

Psalm 34 Ephesians 5:1-14 St. Luke 11:14-28

Comfort and Complacency – our Deadly Enemies

In Deuteronomy 6, the Lord instructed His people to always both hear and keep the Word of God. They were to make His Word part of the very warp and woof of their being...to hide it in their heart. They were to teach His Word to their children diligently and apply it to every part of their lives. In verses 10-12, the Lord revealed the reason for this. Listen to what He said to those about to enter the Promised Land. “So it shall be, when the Lord your God brings you into the land of which He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give you large and beautiful cities which you did not build, houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, hewn-out wells which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant – when you have eaten and are full – then beware, lest you forget the Lord Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.”

What God was basically saying here was that the greatest danger for them was not that the present occupants of Canaan outnumbered them. No, the greatest danger for them was eventual comfort and complacency. These two things would prove to be their deadliest enemies as they would cause them to forget God and His Word which would lead to compromise and ultimately contradiction of faith and practice. And from what He went on to tell His people through Moses in the following chapters (and, indeed, what happens to Israel as the Old Testament story unfolds), we may deduce that if we wish to lead blessed or happy lives, we too will have to be vigilant against such forgetful disobedience and the only way to accomplish this is to both hear and keep the Word of God.

In his book, “The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity”, Philip Jenkins writes about the shift of the center of gravity of the Christian world from the global north to the global south. He believes that “Christianity should enjoy a worldwide boom in the new century, but the vast majority of believers will be neither white nor European, nor Euro-American...(that by the year 2025) Africa and Latin America would be in competition for the title of most Christian continent...(that by 2050) only about one-fifth of the world’s 3 billion Christians will be non-Hispanic Whites.”

He goes on to argue that the primary reason for this shift is the “overwhelming power of secular nationalism” in the global north. Whereas Christians in the North have become increasingly liberal in their zeal to adjust themselves to “present-day realities” and “to become ‘relevant’ by abandoning (what they believe to be) outmoded supernatural doctrines and moral assumptions”, Christians in the South “are far more conservative in terms of both belief and moral teaching”, “are stalwartly traditional or even reactionary by the standards of the economically advanced nations”, “retain a very strong supernatural orientation, and are by and large far more interested in personal salvation than in radical politics.” And the results are alarming. Jenkins quotes from an article in the *New York Times* by Brent Staples: “Visit a church at random next Sunday,” Staples wrote about the traditional American church, “and you will probably encounter a few dozen people sprinkled thinly over a sanctuary that was built to accommodate hundreds or even thousands. The empty pews and white-haired congregants lend credence to those who argue that traditional religious worship is dying out.” The writer then went on to argue “that Christianity had failed and was collapsing and would continue to do so unless

and until the religion came to terms with liberal orthodoxies on matters of sex and gender.”

But in stark contrast to this bleak portrait of main-stream American Christianity, Jenkins writes that “it would not be easy to convince a congregation in Seoul or Nairobi that Christianity is dying, when their main concern is building a worship facility big enough for the 10,000 or 20,000 members they have gained over the past few years. And these new converts are mostly teenagers and young adults, very few (members have) white hair. Nor can these churches be told that, in order to reach a mass audience, they must bring their message more in accord with (Western) secular orthodoxies.” Something we here are constantly being pressurized to do for the sake of numbers or social respectability. Very few American Christians are willing to stand alone if need be for what they believe.

Now, as responsible Christians ourselves, we ought to be asking why Christianity is booming in these countries, the majority of which would be considered Third World countries, while it is becoming increasingly difficult to get people in our own country to attend services when there is a football match or hockey game on the television at the same time...not to even mention the Oscars. Given that the people in many of these countries are among the poorest people on the planet, one can only assume that at least two of the main causes are simply our own comfort and consequent complacency...the very things God warned His people about in Deuteronomy 6.

