to Him by communing with Him in His word and through prayer and worship. May Christ Himself, then, deliver us from our carelessness by bringing to our minds and hearts all that He has done for us. And may we be found as those that are going forward in our walk with Christ and in our service to Christ rather than those that are drifting away from Christ.