

*CAPACITY INVOLVES RESPONSIBILITY.*

ST. MATTHEW xi. 15.

IT is sometimes said of men of great fertility of mind, or even of great singularity of mind, that they never repeat themselves, never say the same thing twice; or, at least, never say the same thing twice in the same words. And when men say this of any teacher who speaks often and much, they intend it for a compliment, and even for one of the very greatest compliments they can pay him. But is this, after all, the best thing that can be said of a great teacher, or even one of the best? Is it characteristic of those who have spoken on moral or religious themes most wisely and with the most impassioned earnestness? On the contrary, when men are possessed by any great truth, or series of truths, they are for ever harping on them, for ever repeating them,—repeating them in new forms, no doubt, in new connections, with new illustrations, but yet often falling back on forms of thought and modes of expression which they have used before. It is, indeed, by iterating and reiterating the truths which they hold to be of prime importance that they succeed in impressing them on the public mind, and win consideration for them, if not acceptance. In how many forms, for example, and yet how often in the same forms, does Carlyle preach the sacredness of labour, bid men do the duty that lies nearest to them, and assure them that “blessedness,” not “happiness,” is their being’s end and aim! St. Paul, again, constantly insisted on what he held to be the cardinal truths of the Christian system, often repeat-

ing both his theological arguments and his moral injunctions in similar, or identical, words. Now, assuredly, St. Paul did not repeat himself out of indolence, or because of the poverty of his intellect, or because he did not love to push out the lines of thought beyond the limits to which he had already carried them. No man, I suppose, ever had a more ardent and audacious, a more fertile and original, mind, or better loved to use it to the full stretch of its powers. It may be conjectured with much probability, indeed, that he never shewed a more genuine and difficult courtesy than when he said to the Philippians, "To write the same things to you, to me indeed *is not grievous*, and for you it is safe." But for his kindly consideration for their weakness and need, I apprehend he would have found it very "grievous" to go on saying "the same things" to them time after time. It was only because he cared more to make them "safe" than to indulge his own bent, that he was willing to repeat the same things over and over again.

But, more, the very highest Example of all is on the side of repetition. Of the Lord Jesus Himself it would be impossible to say, what is often said as a compliment of inferior teachers, that He never said the same thing again in the same words. That He repeated Himself, in the sense of iterating and reiterating certain great truths in ever new and varied forms, every one will admit. Such truths as that we ought to trust in the Providence of God and not to fret ourselves about to-morrow, or that "the love of God is more than all our sins," or that faith is the only avenue by which we can reach and appropriate

spiritual realities, were of the very staple of his ministry, and recur again and again—in prayer, in parable, in conversation, in set discourse. But, beyond this, He not infrequently fell back on the very words He had used before. Certain phrases grew to be habitual with Him. He repeated them again and again. And these phrases are more numerous than is commonly imagined. It is no part of my present purpose to trace many of them through the several occasions on which they were used. Some of them will be familiar to every student of the Word, as, for instance, these and such as these:—"There are first that shall be last, and last that shall be first;" and, again, "He that will be greatest among you, let him serve." For the present let us be content with tracing out the history and meaning of a less familiar and, apparently, a far less important and significant repetition.

"*He that hath ears to hear, let him hear,*" is said to have been a formula in common use among the Jews; and, certainly, it sounds like one of the dark Rabbinical sayings,—seeming to mean little, yet intended to convey much. But whether He took it from the Rabbis, or whether He gave it to them, unquestionably our Lord repeated it many times. It was first used by Him when He assured his disciples that the old prophecy of the coming of Elijah to prepare the way of the Lord had been fulfilled in the advent and ministry of John the Baptist.<sup>1</sup> He used it again as He closed his first great parable, that of the Sower who went forth to sow.<sup>2</sup> He used it once more when He had been

<sup>1</sup> St. Matthew xi. 10-15.

