

“Ears to hear”

R. Stanley, 13 July 2020

The Bible is Christocentric. Its message is that we must be Christcentred (Col 1:18). When sermons reached our ears calling us for Christcentredness, we neither understood it nor worked on it. But now after we have become Corona-centred, we know what it means to be Christcentred! Thoughts, words, deeds, everything about Corona! If only we become so Christ-conscious as we are Corona-conscious now!

Nothing better illustrates Christcentredness than when Christ compared Himself to Vine and us to the branches (Jn 15). It is in this chapter He spoke of the intimacy He enjoys with us by calling us His “friends,” and not “servants” (v15). The call of the entire chapter is to “abide” in Him (vv4,5,6,7,10). Abiding in Christ essentially means His “words” abiding in us (v7). His words abiding in us means that we stay saturated and soaked in them. In the words of the Psalmist, “Oh, how I love Your Law! It is my meditation all the day” (Psa 119:97). Or in the words of Job, “I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food” (Job 23:12).

Whatever Jesus spoke was absolute truth. As the Word of God in flesh, Jesus was full of truth (Jn 1:14,17). He said, “I am the Truth” (Jn 14:6). Even those who tried to entangle Him in His talk testified, “Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth” (Mt 22:15,16). In whatever Jesus preached and taught during His earthly ministry, nothing is more important or less important than the other (Mt 5:17-19). However to some of His statements, He added the words, “Verily I say unto You ...” Here are some sample references from Matthew, Mark and Luke (Mt 11:11; Mk 11:23; Lk 13:35). As for as John was concerned, he uses the phrase, “Verily, verily, I say unto you ...” (Jn 1:51; 5:19; etc.) I suggest that you pick up these verses with the help of a Bible Concordance, and study them in order. It will be a profitable exercise.

Besides the usage of the words, “Verily, Verily,” Jesus made another emphatic statement, namely, “***He who has ears to hear, let him hear,***” as a prefix or a suffix. He used this authoritative statement in seven instances as per the Biblical record. I have picked them here for our meditation. God in these last days speaks to us through His Son (Heb 1:1,2). Let’s give serious attention to His message. I suggest that you take a brief break in between instead of reading or studying this expository Article at a stretch. Some of the truths presented here may appear too elementary or fundamental. Do not overlook them; these are days when the very foundations are destroyed (Psa 11:3).

1) Mark 7:16 PERSONAL PURITY

“If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!”

Read verses 14 to 23 to understand the context of this ingenuous saying of Jesus. He was contrasting the heart from the stomach of man. He said, “There’s nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things which defile a man” (v15). He listed out 13 items as “evil things” which come out of man’s heart: vv21,22, “evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride and

foolishness.” This is a searching list for self-examination. We must purify ourselves from these sins with the same seriousness as we protect ourselves from the Coronavirus.

The call here is for Personal Purity. “Stomach” refers to that which is physical; “heart” to that which is spiritual. He was differentiating between the “ritual” and the “spiritual.” In this instance He was talking about rituals and traditions (vv1-9). The Pharisees found fault with His disciples for eating without washing hands (v2). The Pharisees, when they returned from the marketplace, washed not only their hands and vessels but also their seats (v4). Here’s a picture of today’s Christianity. It’s more of rituals and ceremonies than inner piety. Even in worship it is not our heart but the mouth that’s involved most. Jesus pointed out God’s complaint: “These people honour Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me” (v6). The reason is that we give more weightage to our religious traditions and practices than to the “commandments” of God and His “Word” (vv7,9,13). The teachings of our denomination and practices of our Church are revered more than the pure Word of God. Beloved, the Bible does not get its authority from the Church; rather, it is the Church that gets its authority from the Bible. This reversal has made us miss God’s perfect will by million miles.

