

Weekly Bible Study Series, Vol. 7, No. 24: 13 August 2006

© I. Chris Imoisili, E-mail: imoisilic@hotmail.com; imoisilic@gmail.com
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ARE YOU UNBIASED OR COMPROMISED?

Today's Text: Jeremiah Chap. 26

Extracts:

Now it happened, when Jeremiah had made an end of speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak to all the people, that *the priests and the prophets and all the people seized him, saying, "You will surely die!"* ... And all the people were gathered against Jeremiah in the house of the Lord. When the princes of Judah heard these things, they came up from the king's house to the house of the Lord and sat down in the entry of the New Gate of the Lord's house.... *Then Jeremiah spoke to all the princes and all the people, saying ... "Here I am, in your hand; do with me as seems good and proper to you."* ... *So the princes and all the people said to the priests and prophets, "This man does not deserve to die. For he has spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God"* [Jer. 26: 8, 9b, 10, 12a, 14, 16]

Antonio Ramon Villaraigosa was elected the first Latino Mayor of Los Angeles in May 2005. LA is a multicultural city, made up of Whites, African-Americans, Latinos, Asians (mainly Koreans, Chinese and Taiwanese) and native Indians. There are large communities of Jews and Moslems, apart from other faiths, but they are all Angelinos. Following the onset of the ongoing war between Israel and Hezbollah, the Mayor recently joined the California State Governor to address a pro-Israeli rally in the Jewish neighbourhood. The Moslem/Arab community became incensed and charged the Mayor with ethnic/racial bias. They have invited him to also come to the Arab community to address a pro-Lebanon rally.

The United States is a strong ally and an unwavering supporter of Israel. Since 9/11, Americans are in general instinctively against any terrorist group, such as Hezbollah, that threatens American interest worldwide. Therefore, it would be politically unwise for the Mayor to address the Arab community as requested. However, not to do so would expose him to the charge of bias. What would you do if you were in his place? Would you be even-handed (neutral) and address a rally organized by an anti-Israel lobby in Los Angeles? We all face such dilemmas each new day when we are called upon to resolve matters between couples, siblings, friends, colleagues or church members. In today's lesson, the princes and the people were called upon by the priests and prophets to take a stand against Jeremiah. Let us learn some lessons from the case.

1. Background: Jeremiah versus the priests and prophets

This story is set in the era of Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, as king of Judah. The Lord had commanded the prophet Jeremiah to stand in the court of the Lord's house to warn the people of the calamity that He would bring on them should they refuse to heed His word through the prophets. Specifically, He would make Jerusalem "a curse to all the nations of the earth" [Jer. 26: 1-6]. The priests and prophets who had heard Jeremiah's speech in the Lord's house were angry with him. They then stirred the people to ask that Jeremiah be put to death for bringing an evil message and a curse on their nation. When the princes heard of the uproar in God's house, they came to find out what was happening. The accusers presented their charge against Jeremiah and asked that he be put to death [vv. 7-11]. Let us follow the matter from there, to learn how the matter was resolved.

2. How the dispute was resolved

The following process and general principles can be discerned from the story:

a) *Understand what issues are at stake*

From the point of view of the priests and prophets, Jeremiah was pronouncing a curse on them and their nation and "purporting" it to be the word of God [v. 9]. They were actually accusing him of blasphemy, the penalty for which is death by stoning [Lev. 24: 10-15; Jn 8: 59]. But was that the issue on their minds or that was a convenient way to get rid of a rival? Jeremiah, on the other hand, addressed the need for the people to repent of their sins or face the wrath of God, just as the Lord had sent him [Jer. 26: 2-5].