<sup>2</sup> St. Matthew xiii. 9; St. Mark iv. 9; St. Luke viii. 8.

speaking of the salt wherewith every one must be salted, and asked, "But if the salt has lost its savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned?"<sup>1</sup> Even these three instances would suffice to shew that in these words we have a phrase which commended itself to our Lord, which He used again and again, repeating it probably on many occasions of which we have no record. But what is very curious, and shews how habitually this phrase was on his lips, is the singular fact that He uses it when He speaks from heaven as well as when He stood on the earth. After his ascension into heaven He sent seven Epistles, by his servant John, to the seven Churches of Asia, in which He at once commended and re-proved them; and each of these seven Epistles closes with words which are virtually a repetition of the phrase we have already found in the Gospels.<sup>2</sup> No less than seven times we read, "*He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear* what the Spirit saith unto the churches." Ten times in all, then, this phrase occurs in the brief limits of the New Testament; and always as from the lips of Christ.

Now, obviously, it is much to be desired that we should have a clear conception of the significance of a phrase so often repeated in a Book in which space is so valuable. Obviously, too, it is reasonable to expect that a phrase so often repeated, and repeated by the Great Teacher, will have a special worth. Nor is it unreasonable, I think, to assume that it will have a special worth *in itself*, and not simply as calling studious attention to other sayings of great value and importance. No doubt it subserves *that*

<sup>1</sup> St. Luke xiv. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Revelation ii. 7, 11, 17, 29; and iii. 6, 13, 22.

function ; it does call special attention to the sayings which precede it, and imply that these sayings have an exceptional value. It *was* a great fact, a fact, too, which many doubted or disputed, that the ancient prophecy of the coming of Elijah had been fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist ; for, as Elijah was to come in order to prepare the way of the Lord, this fact implied that the Lord Himself was now among men : and, therefore, when He said, " If ye will receive it, this is Elijah who was to come," Christ might well call attention to these pregnant and momentous words by adding, "*He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.*" So, again, the parable of the Sower, plain as its meaning may be to us, was felt to be very difficult by the disciples ; they were conscious of a spiritual meaning in it which their undisciplined endeavours failed to grasp, and had to ask their Master to " declare " it to them : and, therefore, because He knew the parable was hard for them to understand, while yet it much imported them to understand it, He might well call their special attention to it by his closing words, "*He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.*" So, once more, when He likened his doctrine to salt, and hinted that if we hold the truth in unrighteousness, we may corrupt the very salt of life, He uttered a parable the full meaning of which probably no man has grasped even yet, and might well call our attention to words so " dark with excess of light " by adding, "*He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.*" So, finally, the Epistles to the seven Churches of Asia contained matter of the gravest importance at least to those Churches, and involve truths which

we all find it difficult to discover and appropriate: and, therefore, our Lord might well call *their* special attention to them, and *ours*, by appending to them the words, "*He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.*"

We *may* regard this phrase, then, as a mark of emphasis, as summoning studious attention to words of special moment or difficulty. In some old English books passages of singular importance or beauty are indicated by the figure of a hand stamped on the margin of the page on which they are printed; and we may perhaps take this phrase as intended to fulfil a similar function in the pages of the New Testament. It is like a hand in the margin, pointing to passages which we must on no account pass by. But even in a mere mark of emphasis, if at least it be used by Christ, we should look for some intrinsic beauty and worth. And though we admit the profound significance, or even the exceptional worth, of the passages to which this phrase calls our thoughts, we can hardly be content with the conclusion that it has no other function or worth than that of calling our attention to them. A phrase so often repeated by the Great Teacher, so habitual to his lips, must, one should think, have a value, and a special value, of its own. What is its value, then? What does it mean, or imply? What general, important, and helpful truth does it convey,—what such truth as we naturally expect to find in words habitual to our Saviour's lips?

The truth I find in it is this,—*that capacity involves responsibility, spiritual capacity spiritual responsibility.* What a man can do, that he ought to do.

If he *can* hear, *let* him hear : yes, and if he can see, let him see ; if he can serve, let him serve ; if he can pray, let him pray ; or, as St. Paul expresses the same truth, “ Having these gifts (*χαρίσματα*) differing according to the grace (*τὴν χάριν*) that is bestowed upon us, if it be prophecy, let us prophecy according to the proportion of the faith, or if serving, let us be diligent in our serving ; or he that teacheth, in his teaching ; or he that exhorteth, in his exhortation ; he that giveth, let him give with simplicity ; he that ruleth, let him rule with earnestness ; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness.”<sup>1</sup> By his habitual use of this phrase our Lord exhorts men to a diligent and faithful employment of their spiritual faculties, powers, opportunities, gifts ;—so, at least, I interpret his use of it.