Jesus calls this sort of religiosity as hypocrisy (v6). He illustrated hypocrisy with tumblers and tombs (Mt 23:25-28). Washing of vessels is basic hygiene. But what Jesus rebuked was washing the outside without taking care of the inside. This speaks of a religion that emphasizes the external over the internal. In other words, we get more concerned about the outward show than the inner condition. What people think about us becomes more important to us than what God knows about us. Whitewashing of tombs was a regular Jewish practice. What Jesus wanted to teach here was that it’s not the outward decoration of our lives but the inner devotion that matters. Jesus calls us “hypocrites” if this is how we live. He never pronounced “woe” on adulterers or thieves or murderers. But in this 23rd chapter of Matthew alone He throws “woe” on hypocrites seven times (vv13,14,15,23,25,27,29). They were the “Scribes and Pharisees” whom Jesus called as “blind guides” (v16). Yes, Preachers and Leaders can play hypocrisy more easily than average Christians. Let’s beware!

Hypocrisy hinders growth in personal purity. It is the difference between what a person thinks and what he says. It is the difference between what a man says and what he does. It is the difference between what information an individual gives and what impression he leaves. It is the difference between the talk and the walk. It is the difference between the sermons of a preacher and his behaviour. The impression he leaves on his audience when on the pulpit may be contradicting his walk when he gets back home. Our praying and singing are no exception. Proverbs 26:22-26, Jeremiah 9:8 and Ezekiel 33:31 are among the classic passages explaining hypocrisy. By nature all of us as fallen men and women are hypocrites. Our thoughts and words, or words and deeds, or intentions and expressions do not agree 100% (Rom 3:4). We must consciously and consistently work at minimising this gap in order to grow in personal piety. It’s a lifetime exercise. “The wisdom that is from Above is first *pure* ... and without *hypocrisy*” (Js 3:17). Hypocrites usually ignore the beam in their eye but magnify the speck in the eyes of others (Mt 7:5).

2) Luke 8:8b RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

The context of this penetrating statement of Jesus here is the Parable of the Sower (vv4-15). We read the same Parable in Matthew 13 also. After telling the Parable, we read that Jesus "cried" and said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Lk 8:8b). We cannot ignore the emphasis. The call here is for Proper Response to God's Word. At the end of the Parable, Jesus said, "Take heed HOW you hear" (v18a). See the importance Jesus attaches to the truth by watching what followed. "THEN His mother and brothers came to Him, and could not approach Him because of the crowd. And it was told Him by some, who said, 'Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see You.' BUT He answered and said to them, 'My mother and My brothers are these who hear the Word of God and do it'" (vv19-21). We will closely look at the four kinds of soil to learn practical lessons on receiving maximum benefit from God's Word whether we read it or hear it. We must have heard hundreds of sermons on this Parable. However, a fresh look at any familiar passage of the Scripture yields transforming benefit.

(a) Wayside soil (Lk 8:5,12). The main problem with the seeds which fell on the wayside was that they were not covered with soil. As such the pedestrians trample them down. Or the birds devour them. From what I have understood from this kind of soil, I decide to write down then and there the messages I hear from God from His Word during my meditation. Hardly do I meditate or study the Bible without my diary or notebook open. If I postpone to write my morning devotional thoughts to the evening, I forget most of it. The memory power of most of you are just average like mine. It is from whatever I note down during my study of God's Word I develop outlines for my sermons and articles. This Article is a fruit of such a discipline. The inspiration will be unquestionable. Reviewing the notes at the end of the month or the year is rewarding. That's how we can avoid being "forgetful hearers" (Js 1:25). The pedestrians who trample the seeds may be compared to the distracting human voices I hear after my Bible meditation, if I do not note down the inspired thoughts. Jesus compared the "birds of the air" to the "devil." He said, "The devil comes and takes away the Word out of their hearts" (Lk 8:5,12). In Matthew's Gospel He said, "The wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown" (Mt 13:19). See how cautious we need to be! The Psalmist calls "memorizing" of God's Word as "hiding" it in our hearts against the tempter (Psa 119:11; Dt 11:18; Mt 4:4,7,10).

