

"HEAR YE HIM"

A Devotional Series For Radio

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The Sermon: RESPONSIBILITY ACCORDING TO OPPORTUNITY

Scripture: Luke 12:56:57, Inspired Version (Compare with 47, 48 King James)

And that servant who knew his Lord's will, and prepared not for his Lord's coming, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who knew not his Lord's will, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required; and to whom the Lord has committed much, of him will men ask the more.

He who sins against the greater light shall receive
the greater condemnation. (Doctrine and Covenants 81:1)

If you were asked to name the most guilty man mentioned in the New Testament -- the one least worthy of men's respect and of God's mercy and grace, whom would you name? Would you name the Roman soldiers who nailed Jesus to the cross? Would you name Caiaphas or Annas, the high priests who plotted his death and engineered his conviction? No -- you probably would name Judas, the traitor. Why?

The Roman soldiers who crucified Jesus were only doing their duty, acting under orders. They were not charged with the responsibility of trying Jesus, of finding him innocent or guilty, or even of knowing what he had done. They sinned, if they sinned at all, in ignorance. It was for them that Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The temple priests were more culpable. They had opportunity to know the old prophecies about the Messiah. They should have recognized Jesus, but they were blinded by self-interest. They, too, were in some degree ignorant of his real nature and mission -- a willful and deliberate and stubborn ignorance, perhaps, but still ignorance. They had never been one of the inner circle, as Judas was. Judas knew, and sinned against what he knew. If we were to rank these men then according to guilt, their guilt would be determined by their degree of knowledge or ignorance, with Judas most guilty, the soldiers least guilty, and the priests somewhere in between. Their responsibility was according to their opportunity.

The law of Moses in the Old Testament allowed for a difference between sins, done presumptuously or "high-handedly,"

willfully, deliberately, rebelliously, and those done through ignorance, in rash haste, impetuously, or unwittingly. (See Numbers 15:24-30; Lev. 4:2 f, etc.) The punishment was suited to the crime, and to the degree of knowledge in the offender -- whether the crime was willful or unwitting. Deuteronomy 25:2 says that punishment by beating shall be "according to his fault, by a certain number." Modern legal practice continues to follow this principle. While ignorance of the law does not excuse the offender or completely release him from the consequences of his act, ignorance may properly invoke mercy, and lift some of the punishment.

Jesus laid down the same principle in his teaching, not just once, but several times. The servant who knew his Lord's will and disobeyed deserved to be beaten with many stripes; the servant who knew not his Lord's will and sinned unwittingly deserved to be beaten with few stripes. Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required. In pronouncing his woes upon Chorazin and Bethsaida, Jesus said that if the mighty works done in these cities had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented, yet the cities which had had the greatest testimony of Jesus paid no heed. To the Pharisees who came accusing him he said, "If ye were blind, ye should have no sin; but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth." On another occasion he said, "If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin; but now they have no cloak for their sin." Actions which are excusable in one who knows no better are completely inexcusable in one who knows.

Peter recognized that not all the Jews had rejected Jesus willfully or rebelliously when he said on the day of Pentecost, "And now, brethren, I know that through ignorance ye have done this, as also your rulers." (Acts 3:17) Paul recognized the same principle as it applied to the heathen nations, the idolaters, who were ignorant of God and Christ. "And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth men everywhere to repent...." (Acts 17:30) Lack of knowledge may excuse some sins, but when knowledge comes, there comes with it the responsibility and obligation to act in harmony with and in obedience to that knowledge.

Paul himself was once a very great sinner. He was not vicious in his sinning, but he was certainly zealous and sincere. He thought he was doing the right thing. When the higher knowledge and the brighter light came, Paul was not disobedient to the heavenly vision; and because he did obey he could later write to Timothy: "I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly, in unbelief."

Much useless worry has been expended by people who fear lest they have committed the unpardonable sin. If you are concerned lest you have, you haven't. The unpardonable sin is rebellion against and a vicious, willful forsaking of a perfect knowledge, a perfect light, a perfect truth. The writer of the Hebrew letter was concerned about this sin -- also Peter. When those once enlightened -- those who have tasted of the heavenly gift -- those who have been partakers of the Holy Spirit, utterly and rebelliously and callously and willfully turn from their knowledge, break their covenant with Christ, and reject his love and his grace, there is nothing more God can do for that kind of people. God does not condemn them; they condemn themselves. When men who have known Christ and his power, have been made partakers thereof, suffer themselves to be overcome in spite of the availability of the Comforter (who is the source of the power to overcome), so that they deny the truth and defy God's power, there is nothing more God can do.

Men and nations are always judged according to their degree of knowledge,

and according to the physical and spiritual blessings they have received as a stewardship. Israel as a nation was chosen by God for a special purpose, and blessed above all other nations of the earth. Amos, in one of his denunciations of Israel, pointed this out: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." (3:2) Israel was many times charged with dereliction of duty -- of sinning against the sure knowledge which she had of God and his laws -- of violating and ignoring the covenant made with God to serve him. Israel was blessed not only spiritually, but materially, above all other nations. Her sins were not sins of ignorance, unwitting sins. They were against the law with which they were perfectly familiar. They were done in spite of the favor of God shown in protection and blessing.

We expect more of an educated man than we do of an ignoramus. We expect more productive labor from a strong, healthy man than from a chronic invalid. We expect more from a Christian than from a heathen or infidel. We expect more from a minister than from a layman. "Unto whom much is given, much is required; and he who sins against the greater light shall receive the greater condemnation."

This is true of nations as well as of men. God expects something more, something extra, from a nation which is blessed abundantly with natural resources, with political and economic freedom, with the light of education, with the light of Christ and his gospel, with good health and longevity. The United States of America is such a nation. Never in all the history of the world has any nation enjoyed so many blessings from the hand of God. It is not enough that we should beslightly better than other nations; we should be so far ahead morally and spiritually that the whole world would gladly turn to us for leadership. It is not enough that we should judge ourselves by the standards of what others do. We must judge ourselves by God's standards, and in the light of the great blessings, both temporal and spiritual, which he has given us. "Unto whom much is given, must is required, and he who sins against the greater light shall receive the greater condemnation."