The first principle to learn is to make sure that you understand the underlying issues at stake. In this case, the fundamental issue was whether or not it was God who had spoken the warning through Jeremiah. You will hear of emotional and sensational statements which are actually aimed at disguising the true issues. For example, to disguise the truth of her being the one who had attempted to seduce Joseph into adultery, Potiphar's wife held up his garment to her husband and said, "The Hebrew servant whom you brought to us came in to me to mock me (and), as I lifted my voice and cried out, he left his garment with me and fled outside." In the absence of independent evidence to the contrary (since the other servants were outside of the house at the time), what did you expect her husband to do but to have his anger aroused [Gen. 39: 13-19]? Therefore, you must be careful not to allow yourself to be drowned by the parties' antics!

b) *Hear from both parties*

In spite of the fact that the princes and people were affected by Jeremiah's message, they did not immediately pick up stones to kill him without first hearing from him. In the presence of the princes and the people, the priests and the prophets repeated their accusation against Jeremiah and why he deserved to die [**Jer. 26: 11**]. Soon after, Jeremiah also stood up and told the princes and the people that his prophecy came from God Himself, calling on the people to amend their ways and their doings, and obey the voice of the Lord, their God. If they did that, God would relent concerning the doom that He had pronounced against them. In winding up his defence, Jeremiah said, "As for me, here I am, in your hand; do with me as seems good and proper to you" [**vv. 12-14**].

Hearing from both parties is crucial if you want to narrow down the areas of divergence. How do rumours spread? People hear one version and run with it, whether true or false! A good number of managers and supervisors are known to act on the first report they receive on a matter before or without first hearing from the other side. For example, as king David was running to safety from his son, Absalom's rebellion, the servant of Mephibosheth (Jonathan's crippled son that David had given a privileged place at his table) came to the king to allege that Mephibosheth had declared his allegiance to Absalom. Without hearing from the other side (or waiting to do so in due course), David immediately decreed, "Here, all that belongs to Mephibosheth is yours" [**2 Sam. 16: 1-4**]. By the time that David came to know the truth of Mephibosheth's loyalty to him, even in his absence, it was too late for the king to reverse himself [**2 Sam. 19: 24-29**]. Therefore, you must insist on hearing from both parties before you take a stand.

c) *Seek independent confirmation, if necessary*

The princes and people searched their national archives to know how a similar issue had been handled in the past. Their search revealed that [**Jer. 26: 17- 23**]:

- When Micah, a prophet during the reign of King Hezekiah, spoke a similar warning, the king did not put him to death. Instead, the king and the people repented so as to avoid the Lord's wrath, and in deed, God relented and the doom was averted [**2 Kgs. 20: 1-19**];
- When Urijah prophesied a similar message against the city and the land, the then incumbent king Jehoiakim sought to kill him but the prophet fled to Egypt. The king used his political leverage to get him repatriated from Egypt and killed him as a common criminal. Yet, God was confirming through another prophet of the same era,

Jeremiah, that the said doom was still on the way. Therefore, Urijah had been vindicated.

The disciples did a similar appraisal when there was a major dispute in the early church on whether to require the Gentiles to be circumcised like the Jews in order to receive salvation [Acts 15: 1-27]. The apostles and elders took testimonies from Peter (his experience with Cornelius and his Gentile household) and from Paul and Barnabas on the miracles and wonders that God had worked through them among the Gentiles. With such compelling evidence, it became relatively easy for the early church to resolve a major threat to its existence as one fold. Therefore, you must look for additional facts from as many independent sources as possible to back up the stand that you are about to take.

d) *Take a stand and act on it!*

After their thorough investigation, the princes and the people said, “This man does not deserve to die. *For he has spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God*” [Jer. 26; 16]. In order to ensure that the decision of the princes and the people stood, Ahikam, the son of Shapham (apparently a prince), stood by the prophet Jeremiah “so that they should not give him into the hand of the people to put him to death” [Jer. 26: 24].

The early church did a similar thing. As soon as they had taken the stand to exempt the Gentiles from the Jewish rituals under the Law of Moses, the elders wrote a letter to the Gentile church in Antioch, saying, among other things, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well” They also sent Judas and Silas to accompany Paul and Barnabas to “also report the same things by word of mouth” [Acts 15: 19-29]. They walked their talk!

