

Sunday, November 8, 2009

**Matthew 7.15-23
Giving Lip Service
SWCOB 11.08.09**

Our Old Testament story is familiar to many.

It is the story of Cain and Abel,
The first two children of Adam and Eve.

Cain was the first-born and grew up to be a farmer.

Abel, the second-born, grew up to be a shepherd.

Now the differences between these two occupations,
May not seem to be significant.

But in other parts of the world,
Notably in Nigeria,
The difference is like night and day.

For instance, Judith's tribe, the Irigwe,
Are farmers who plow the land and put out crops.

But another tribe in the same area, the Fulani,
Are nomadic cattle-herders.

They drift from place to place,
In search of water and grass.

Both tribes compete for the same land for very different reasons.

And there has always been tension between the two.

So it is not surprising that there was friction,
Between Cain and Abel.

~~

But I have had difficulty with this text.
It took me a long time to understand,
Why God found favor in Abel's offering,
But not Cain's?

They both brought their offerings before God,
Out of sense of religious duty.

But Cain's offering was rejected. Why?

Look closely at verses 3-4,

**In the course of time,
Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil,
As an offering to the Lord.**

**But Abel brought fat portions from
Some of the firstborn of his flock.”**

Subtle but nevertheless, a difference between the offerings.

Cain's offering was, just as it says,
SOME of the fruits of the soil.

While Abel's was the fat portion of the FIRSTBORN of his flocks;
SOME versus the fat portion of the FIRSTBORN.

We don't think much of the fat portion today,
But then it was the choicest piece of the meat.

Perhaps God's rejection was because of attitude.

Cain's offering, not being the choicest offering,
Suggests that he did not have his heart in it.

Whereas, Abel gave the very best choice,
Signifying an attitude of true gratitude.

A subtle difference between the two, I admit.
But enough of a difference,
For God to respond to Cain's offering.

**If you do what is right,
Will you not be accepted?**

**But if you do not do what is right,
Sin is crouching at your door,
It desires to have you, but you must master it.**

Cain performed his offering much the same as Abel,
But God saw through his false and shallow worship.

Not only, then, was Cain the first to commit murder.

Cain was the first person who acted religious with having faith.

~~

A person's heart will determine his actions,
And vice versa,
A person's actions will reveal his heart.

~~

This brings us to our New Testament reading today.

Jesus sends a scathing message,
Condemning right practice with wrong attitude.

I imagine the very religious leaders that he had called hypocrites,
Are the ones he accused of being in sheep's clothing,
But are ferocious wolves.

Good trees produce good fruit,
Bad trees produce bad fruit.

If you want to know what kind of tree it is,
Look at what fruit it produces.

What we do reveals who we are!

Jesus says, **Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord,"
Will enter the kingdom of heaven,
But only he who does the will of my father.**

Jesus sees through false and shallow worship.

~~

The Pharisees knew how to "do" religion.
They were masters of God's law.

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount we catch glimpses
Of their behavior.

(Mt. 6.2) **So when you give to the needy,
Do not announce it with trumpets,
As the hypocrites do.**

(Mt 6.5) **And when you pray,
Do not be like the hypocrites,
For they love to pray . . . to be seen by men.**

(Mt 6.16) **When you fast,
Do not look somber as the hypocrites do,
To show men they are fasting.**

(Mt. 6.24) **No one serve two masters . . .
You cannot serve both God and man.**

(Mt 7.5) **You hypocrite,
First take the plank out of your own eye,
And then you will see clearly to remove the speck,
From your brother's eye.**

And now here as he winds up his sermon,

He once again points to the hypocrites,
But says, **I never knew you.**

~~

Jesus is preaching against those false prophets,
Who preached what people wanted to hear.
Jesus said they were like wolves in sheep clothing.

He said we can recognize the truth in what they say,
By the fruits in what they do.

The false prophets said,

**Lord did we not preach in your name?
And drive out demons?**

And did we not perform miracles in your name?

Jesus says, Away from me you evildoers!

I never knew you!

~~

Nowhere in the Bible is there a more concise statement,
That the essence of faith,
Is not in words,
Nor in being religious,

Not in performing spectacular deeds,
Even in the name of Jesus;

Rather, the essence of faith,
Will be known by the fruit that it bears.

~~

A full relationship with Jesus Christ,
Is impossible without doing the will of God.

And it all comes down to this:

Neither the good, important words one says,
Nor even the good important deeds that one does,
Can substitute for properly motivated right living.

Religion never takes the place of faith and obedience to Jesus.

A. W. Tozer states,

“The Bible recognizes no faith,
That does not lead to obedience,

Nor does it recognize any obedience,
That does not spring forth from faith.

They are two sides of the same coin.”

~~

There is nothing more damaging to the cause of Christ today,
Than this:

Claiming to be Christian,
Claiming to have the truth,
Claiming to be transformed by the Holy Spirit;
And living a life that proves otherwise.

William Barclay writes,

“More people have been brought into the church
By the kindness of real Christian love,

Than by all the theological arguments in the world,

And more people have been driven away from the church,
By the hardness and ugliness of so-called Christianity,
Than by all the doubts in the world.”

