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© I. Chris Imoisili, E-mail : imoisilic@hotmail.com; imoisilic@gmail.com

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BLAME THE HEARER NOT THE WORD!

Today's Text: Matt. 13: 1-23

Extracts:

Then [Jesus] spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop; some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear" [Matt. 13: 3-9].

On Sunday, 19 April 2009, the Miss USA title was at stake.¹ In hot contest for the title was Miss California, Carrie Prejean. At the final stage, one of the judges, Perez Hilton, asked her whether she thought same-sex marriage should be legalized. Carrie was aware of the celebrity judge's sexual orientation (Hilton was a homosexual) and the audience's expectation of a politically-correct answer but she replied, "In my country, and in my family, I believe that a marriage should be between a man and a woman." The crown went to Miss North Carolina while Miss California came second. Carrie's response raised some controversy. In subsequent interviews, she claimed that her anti-gay response cost her the crown. Nevertheless, she thanked God for giving her the opportunity to defend her faith. She had lost the title but she considered herself a winner, based on 200 friend requests and over 1,000 new messages on Facebook.

There may be several other reasons why Miss California did not win. Her loss assumes that Hilton was able to convince the rest of the panel of judges to punish her for not being politically correct. What would she have said if she had won? Therefore, the key issue in the matter is not whether she won or lost but whether she spoke the truth about marriage. Was she right to say that, according to her faith, marriage should be between a man and a woman? Were her hearers right to expect her to say that marriage can be between any two consenting adults, irrespective of their gender? Who is to blame in this matter- the word or the hearer? In this week's study, we shall use the Parable of the Sower to answer those questions.

¹ Story based on "Miss Calif: Anti-gay marriage answer 'Cost me my crown,' MSN Entertainment, April 20, 2009; <http://tv.msn.com/miss-california-controversy/?GT1=28103>

1. Seed and Soil: symbiotic or parasitic?

West Los Angeles has a special fascination for me because most of its streets are lined with evergreen drought-resistant trees that can withstand the climatic (desert) conditions of California. A few days each week, as a form of exercise, I love to walk the almost two-mile distance between my home and the office. During the summer, as you walk under the scorching heat of the sun that monopolizes the clear blue sky, you thank God for the shades such trees provide. However, there is one block that I try to avoid. Along Orange Grove Street [east of Fairfax Avenue, between W. 18th Street and Airdrome Street], there are no shades at all. The authorities keep planting new trees but they never seem to thrive beyond stunted shrubs. Yet, one block north or south of that same street, there are alluring shades provided by graceful leafy trees. So, what is wrong with that stretch of Orange Grove Street? Do you blame the soil or the plants or both?

In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus tells the story of a man who went out to sow. His seed fell on different kinds of soil, each producing different outcomes. A seed is bad for planting if it is not ripe or if it is diseased or roasted. So, to plant it is a waste of time. Bad soil may be too dry or too wet or just not fertile for cultivation. Therefore, there is some relationship between the seed and the soil. If both are good, the yield is likely to be good. If they are both bad, the crop is likely to be bad. But, what if the seed is good and the soil is bad or vice-versa? It follows that the relationship between the seed and the soil could be symbiotic (mutually beneficial) or parasitic (the bad living on and destroying the good). What is the case in the Parable of the Sower?

2. But the seed was good!

In the parable used by Jesus, the seed is the word of God [Lk 8: 11]. When Jesus prayed (for the disciples) to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, He said, “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” [Jn 17: 17]. So the seed in the parable is good and wholesome, just as the word of God that we read in the Bible or that we hear preached when we go to church is true. If it is not productive, the problem is not with the word but with the soil on which it is planted.

In the parable, the seed fell on different kinds of soil. What does the soil here represent? Jesus explained to His disciples that the various kinds of soil referred to different kinds of people [Matt. 13: 19-23]. More specifically, the soil refers to the state of a person’s heart for as we think in our hearts, so are we [Prov. 23: 7], and what defiles a man comes from his heart [Matt. 15: 18-20]. Thus, bad soil (the wicked heart) that can destroy a good seed (the word of God) can manifest as one of the following:

- a) *The shallow heart*

Jesus said, “And as (the sower) sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them” [Matt. 13: 4]. Here is His explanation: “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the one who received seed by the wayside” [v. 19].

People in a crowd are held together by what sociologists call emotional contagion. It lasts only for a fleeting moment. For example, when a car knocks down a pedestrian, onlookers suddenly mill around the spot to see things for themselves. Some may be genuinely concerned; some may actually try to apply first-aid, but the majority of them may just be curious bystanders. As soon as the ambulance comes to rush the injured person to the hospital, the crowd disappears. The seed of their attention has disappeared! In like manner, the spiritual birds of the air snatch away the word of God from the hollow heart as soon as it receives it. For example, speaking to the multitudes that milled around Him, Jesus said, “*You seek Me, not because of the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled*” [Jn 6: 26]. After each meal, they left until they became hungry again. That is an example of the shallow heart. It plays to the gallery. Its attention span is short. Like a rolling stone, it gathers no moss of conviction.

b) *The stony heart*

Some seeds fell on stony places where they did not have much earth. They quickly sprouted but when the sun came up, “they were scorched, and because they had no root, they withered away” [Matt. 13: 5-6]. Those who have received the seed on stony ground are similar to those who hear the word and instantly receive it with joy. However, without deep roots, they can only endure for a while. “When tribulation or persecution arises because of the word,” they soon stumble [vv. 20-21].