(b) Rocky soil (Lk 8:6,13). Those who belong to this type of soil are known for instant and enthusiastic response (Mt 13:20). They receive the Word with "joy." In other words, there was so much of excitement associated with their reception of the message. The message was obviously quite attractive and appealing to them. The plant withered as quickly as it sprang up. Matthew says, there was not enough "soil" to take roots (Mt 13:5,6). Luke says, it lacked "moisture" (Lk 8:6). This speaks of the lack of proper follow-up (1 Cor 3:6). It is conversion without conviction. It is believing without repentance. The most attractive and popular prosperity message does the same to the hearers. The truth that we are called not only to "believe" on Jesus but also to "suffer" for Him is not clearly presented (Phil 1:29). When they face "tribulation, persecution" and "temptation," they wither away and fall away (Mt 13:21; Lk 8:13). Those of us with a pulpit ministry should

be extremely cautious lest we preach to people what they “want” instead of what they “need.” We will be responsible for their backsliding because of the false hope we give them. Jesus said, “Take heed *how* you *hear!*” The corollary can be, “Take heed *what* you *preach!*”

(c) Thorny soil (Lk 8:7,14). These people get “choked” with “worldly anxieties, riches and pleasures of life” (Mt 13:22; Lk 8:14). The plant does not die. It stays green but is unfruitful. Those of this type just remain alive but they don’t grow to maturity (2 Pet 1:5-8). They are overoccupied with the things of the world rather than the concerns of the Kingdom of God. This is what Jesus warned against in His Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6:24-34). Overanxiety over our material and physical needs amounts to serving two masters (v24). Money-mindedness and spirituality normally do not get along well (1 Tim 6:6-11). A fruitless Christian is a self-contradiction (Jn 15:16). Fruitless but leafy trees are deceptive which come under God’s fury (Mt 21:19; Heb 6:7,8). Fruitfulness means reproduction as fruits contain seeds.

(d) Good soil (Lk 8:8a,15). Matthew says “hundredfold, sixtyfold and thirtyfold” (Mt 13:8,23). Luke says just “hundredfold” (Lk 8:8a). One begins with “hundredfold,” the other mentions only “hundredfold!” What an expectation! The secrets of good harvest are “understanding ... noble and good heart ... and patience” (Mt 13:23; Lk 8:15). The stress is against “instant” mentality. This is a hard truth we all need to learn in this world of instant everything and quick results. Heaven does not operate on computers. God is never in haste. Being addicted to modern technology, we need to unlearn a lot while dealing with spiritual matters. I do not deny how digital facilities have enhanced Biblical research. But I’m definitely against googling for a Sunday sermon on Saturday evening without waiting on God at least for a week for His Word.

This Parable of the Sower has lessons both for the preachers and the hearers as we have seen in the above paragraphs. “The seed is the Word of God” (Lk 8:11). Good seed will produce good crop. If the seed is defective, we cannot expect full-sheaved harvest. Beware of preaching the adulterated Gospel (2 Cor 2:17) or another Gospel (11:4). Preach the “Word,” not stories (2 Tim 4:2-4). The “Gospel” is the power of God unto salvation for the civilized and the uncivilized, for the wise and the unwise, for the Cambridge scholar and the tribal hunter (Rom 1:14,16). Philosophies don’t save anyone (Col 2:8). What’s the use of sowing intellectual pearls on the soil of men’s hearts? Will any plant grow? There’s “life” in the Gospel seed only (Js 1:21). It’s the living Word of God.

3) Mark 4:23 A SHINING LIFE

“If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!”

Jesus was speaking about setting a lit lamp on the lampstand and not under a basket or a bed (v21). He made a similar statement in His Sermon on the Mount: Mt 5:14-16, “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to those who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify Your Father in heaven.” So the call here is for a Shining Life.

Jesus is the true Light and we who have believed on Him have received light from Him (Jn1:9). Just like John the Baptist we are called to bear witness of that Light in order

that people might believe on Jesus (vv6-8). Basically every man and woman is in spiritual darkness. This darkness is driven away only when one turns to Christ (vv4,5). When Jesus moved from Nazareth His native town to Naphtali, it was in order that the people who were sitting in “darkness” might see the “great light” dawning on them (Mt 4:13-16). This is why Apostle Paul called believers as “children of light” (Eph 5:8; 1 Thess 5:5). The ungodly works are called the “works of darkness” (Rom 13:12; Eph 5:11).