Comfort and complacency work together as a diabolical twin to stop us from hearing and keeping God’s Word. Comfort and complacency cause us to forget or minimize God’s standards...they cause us to deceive ourselves into thinking that it doesn’t really matter

how we live our lives...whether we actually walk in love as our Lord Jesus did...whether we actually follow in His footsteps or not...whether we live as followers of the Word or as followers of the world. Comfort and complacency fool us into thinking that fornication, uncleanness, covetousness (which is what our advertising industry is based on!), filthiness, foolish talking, coarse jesting, and various forms of idolatry (which includes the worship of ourselves, our possessions and our money)...that these things just don't matter to our holy God. Comfort and complacency cause us to cease striving to find out what is acceptable to our Lord as they cause us to rather come alongside if not fully merge with the works of darkness...and so we become imitators of those who do not know God and, indeed, those who oppose God, rather than imitators of God Himself. Well may our Lord ask us, "Why do you call Me 'Lord' while you do not do the things which I say...?"

You see, one of the major differences between us and, what has become known as the Majority World Christians is our wealth and our possessions...our "large and beautiful cities which (we) did not build, houses full of all good things (not to mention garages and storage facilities), which (we) did not fill"...in many ways, our generation is reaping the fruits of our parent's faith and their hard labor. We "have eaten and are full" and, as our Lord warned in Deuteronomy, we have forgotten the Lord Who brought us out of bondage to sin, satan and death. We have forgotten Him because we have forgotten His Word because we have become distracted by our many comforts and because we have forgotten what it is like to trust Him to provide for us. Why exercise faith when we have everything we need and then some? And if we don't have it, we can always charge it, right? Consequently, we lack the vibrancy of true Christian faith...we lack the reality of

a relationship with the Living God...a relationship that is meant to shape the manner in which we think and behave. In many ways, we are a kingdom divided against itself, and, as our Lord warned, we are being brought to desolation.

Now, you may very well ask, is there a way to break out of this downward spiral? Well, yes, and it is very simple, but it will not be easy. The only way out...the only way out...are you ready for this? The only way out is for each and every one of us who call ourselves by the Name of Jesus take God's warning seriously and to actually and consistently do something about it. In Deuteronomy our Lord warns us that we can only secure His blessings if we listen to, and keep, and do His Word. In our Gospel lesson for today, our Lord Jesus bluntly stated that only those who hear the Word of God and keep it will be blessed. And in our Epistle lesson, St. Paul said that we ought to be imitators of God...and the only way to do that, dearest brethren, is to avoid being deceived by empty words by walking in the light of what is revealed to be acceptable to the Lord in His Word.

Until we learn that we simply cannot run with the fox and hunt with the hounds, we will continue down that slippery slope into meaningless and powerless religion, our numbers will continue to decrease, and we will live lives of frustration as true blessing and happiness will prove elusive and illusionary. Sadly, no one can make you turn away from your spiritual amnesia and apathy...that is a decision you will have to make on your own...but it certainly is one I sincerely hope you will make soon. It is not too late for us to recover the vitality of real Christianity...it is not too late for us to recapture the vibrancy of our poorer yet richer brethren in the Majority World...if we only will choose to hear and keep and do God's Word.

Yes, as I said, this will not be easy because no one can do this for you...but consider Him Whom you profess to follow...consider Him Who did not shrink from doing the will of God in spite of the fact that it would ultimately cost Him His life. Consider Him as you prepare your heart to come to partake of the elements demonstrating not only His love for you, but also His commitment to doing the will of God. He despised the horror of the cross because He saw the joy of its consequence...He saw our salvation...our reconciliation with God. As such, the Eucharist serves as a remedy against discouragement because it strengthens us to walk in the footsteps of the One Who has gone before us. It encourages us to lay aside all that ensnares us and all that causes us to be distracted from hearing and keeping and doing the will of God.

So, as you come before Him this day, dearest beloved brethren, consider your ways in the light of our Lord's Word. Have your comforts robbed you of a real and vibrant relationship with our Lord? Have they allowed you to be deceived into complacency so that you have forgotten to read, mark, learn, inwardly digest and apply God's Word? Ask Him to Whom all hearts are open, all desires know and from Whom no secrets are hid, to reveal the state of your heart to you, for your own sake and for the sake of His kingdom...ask Him to allow you to see your heart as He sees it...and then ask Him to grant you true repentance and His Holy Spirit, so that you might break the downward spiral and obtain the blessings promised to those who hear, keep and do His Word.