3. But was that stand unbiased or compromised?

The priests and prophets who had wanted Jeremiah dead could have been acting as the agents of Jehoiakim the then unrepentant king of Judah. Therefore, their stand against Jeremiah was based on self-interest. The princes stood to lose their princely pleasures should they heed the voice of Jeremiah to repent. Yet, they took the stand to let the prophet live because he had spoken the word of God. So, how would you evaluate their stand on this matter? Were they neutral, that is, unbiased, or they sold out, that is, compromised? The answer would depend on the standard of morality that we are applying.

a) *By human standards*

Human standards are determined by *law* or *tradition*. Therefore, any stand that is based on the rule of law is considered unbiased or neutral. However, the law, as they say, is an ass. With little practice, we all can ride an ass! That is why many criminals get away on technical grounds. Moreover, law is not comprehensive. That is where tradition fills in. If the law allows something or does not punish it, then it must be right. If it is politically correct to be inconsistent in the application of rules and principles and standards, there is nothing wrong in taking conflicting stands on the same matter. For example, a Cuban exile who sets foot on continental American soil is a legal immigrant whereas a similar person from Haiti or Mexico is immediately bundled back as an illegal alien! The West encourages Arab countries to democratize but rejects a democratically elected government in Palestine because Hamas the winning party is unacceptable!

In the light of the limitations of human standards, it is not surprising to find that, in the face of overwhelming evidence, people still shy away from taking a stand, not to talk of a principled one. You will hear such statements as, “Let’s forgive and forget!” “Let sleeping dogs lie!” and so on. What is wrong with first telling the wrong party that s(he) is wrong? How can a hungry dog sleep without food? You can see why many families, churches and groups remain in dispute.

Some people have refused or are afraid or unwilling to tell the guilty party that it has done wrong, not to talk of making amends. How many people are you familiar with who will take a stand with everybody else at a meeting only to do the direct opposite when they come out? They may even apologise to the wrong party and assure him or her that they do not support the group verdict on the matter! They may refuse to act on the actions or steps agreed upon. In the end, good decisions are frustrated at implementation. It is no surprise that highly placed administrators in the home, government, church or business have lost self-respect.

If we have used human principles as outlined above, we may wind up with inferior outcomes. An inferior outcome is one which compromises our integrity or our relationship with God. The princes took a stand against their own self-interest. Certainly, it was not based on human standards.

b) *By God’s standards*

Unlike human standards that are inconsistent and shifting. God’s standards do not change because He does not change [**Mal. 3: 6**]. God is not a respecter of persons and shows partiality to none [**Acts 10: 34**]. Therefore,

any stand based on His word is bound to be neutral, unbiased and principled.

When God called Jeremiah, He made him “a fortified city and an iron pillar, and bronze walls *against the whole land, against all the kings of Judah, against all the princes, against the priests, and against all the people of the land*” and that they would fight against him but they would not prevail against him because the Lord was with him to deliver him [**Jer. 1: 18-19**]. The princes said that Jeremiah should live because “he has spoken to us *in the name of the Lord our God*” [**Jer. 26: 16**]. Therefore, they spoke the mind of God when they spared his life. Their stand was neutral, unbiased and principled. That was why they were able to sustain it against the king, the priests and the prophets.

4. Conclusion: Are you unbiased or compromised?

In your home or family, office or business, club or church, you may be called upon to adjudicate a dispute. By law, rules or tradition, you may take a stand that may on the surface look sound but which offends morality as defined by the word of God. You may succeed for a while but it will not last. That is because you have based your stand on shifting standards. You have actually compromised your standing with the Lord. That is why you must strive at all times to uphold God’s standards in your thoughts, words and deeds. Then, by your fruits, the world will know that you are unbiased, that you cannot be compromised.

The choice is yours!