

CHAPTER V  
EARNESTNESS TO TRANSLATE HEARING  
INTO DOING

THE PARABLE OF THE CHILDREN AT PLAY

"Whereunto then shall I liken the men of this generation, and to what are they like? They are like unto children that sit in the marketplace, and call one to another; who say, We piped unto you, and ye did not dance; we wailed, and ye did not weep. For John the Baptist is come eating no bread nor drinking wine; and ye say, He hath a demon. The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold, a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners! And wisdom is justified of all her children."

(*Luke 7:31-35*)

(*Parallel passage: Matthew 11:16-19*)

THE PARABLE OF THE WISE AND FOOLISH BUILDERS

"Every one therefore that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them, shall be likened unto a wise man, who built his house upon the rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon the rock. And every one that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them not shall be likened unto a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and smote upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall thereof."

(*Matthew 7:24-27*)

(*Parallel passage: Luke 6:46-49*)

CHAPTER V  
EARNESTNESS TO TRANSLATE HEARING  
INTO DOING

*Parable of the Children at Play*  
*Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders*

"The doings of grown folk," writes Robert Louis Stevenson of children, "are interesting only as the raw material of play . . . and they will parody an execution, a death-bed, or the funeral of the young man of Nain with all the cheerfulness in the world."<sup>1</sup> Similarly Francis Thompson: "Know you what it is to be a child? . . . it is to be so little that elves can whisper in your ear: it is to turn pumpkins into coaches, and mice into horses, lowness into loftiness, and nothing into everything . . . it is to know not as yet that you are under the sentence of life, nor petition that it be commuted into sentence of death."<sup>2</sup>

"Under sentence of life"!—pathetic recognition by one who knew and loved children as few have done that, though they may live by right in a God-given country of make-believe, a man must move in a world of stern realities. We buy knowledge at the price of innocence, and, ill-satisfied with the bargain, we petition that "sentence of life" be "commuted into sentence of death." But we must serve out our sentence. Jesus never lost the key to childhood's enchanted realm. He loved children and was loved by them. He knew and shared their games. But He knew also that though *childlikeness* must never be lost (or if lost, then regained in the pains of a new birth), there are natural limits to *childishness*. Make-believe becomes a child but it is sorry guise for a man: "When I was a child I thought as a child . . . now that I am become a man,

<sup>1</sup> In "Children at Play." ("Virginitus Puerisque," published by Chatto & Windus.)

<sup>2</sup> In the Essay on "Shelley." (Prose Works, edited by Wilfrid Meynell; published by John Lane Co.)

I have put away childish things.”<sup>3</sup> A childish man is an anachronism too pathetic to be a joke.

Hence the trenchant satire of the Parable of the Children at Play. He characterized His generation<sup>4</sup> as children playing in the market-place. The Pharisees, typical of their time, were as petulant, as fickle in temper, as prone to find fault as a group of children, who despite all appeals by their playmates, were still querulous.<sup>5</sup> They would play at neither weddings nor funerals. The distinguishing trait of the age was its lack of moral earnestness. Refusing to face realities it was playing at religion in a land of make-believe!

Thus Jesus caught and transfixed in a parable the mood of His contemporaries. At the same time He impaled on a word (surely not without a glint of humor!) first John the Baptist’s ministry and then His own. John’s was like a funeral! It was as sombre, as starkly real, as inescapable. But His was like a wedding!—as momentous, as joyous, as deeply in tune with the law of life. John came as a recluse, an uncouth yet piercing spirit. In the fierce crooning of the desert wind he had heard God’s voice and feared not the voice of men. With a lash of corded words he flayed the prevalent sin, and called on rich and poor, priest and people, to repent. But an indifferent age could not understand him. He was an enigma. He would not fit into any of their thoughtless categories. “Who art thou?”<sup>6</sup> they asked him. Then, fretfully resenting his flaming protest, they labelled him “demon-harried” and dismissed him from mind. Jesus, on the contrary, came “eating and drinking.” He was not ascetic or aloof. He was genial. He loved the common life. He responded eagerly to the hospitality of His friends,<sup>7</sup> and instructed His disciples to be similarly compan-

<sup>3</sup> I Corinthians 13: 11.

<sup>4</sup> A careful study of the sayings of Jesus reveals His keen historical sense, and His accuracy of historical appraisal.

<sup>5</sup> Wellhausen makes the interesting suggestion that, “We piped unto you and ye did not dance” and, “We wailed, and ye did not weep” are antiphonal rhymed responses used by two groups of children in a game. But if we think of Jesus or John making the complaint against their age, or of their age making it reciprocally against John and Jesus, the latter become party to the game and therefore one with their generation. The view here suggested seems (despite Wellhausen’s ingenious suggestion) the most natural, and the most straightforward in its solution of the difficulty instanced.