And if this be its true meaning, is it not a worthy meaning,—a meaning congruous and appropriate to the lips that uttered it ? What was our Lord’s very mission on earth ? for *what* was He sent but to awaken men to a sense of their spiritual subjection, and to call them to a resolute use of their powers and his gifts, that they might thus rise into spiritual life and vigour and freedom ? If, then, we have hit on the true meaning of this phrase, we must confess that it is a worthy meaning ; we shall no longer wonder that it so often fell from his gracious lips who came to lift men to the full use and the full enjoyment of their spiritual capacities and powers.

But *is* this its true meaning ? Let us examine the phrase and see.

When we first look at it, it seems a mere truism,

<sup>1</sup> Romans xii. 6–8.

so simple and trite does it appear. "If a man can hear, let him hear!" we say: "Why, of course men can hear, nay, must hear, whatever is spoken audibly to them." But no sooner do we begin to think, than we see that *that* is not true, that it is not true even on the lowest plane of experience. On the contrary, it is quite true that men *can* hear much that they do not hear. An average ear, we are told, is able to recognize about a thousand musical tones. Speaking roughly, the human ear is so constructed that all tones, from that which is caused by fifty vibrations in a second to that which is caused by five thousand vibrations in a second, can be distinctly received and discriminated. It is a wide range; but both above it and below it there are sounds inaudible to us, though very probably many of them are audible to some of "the inferior creatures." We stand, in short, amidst a vast complexity of sounds, many of which we are incapable of receiving, many more of which only the trained ear can receive (it is computed, for instance, that in the compass of a single octave a trained violinist can distinguish four times as many distinct tones as his untrained neighbours): and even of those sounds which we can all hear, we miss many for want of attention, while we miss the full significance of many more for want of knowledge. How much we lose, for example, in walking through a wood, if we are ignorant of the notes of the various birds we hear around us; how much the scene gains in interest and charm when we have learned to recognize them and can call up a picture of the birds in their several haunts. Nay, how many more distinct tones we hear in the sweet general babble of



the woods if we are able to recognize the several notes of which it is composed. If it be true that "the eye sees only what it brings the power of seeing," it is equally true that the ear hears only what it brings the power of hearing. The capacity of hearing is a common gift; but this common gift becomes special and valuable to us in proportion as we exercise and cultivate it. We all have ears; but we have not all of us ears to hear this or that with: and, even if we have, we do not always use them.

Let us take still another illustration—rising a little in the scale. If we listen to the music of any great master, such as Mendelssohn, or Weber, or Beethoven, we may not all of us be really charmed or impressed by it; the music may be too severe in form, too classical, for our untrained taste, although, in deference to the fashion of the time, we may be tempted to say, and even to think, that we like it. If we do honestly like it, if we are charmed by the veins of melody we find in it, and impressed by a dim sense of a poetic meaning and grandeur in it, yet how different are the sensations of an accomplished and scientific musician as *he* listens to it and sees the master's plan unfold before him, as he traces out the sequence of thought and emotion in it, and responds to a thousand touches of beauty which, in our ignorance, we wholly pass by.

Consider still another illustration. If we listen to a sermon from a preacher who has a profound acquaintance with Holy Writ, who is also familiar with the best literature of his age, and whose heart glows with a fervent love for God and man, we all hear the same words, and may all gather the general

drift of what he says. Yet unless we are of an equal brain with him, and of an equal culture and an equal devotion, how much—yes, and how much of what is best in it—we lose of his discourse! Some of us, because we have not his large and intimate knowledge of the Bible, fail to see how many of his sentences are based upon passages of Scripture or throw light upon them. Others of us, because we lack his culture, fail to catch half his allusions to the great writers on whom he has unconsciously formed himself; the very words he uses have not half the pleasant or instructive associations for us with which they are fraught for him. And still others of us, because we are not of a devout heart, or chance to be in an indocile and indevout mood, miss a thousand delicate indications of the spiritual purpose and intensity by which he is swayed.