Jesus sees through false and shallow worship.

~~

This text has more to say to us who stand in the pulpit!

There is a lot of power and influence,
Standing behind this pulpit, preaching the word of God.

It is all too easy to become like one of the Pharisees:
To be able to “do” religion well;

~~

Ezekiel, in chapter 13, writes about the false prophets of his day;
Who prophecy out of their own imagination,
Who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing,

Who lead the people astray,
Who say “Peace” when there is no peace,

Who build a flimsy wall and cover it with whitewash.

~~

A lot of people want to be entertained during the sermon,
Rather than to be challenged and transformed by it.

Sometimes what a congregation wants in a pastor,
May not be what God wants.

They want a preacher to make them feel good,
I mean, after all, isn't that what faith is all about?

Feeling good?

They want the preacher to leave out the hard stuff.

Many want a feel-good, good-time kind of religion.

Many congregations really don't want to hear
About the real Biblical Jesus,
Who challenges them at every turn.

They want a Jesus to affirm who they are,
And what they do.

~~

We all need to be comforted from time to time,
To be affirmed by our Maker,
To feel His powerful sense of grace and mercy.

We all need this!

But there are times when we need to be challenged.

And really, in the Sermon on the Mount,
There is very little here that is comforting.

~~

So how do you tell a false prophet from a true prophet?

How do you know when you're getting a whitewash?

How do you tell a preacher who preaches the truth?
From one who preaches to build himself up?

If you're offended by the sermon, it may be the truth.

Truth hurts when you're not living true.

The Gospels stings when you're not living it!

The devil wants you to deny the truth,
And wants you to be comfortable and satisfied!

The devil wants the sermon to be entertaining,
But empty of the Gospel.

The devil wants to have you feel,
That your life is fine the way it is.

Chad Walsh wrote,

"I suspect that the devil has called off his attempts,
To convert people to agnosticism.

(someone who is noncommittal to the existence of God)

After all, if a person travels far enough away from Christianity,
He or she is always in danger of seeing it
In perspective and deciding that it is true.

It is much safer, from Satan's point of view,

To vaccinate a person with a mild dose of Christianity,
So as to protect him from the real disease."

Satan loves complacent Christians!

~~

If the preacher preaches,
And doesn't back it and support it with Scripture,
Be skeptical.

If the preacher says nothing that challenges you,
Be skeptical.

If the preacher whitewashes the gospel,
So that it fits your way of thinking,
Be skeptical.

If the preacher does not practice what he preaches,
Be very skeptical.

~~

But if the preacher preaches from the Bible,
And it makes you squirm in your pews,
Take heed.

If the preacher causes the Holy Spirit within you,
To rise up and convict you of wrongdoing,
Take heed!

If the preacher steps on your toes,
Take heed!

If the preacher is preaching to the whole congregation,
But it feels like he is preaching right at you,
Take real heed!

~~

The true prophet is not an employee of the church,
He/she is called by and works for God.

The prophet takes his cue from the Word of God,
And seeks the Holy Spirit for strength to preach it,

Even at the expense of his popularity and prestige.

Take it from the writing of a well-known prophet,
John Wesley,
The founder of the Methodist faith,
As taken from his journal.

Sunday AM, May 5, Preached in St. Ann's,
Was not asked to come back anymore.

Sunday PM, May 5, Preached at St. John's,
Deacons said, 'get out and stay out!'

Sunday AM, May 12th, Preached at St. Jude's,
Can't go back there either.

Sunday PM, May 12th, Preached at St. George's,
Kicked out again.

Sunday May 19, Preached on the street,
Kicked off the street.

Sunday AM, May 26, Preached out in a meadow,
A bull was turned loose during service.

Sunday AM, June 2
Preached out at edge of town,
Kicked off the highway.

Sunday PM June 2, Afternoon service,
Preached in pasture, 10,000 people came.

~~

And finally, another prophet who also recognized,
The tension between staying true to the Gospel message,
And preaching what the masses wanted to hear

The Apostle Paul,

**If I speak in human or angelic tongues,
But do not have love,
I am only a resounding gong,
Or a clanging symbol.**

**If I have the gift of prophecy,
And can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge,**

**And if I have the faith that can move mountains,
But do not have love,
I am nothing.**

**If I give all that I possess to the poor,
And surrender my body to the flames,**

**But do not have love,
I gain nothing (1 Corinthians 13.1-1-3)**

~~

The final test of true prophecy versus false prophecy is love.

Love that the prophet has for Jesus,
Love that the prophet has for his flock.

~~

Jesus sees through false and shallow worship!

~~

Back to the story of Cain and Abel;

The subtle difference between Cain and Abel's offerings,
Was enough to show God,
That Cain's action revealed the true nature of his heart.

~~

I pray that God, through Jesus, will bless you,
And fill you full of love.

And that through his grace and mercy,
Your lives will be filled to overflowing.

And the fruit of your tree,
Will reveal the nature of a heart,
Filled with a deep sense of worship.
Now and forevermore. Amen.