<sup>6</sup> John 1: 19-23.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Matthew 8: 15, 9: 10, 26: 6. Many such references in the gospels serve to emphasize His constant friendliness.

ionable.<sup>8</sup> But the Pharisees stigmatized Jesus as a “wine-bibber and a glutton,” just as they had branded John “possessed of a demon.”<sup>9</sup> In every age, and especially in one devoid of earnestness, an epithet has damning power. Catchwords deliver the unthinking into the hands of the unscrupulous. The Pharisees slew John and Jesus with a phrase. Jesus’ love they pronounced laxity; and His friends, they hinted, were people of loose life. John’s austerity also failed to satisfy; it was too stern. They were like children refusing to play at either weddings or funerals.

The cardinal sin of John and Jesus was that they were real and positive in a generation which, despite all its pretensions, was still trifling at heart. Neither John nor Jesus was tepid. Both were of a consuming zeal. Each in his own way was a strongly etched and independent soul. It was fitting that John should sternly conclude a stern line of prophets. It was fitting that Jesus (whose shoes John felt unworthy to unloose) should come as an influx of joy; for though like John He was burdened by the world’s sin, He knew (by fullness of its indwelling) the love “that taketh away the sin of the world.”<sup>10</sup> But their generation received neither John nor Jesus, because it abhorred enthusiasm. Lacking the saving grace of earnestness, it substituted the form for the spirit—and is it not the very essence of child’s play to rate the reproduction above the reality?

“And yet,” said Jesus (and what a deeply pondered conclusion that “yet” implied!)—“wisdom is justified of all her children.”<sup>11</sup> Such was His quiet reply to the savage taunts hurled at Him. The “wisdom” of God—His immemorial intention lately personified in John and Jesus—would be “pronounced right”<sup>12</sup> by all the inheritors of insight. The shallow and

<sup>8</sup> Luke 10: 7.

<sup>9</sup> The word is “demon,” not “devil.” See article on demonology, Hastings Dictionary of the Bible.

<sup>10</sup> John 1: 29.

<sup>11</sup> Luke’s version of the dictum is preferable because closer to the Hebrew idiom. The interpretation: “is justified against her children” (i.e., the wisdom of Jesus and John will be vindicated against a generation which prides itself on being the offspring of Divine wisdom) is not convincing. See Plummer (*ad. loc. I.C.C. Luke*).

<sup>12</sup> Such is the meaning here of “justified,” a noble word all through the New Testament. Spoken of man’s act it usually means “to pronounce right” and of God’s act “to make right.”

capricious estimates of the time would be overturned. The issue would show that the kingdom heralded by John and inaugurated by Jesus had its origin in the will of heaven. Some in that generation but not of it (scattered souls keeping faith with an inner lantern) and multitudes in coming years would acclaim the kingdom as Divine! Thus Jesus, with heart-breaking courage of patience, drew no "circle premature," but looked to the "far gain," being cheered meanwhile by the approval of God and of God's illumined minority.

"What's time? Leave Now for dogs and apes!  
Man has Forever."<sup>13</sup>

Still the generations face life's high adventure as irresponsibly as children. Still His earnest soul lights each generation on its upward way.

#### *Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders*

"And great was the fall of it!" Thus Jesus ended a sermon.<sup>14</sup> His hearers went away with the crash of doom reverberating in their ears. This was not fictitious thunder. Mock heroics are inconceivable in Him. Moreover, every word of the abrupt story leads on in tense feeling to the dramatic issue. Even through the opaqueness of the printed page we can see Jesus quivering under the urgency of the plea.

This mood of urgency is dominant. Other moods sound their theme but quickly retire. Momentarily there is the mood of pity—"foolish man," not "wicked man." This man in the business of living was guilty of folly which he would have deemed incredible in the business of shop or store. His deed was not premeditated; it came from lack of premeditation. He built his house on the smooth deposit of a flood where the sand shone firm and golden in the summer sun, and took no account of winter's storms. "Foolish man," says the parable. Then its mood of pity subsides to a constant undertone.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Browning, "A Grammarian's Funeral."

<sup>14</sup> A fact which holds true whether the "Sermon on the Mount" is considered as one sermon delivered at one time, or (as most commentators believe) as a brilliant collation, by the author of the "Logia" of Matthew, of sermonic material delivered on different occasions. The parable has a finality which proclaims its "clenching" function.