In many different ways, then, we are like the idol of whom the prophet averred, "Ears have they, but they hear not." Through our ignorance, or our pre-occupation, or our lack of attention, or our imperfect sympathies, we are insensible to the meaning and charm of many of the sounds which fall upon our ears; we fail to hear, or to understand, many of the voices that address us: we lose much pleasure—and that of the purest, and much instruction—and that of the highest sort, which would inevitably come to us had our capacity of hearing been trained and developed. Above all, and worst of all, since here loss is most impoverishing, we miss the *spiritual* message and burden with which, for the spiritual ear, all things are fraught. Remember what lovely and pathetic parables our Lord was for ever *hearing*, as well as

speaking, when He dwelt among us. For Him the whole realm of Nature was instinct with spiritual significance, and all the relations, occupations, and events of human life. For Him they had voices, and voices that disclosed their inmost secret. The birds of the air spoke to Him, and the lilies of the fields, and the sower going forth to sow, and the housewife sweeping her floor or making her bread, and the very children as they played and wrangled in the market-place. What a world *that* was through which *He* moved; with what sweet and delicate voices it greeted Him; what tender and lovely stories they were always telling Him; what spiritual messages and consolations and encouragements and hopes they were for ever bringing Him! It is the very same world through which we move; yet what a dull and voiceless world it often is to us: how little it has to say to us: and, if we may judge by the tenour of our lives, what a poor and sordid message it often brings us! To many of us the upshot of all the voices of this great fair world seems to be,—“Toil to-day, and fret about to-morrow;” or, “Take pleasure without enjoyment;” or, “Eat, and drink, and die;” or, “Make money and get on.” Alas, to many of us, how poor and base *are* all the uses of this world!

Have the world and human life, then, changed their voice, or their message, since Christ came and went? Nay: because He came into the world, and has never really left the world, because He took our nature on Him and still wears it, the world and human life speak the more clearly to us, the more movingly, the more hopefully. The fault is in us, not in them, if we do not hear and apprehend their

meaning. It was because He had ears to hear, and used them, that all things spake so musically, so spiritually, to Him. It is because we have not ears to hear, or do not use them, that we do not take, or do not fully and always take, their meaning, but mistake it. Only as we use and cultivate our faculty of spiritual hearing shall we ever catch, and rightly interpret, the voices which spake to Him by day and by night. He, then, that hath ears to hear, let him hear what God saith to us all, through the whole round of Nature and of human life.

But let him also hear "what the Spirit saith unto the churches." For there are voices in the Bible and in the spiritual experiences of humanity which as yet we have not heard, or have heard only in part and from afar. So many voices address us, we live amid such a din of confused utterances, and we are so preoccupied with the daily vocation which makes a constant and imperative demand upon us, that, unless we are on our guard, the highest and most spiritual utterances will escape us. Many a man pleads, not wholly without reason: "I am so busy, so engrossed with labour and care; so many capacities in me are undeveloped, so many voices solicit my attention, and these voices are so contradictory and confused: how can I help it if I miss much that is said? how am I to tell which of these capacities I am to develop, to which of these contradictory voices I am to listen?" But the answer is plain, unmistakable. "Listen first to the highest voices. Study first to develop and train your highest faculties. Your spiritual nature, since that is confessedly highest, since that alone is capable of an eternal life, demands

your first care. Give your first and best attention to that. Sacrifice whatever would prevent you from cultivating it, for such loss is gain indeed."

And if any man accept this solution of the problem, which surely is a reasonable one, and the only reasonable one, he knows well enough where to turn. If any man would "hear what the Spirit saith to the churches," he must come to the Church; he must study the Book of the Church; he must take part in the services and ordinances of the Church. In the Bible he will find a great complex world of truth, quick with spiritual voices and influences which will address themselves to his spiritual needs. In the exercises of Christian worship, in sympathy and co-operation with other members of the Christian family, in the labours of a life grounded on spiritual motives, and moving on to spiritual ends, he will receive the very training he needs. Through these the Spirit will speak *to him*, and will quicken in him the hearing ear and the thoughtful meditative heart. Under this gracious culture his spiritual faculties will unfold and "put on strength" until they dominate his whole nature, and mould to their own likeness the whole circle and tenour of his life. On these, in fact, the familiar and habitual exhortation of our Lord will have taken effect, and, by the grace of Christ, he will be roused to a diligent and loyal use of his spiritual faculties and gifts.

"He that hath ears to hear," then, "let him hear;" and, that he may hear, let him remember that his very capacity for hearing binds him to use and cultivate it.