Some people show such enthusiasm for the word of God when they first receive it. They might have attended a revival service where they were moved by the eloquence of the preacher. They might have even answered the altar call to give their lives to Christ. However, they may still hold on to a life style, such as corruption, or sexual immorality that they are not in a hurry to get rid of because of transient pecuniary gains. Some people do not go forward to know more about God and Jesus through the Bible. Instead, they lean on their priests or pastors to do everything for them, including praying and fasting! So, when temptation comes that will make them choose between Christ and the world, they may take the easier way out and stumble. Their roots were too shallow to endure the storms of life. That is an example of the stony heart. It is impervious to change or reform

c) *The greedy heart*

Some seeds fell among thorns. Before they could even sprout, the thorns sprang up and choked them [**Matt. 13: 7**]. Those are people who hear the word of God but “the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word and (they become) unfruitful” [v. **22**].

How many enthusiastic men and women of God do you know that are being hampered by the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of material riches? For example, they may be too busy with work to have time for prayer or worship. They may be carrying stressful family responsibilities that they cannot transfer to somebody else. Therefore, they may not be able to devote adequate time to their spiritual calling. Where they then have to depend on their ministries to provide for their welfare, they pander to the unholy interests of the highest bidders, forcing them to compromise their morality integrity.

Remember the encounter of Jesus with some people who were desirous to follow Him. He asked the first one to follow Him and he replied, “Let me first go and bury my father.” Jesus told him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God.” Another one said to Jesus, “Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house.” Jesus told him emphatically, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” [**Lk 9: 57-62**].

With respect to the lure of money, Paul warned young Timothy, “Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition, for the love of money is (the) root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the truth in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” [**1 Tim. 6: 9-10**]. A greedy heart is unproductive since “he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption” [**Gal. 6: 8**].

d) *The wholesome heart*

Some seeds fell on “good ground and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” The good ground represents people who hear “the word and (understand) it, who in deed (bear) fruit, and (produce) some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty” [**Matt. 13: 8, 23**]. The good ground represents the wholesome heart [**Rom. 12: 2**], the one sown in the Spirit [**Gal. 6: 8**].

Interestingly, the seed produces different levels of abundance in different hearts. Does that suggest that God is unfair or partial? No, as the following verses confirm:

- When God rained down manna from heaven to feed the children of Israel in the wilderness, He instructed the people through Moses, “Let everyone gather it according to each one’s need.” The children of Israel did so “some more, some less ... (and) he who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack. *Every man had gathered according to each one’s need*” [Ex. 16: 15-18]. So, no matter what each person received, everyone’s need was adequately met.
- It is God that gives us power to get wealth for His own purpose [Deut. 8: 17-18]. To enable Solomon to build His temple in Jerusalem, God made him the richest man ever [1 Kgs 3: 13]. So, whatever you receive is adequate for what God wants you to do for Him.
- When God distributes spiritual gifts to believers, He does so by grace as He deals to each one “a measure of faith” [Rom. 12: 3]. Thus, He has appointed in His church some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and some teachers “for the equipping of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” [Eph. 4: 11-12]. So, whatever you are given is an integral part of the totality that belongs to God.

The supplier of the seed, God Himself, can determine what output we can produce from our spiritual work in His vineyard. Nevertheless, we must still work hard for results. According to the word of God, the field of the lazy man, the vineyard of the man devoid of understanding, is “all overgrown with thorns; its surface ... covered with nettles (and) its stone wall ... broken down” [Prov. 24: 30-31]. That is why Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, “I planted, Apollos watered, but *God gave the increase*. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and *each one will receive his own reward according to his own labour*” [1 Cor. 3: 6-8]. The reward of the wholesome heart is certainly superior to that of the shallow heart, the stony heart or the greedy heart. Much more, all those who have the wholesome heart will not necessarily produce the same amount of crop but the *value* of their sowing is the same- peace of mind on earth and eternal life with Christ after death [Mk. 10: 29-30].

3. Conclusion: Jesus is the Word of God made flesh!

From the Parable of the Sower, we know that the seed was good. So, if the seed was good and yet it did not grow everywhere it fell on, except on good ground, the problem was not with the seed but with the soil. That seed is the word of God and the soil is our heart. You need to know more about this word of God:

- *The “word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and*

marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” [Heb. 4: 12]

- “All Scripture (a summary of the word of God) is given by inspiration of God, and *is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness*, that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work [2 Tim. 3: 16-17]
- The word of God *is a lamp to our feet and a light to our paths* [Ps. 119: 105]. *By it, we can walk by faith, not by sight* [2 Cor. 5: 7].
- We are told, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ...*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (as) the only begotten of the Father*” [Jn 1: 1, 14]. All of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, is about Him [Lk 24: 44; Rev. 22: 16]. ***The Word of God is Jesus the Christ*** who has shed His blood for us on Calvary. He is forever the way, the truth and the life; ***the only gateway to God and salvation*** [Jn 14: 6].

Therefore, the problem is not with the word of God that we hear from the pulpit or read about in the Bible. The problem is not with Jesus or what He has commanded us to do. The problem is with us, the hearers. That was why when Jesus had finished telling the parable to His listeners, He said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” [Matt. 13: 9].

You do have ears but will you hear?