A shining life is one of witnessing through lips and life, through words and works, and through talk and walk. It is not either or but both. One complements the other. You must have heard some Christians say, “Let people come to Christ just by seeing our lives.” This is a wrong concept and totally unbiblical. No one can be saved by seeing what I do; they must hear what Jesus has done. That’s the Gospel: “Jesus came; Jesus died for our sins; Jesus rose again” (1 Cor 15:1-4). A person gets saved when he hears this message, believes it in his heart and confesses it with his mouth (Rom 10:8-10). Faith comes by “hearing” the Word of God, not just by seeing the moral life of a Christian (vv15-17). When men see the good life of Christians, it becomes easier for them to believe the message they proclaim. That’s what Jesus meant in Matthew 5:16. When the manner of our life influences our non-Christian neighbours, their interest in the Gospel is aroused in a general sense. We must not forget that there are people with exemplary conduct and exceptional character among the adherents of other religions also. On the other hand, when they notice flaws among Christians, they magnify it. It is with this in mind Peter wrote to those Christians scattered everywhere, “Have your conduct honourable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation” (1 Pet 2:12).

The “Gospel” is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes (Rom 1:16). Following this statement, Paul mentions two groups of people to whom he is obliged to preach the Gospel: “The Jew first and also the Greek” (v16b). The Jews were worshippers of Jehovah and they are comparable to the “nominal Christians” of today. The Greeks represent “non-Christians.” Each born-again Christian must personally involve himself or herself in soulwinning and evangelism. It is not an option but an obligation. We are “debtors” to both the groups mentioned above (v14). No pain should be spared in this endeavour. Paul says, “As much as is in me, I am ready to preach the Gospel” (v15). He goes to the extent of saying, “Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel” (1 Cor 9:16). It is said that Bishop V. S. Azariah (1874-1945), the Founder of Indian Missionary Society (IMS) and National Missionary Society (NMS), would urge his congregational members to keep their hands on their heads and shout the above text aloud!

The Government may ban open-air evangelism, evangelistic crusades and the like. But who can stop person-to-person sharing of the Gospel? It was Friendship Evangelism which brought new souls into the early Church “daily” (Acts 2:47). In the numerous Missionary Conventions I addressed across the country, I used to tell the Pastors, “Lock down the Churches for one month; when you reopen them, no entry for any member of your congregation unless he or she brings along at least one non-Christian he or she had won during the 30-day closure!” Our Churches are shut down due to the pandemic for over three months now. How many Pastors are encouraging their members during their Online Services to do this? Here lies our failure. How much time each Christian spends daily over

the phone with his or her non-Christian contacts! Uncertainty and fear have gripped every heart. If this is not the appropriate time to share the Gospel, which would be? If not now, when? Dear Christian, if not you, who?

Jesus said that the lamp should not be kept under a “basket” or a “bed” (Mk 4:21). These are domestic items. In the parallel passage in Matthew, He spoke about giving light to all who are in the “house” (Mt 5:15). This emphasizes our first responsibility, which is being a witness in our own family. Preaching in a street-corner or from a pulpit is much easier than shining at home. Let each of us accept this challenge and do our best. It would not have been easy for a 600-year old Noah to convince a married son like Ham to enter the ark, and to manage the three sons and daughters-in-law for one full year inside the ark with no outing! Total lockdown! (Gen 5:32; 6:10,18; 7:6,7; 8:13; 9:22). God expects us to do our best and leave the rest into His hands. My advice to preacher friends: “Under God, sacrifice neither the family for ministry nor the ministry for family. May God give you the grace and wisdom to balance both!” Besides being a channel of blessing to our family, we are to influence our “city” and ultimately the “world” (Mt 5:14,15). This is not to be done one after the other but simultaneously. Jesus before His ascension did not tell His disciples to be witnesses “first” in Jerusalem and “then” in Judea, Samaria and the whole world. Rather He said “both” in Jerusalem and Judea, Samaria and the world (Acts 1:8 KJV). If the European and Western Missionaries had waited until their countries were totally evangelised, no other nation including India would have received so much of the Gospel blessing through them.