The sharp challenge of authority is sounded—only to be overcome by the throbbing urgency. "These sayings of mine, whosoever hears them"—what a regal claim! The words of the Nazareth Carpenter are to be absolute law, a touchstone by which men and nations rise and fall. There are, perhaps, only two facts in human story more amazing than that categorical assumption of authority—first, His life, death, and continuing influence divinely attesting it; and, second, the instinctive reverence by which mankind, though disobedient, admits His right to rule:

"O Lord and Master of us all,  
Whate'er our name or sign,  
We own Thy sway, we hear Thy call,  
We test our lives by Thine."<sup>15</sup>

But even this challenge of authority is conquered by the recurrent urgency which now and again sounds out in a word like a sudden trumpet note—"Do!" "He that heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them"—"he that heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them not." Insistently, compellingly, that note is struck until it vibrates in our minds. It is the culmination of the teaching of the Parable of the Children at Play. The kingdom demands in its hearers not earnestness alone, but earnestness which will translate truth heard and truth pondered into truth lived! Only such earnestness, said Jesus (and He said it in tones of destiny), can establish a man or nation; and without it life crashes in ruin.

Here is also the culmination of the Parable of the Sower. The responsibility of hearing is that the hearer shall obey: "Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?"<sup>16</sup> Hearing is a generic term. It includes reading, for instance, and the impress made by living example. In the strict sense there is no such thing as "reading for diversion." Who can read George Eliot's "Adam Bede," or Carlyle's "Heroes and Hero Worship," or Shakespeare's "King Lear" without feeling as if the true road had been made as clear as a white ribbon of road in moonlight, and as if a voice had spoken saying: "This is the way: walk ye in it?"<sup>17</sup> If a sentence leaps from

<sup>15</sup> Whittier in "Our Master." ("Poetical Works," Houghton Mifflin Co.)

<sup>16</sup> Luke 6: 46.

<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 30: 21.

a page or a deed from a life and proclaims itself true, it there and then becomes a lamp which we may keep bright and use for our pilgrimage, or which we may neglect until it pollutes the air as neglected lamps and neglected duties always do. The psychology of an inveterate novel-reader or theater-goer is dangerous: it easily substitutes the thing felt for the thing done. The manna in the wilderness grew rancid if it was not straightaway gathered;<sup>18</sup> so does a nourishing emotion if not carried into deeds. There is in the Russian the story of a lady who went to the theater on a winter's night and wept copious tears over fictitious sufferings in the play, while her coachman was perishing of real cold outside the door.

Under the simile of building Jesus asserts the necessity of true deeds in enduring character. He employs the simile so repeatedly in His teaching that it has been surmised that Jesus Himself may have been by trade a builder.<sup>19</sup> At first blush the figure seems unjustified. Is our manifold experience like a house in plan, shape, and close-knit structure? Surely our impressions, thoughts and volitions are more like a tumbled heap of bricks. But psychology endorses the simile. Consciously or unconsciously character gathers into a unity with its individual color and form. Our days are not piled haphazard. They are built together like cemented stones, riveted together like girders. We must dwell in the character-home we build. This real estate cannot be leased or sublet. By imposture we may live for a time in other homes, but, soon or late, we are driven back to our own habitation to make there such poor shelter as we may!

In outer semblance human houses are similar. The factor of difference is hidden: some houses have a foundation, while others are built "upon the earth without a foundation."<sup>20</sup> The

<sup>18</sup> Exodus 16: 19, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Holtzmann suggests that *tekton* ("carpenter") should be translated "builder." For the references to building, see Matthew 21: 33, 23: 29; Luke 12: 18, 14: 28, 26: 17; and John 2: 19-21.

<sup>20</sup> So Luke. The differences in this parable as reported in Matthew and Luke are an interesting study. Matthew attributes blame because the "foolish man" chose a poor location, Luke because he built without a foundation. According to Luke both houses may have been built on the same tract, but the one rested on the surface and the other deep upon the rock. Matthew is more dramatic in description of the storm, but Luke has telling phrases: "dugged and went deep," "it had been well-built," "and it fell in." If any one wished to draw invidious comparisons among four indispensable gospels that of Luke the physician could stand the test.

foundation is not essential in still weather, but in the lashing of the storm the house cannot stand without it. The energies of a will doing His words, Jesus avows, constitute the solid rock by which alone the house of life endures.

There are three prime forces in personality—emotion, intelligence and will—and the history of ethics might be defined as a succession of attempts to represent one or other of the three as supreme and the other two as subsidiary.<sup>21</sup> No such attempt has won success. Emotion is wild until guided by reason and focussed by will. Reason ends in futile theorizing until the emotion kindles it and the will makes it effective. Similarly the will (even though it is the "foundation") can be no better than a frenzied digging until emotion covets the home, and reason plans and supervises the building. The three are inseparable and each is essential. If any is lacking (even though one may temporarily be dominant) the personality is to that measure weak. They are the living triangle, perfectly balanced, around which life revolves.

Yet it is true, and especially of religion, as Jesus discerned, that the balance is more likely to be upset by the absence of will than by the absence of feeling or intelligence.<sup>22</sup> Jesus did not minimize the place of reason in religion. The doors of a church should be high enough to allow the worshippers on entering to retain their heads. That grand word "rationalist" should be recaptured from the sorry camp of the sceptic and given honor in Christian vocabulary, for the life of Jesus is the most rational thing our befuddled planet has ever seen. Reason quickly reaches frontiers of mystery, but as far as those frontiers religion should march with reason. A man's faith must be consistent with (though not necessarily slave to) his whole range of knowledge, or it sinks into black magic. But the reason without the will never arrives. It discusses with utmost care all the swimming-strokes, but it never enters the water or learns to swim. It was characterized once with penetrating truth: "Foolish man."

Similarly there is ample room for emotion in religion. The

<sup>21</sup> Thus Schopenhauer ("the world is my will") might be regarded as a typical proponent of the volitional, Lotze of the emotional, and Hegel of the rational.

<sup>22</sup> Jesus reverts to His emphasis on the word "do" (a favorite word with Him both in speech and in practice) in the Parable of the Two Sons. See Chapter XIX.

sight of weak faith beating the air in an orgy of emotion should not dictate a cold and expressionless worship. Strong souls are blessed by the supernal vision and lifted at times into a seventh heaven of ecstasy, so that they cry with Paul: "I know a man in Christ—(whether in the body, I know not; or whether out of the body I know not; God knoweth)—how that he was caught up into Paradise and heard unspeakable words."<sup>23</sup> True religion knows its magic hours,—

"those hours of birth,  
Those moments of the soul in years of earth. . . .  
That curlew-calling time in Irish dusk  
When life became more splendid than its husk,  
When the rent chapel on the brae at Slains  
Shone with a doorway opening beyond brains."<sup>24</sup>

Jesus Himself was transfigured in such unearthly radiance that His very garments seemed luminous. Nevertheless, His warnings against the abortive emotion which fails of practice were frequent and severe. Feeling is shifting sand—a poor foundation for a house!

"Ye are my friends if ye *do* the things which I command you."<sup>25</sup> "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the teaching whether it is of God or whether I speak from myself."<sup>26</sup> So Jesus pleaded fearlessly that His teaching should be brought to the acid test of deeds. But we are slow to obey—a slowness of which Mark Twain spoke whimsically when he declared that the parts of the Bible which gave him trouble were not those he could not understand but rather those he could understand. "Can any man look round," asks Oliver Wendell Holmes, "and see what Christian countries are now doing, and how they are governed, and what is the general condition of society, without seeing that Christianity is the flag under which the world sails, and not the rudder that steers its course?" So Ruskin: "Every duty we omit obscures some truth we might have known."<sup>27</sup> So William James: "Never suffer yourself to have an emotion without expressing it in some active way." But the warning

<sup>23</sup> II Corinthians 12: 2, 4.

<sup>24</sup> John Masefield, "Biography." ("Collected Poems," The Macmillan Co., 1921.)

<sup>25</sup> John 15: 14.

<sup>26</sup> John 7: 17.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted pertinently by Dr. Halford E. Luccock in his valuable little book, "Studies in the Parables of Jesus," p. 31.

was never so forcibly uttered as when Jesus condemned with quivering urgency the house of the man who failed in deeds: "And great was the fall of it."

For the storm comes—since life intends not that we should be superficially happy but that we should be blest in strength and sacrifice. Jesus describes the storm in abrupt and flashing words: "Torrential came the rain! Down swept the floods! Angry roared the winds!"<sup>28</sup> Thunder-clouds gathered ominously in the hills, lightning tore the sky, and then, amid the crash of thunder, the flood came swirling down the river-bed, a livid turbulence, and away went the house that had looked so fair in summer suns!

Who has not seen human houses "fall in"—crumple in sudden ruin—before the onset of business calamity, or the overwhelming storm of sorrow? And who has not seen other lives strong to endure however the pitiless rain of a friend's unfaithfulness might beat, however the cruel winds of pain might lash and tear? Such souls are "buildd well" on the impregnable rock of a Christ-instructed will.

"O living will that shall endure  
When all that seems shall suffer shock,  
Rise in the spiritual rock,  
Flow through our *deeds* and make them pure."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> The very order of the Greek words heightens the dramatic effect.  
<sup>29</sup> Tennyson, "In Memoriam" (CXXXI).