We cannot but think of John the Baptist when we talk about a shining life. About him Jesus testified, “He bore witness to the truth ... He was a burning and shining lamp” (Jn 5:33b,35a). Our problem is that we desire to shine for Jesus but we are not ready to burn out for Him! We want to be like electric bulbs; but God is looking for candles which melt away in the process of giving light. Yes, Jesus will increase only if we decrease (3:30). Maybe you are not burning, but only smoking. Here’s God’s Word for you: “Jesus will not extinguish a smoking flax” (Isa 42:3). Kneel down before Him with a broken heart and contrite spirit. He will revive you with His very presence and you will shine again like the sun for the Son of God (Isa 57:15; Psa 67:1,2). The promise of Daniel 12:3 is for you to claim: “Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever!” Superstars!

4) Luke 14:35b **MAINTAINING FERVENCY**

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

Jesus made this articulate statement while talking about “Carrying the Cross” and “counting the cost” (Lk 14:25-35). He concluded this teaching with the example of salt losing its saltiness (vv34,35). At the end He says, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (v35c). So the call here is for Maintaining Fervency till the end.

Jesus called many individuals to follow Him beginning with Peter and Andrew (Mt 4:18). But He never enticed anyone making attractive offers. Even in this instance He gave them a job, an assignment, a responsibility: “I will make you fishers of men” (v19). In other words, He did not promise them, “I will bless you!” Rather He told them, “I will make you a blessing!” This is where the modern concept of discipleship has gone all wrong. In our

passage under meditation, even Lk 14:25-35, Jesus says thrice, "... he cannot be My disciple" (vv26,27,33). Do we think that Jesus was negative? No, He was positively positive! He didn't want to sugarcoat His conditions. It was not cotton-candy to attract playing children from streets. It was a call for costly discipleship. Of the four Gospel writers, Luke alone records this clause. As a companion to Paul in missionary journeys, he knew that the game was tough. It was not for dainty darlings but for daring disciples! The first thing God gave man was an assignment, whereas the first thing Satan offered to man was an attraction (Gen 1:28; 2:15; 3:4,5). This trend has reached the peak in today's world of advertisements.

In the passage under study, Jesus mentioned three conditions for being His disciples. The setting is interesting. He said these things to the "great multitudes" who went with Him (Lk 14:25). Our God is known for reduction! Of the 30,00,000 who exited Egypt, only two entered Canaan. Gideon's 32,000 was reduced to 300 (Judg 7:2-6). From the multitudes who followed Jesus, only 120 made it to the upper room (Acts 1:15). Many are called, but few are chosen. After listening to the three conditions of discipleship set forth by Jesus one after the other, I'm sure the majority left Him. Such instances were not rare in His teaching ministry (Jn 6:60,66). Today we use the title "believers" more than "disciples." But in the early Church, as we see in the Book of Acts, the Jesus' followers were called "disciples" more often than "believers." I counted it to be just 10:1! It's said, "If a man is saved in Russia, he is a martyr; if in Korea a missionary; if in India just a believer!" Let's look at the three conditions Jesus put forth in this passage for discipleship —

(a) Family ties: "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple" (Lk 14:26). Peter and Andrew left their "nets" (Mt 4:20). James and John left their "boat" and their "father" (v22). These were the first recruits of disciples. Matthew left his "tax office and all" (Mt 9:9; Lk 5:27,28). Of course these men were called to serve Jesus fulltime. Not every Christian is called so. But the condition Jesus laid was not for fulltime ministry but for "discipleship." The lesson is clear. It is first God and then family. Our commitment to God supercedes our obligations to the family. Even children are to obey their parents "in the Lord" (Eph 6:1).

Those not trained in giving priority to God over their family affairs would find it difficult to obey Him if He calls them to serve Him fulltime. There's a slump in the number of missionary applicants. Even among them we don't find many well-educated youngsters. The main reason is they are stopped by their parents and relatives. When a medical graduate desires to go where there's no doctor, his parents try to set for him a clinic in his native place itself! Or they get him married to a girl with no missionary vision! This is where Christ's sword of separation must do its work. Read the forthright word of Jesus in Matthew 10:34-37. Several white missionaries did not bring their families to India because of unbearable heat and prevalent diseases like malaria. This is the story of many who dared to go to countries like Africa. Some of them never returned home! It is because of their sacrificial obedience to God's call we are Christians today. Are we not blessed just to bless others? (Gen 12:1-3). Should we let men and women die without hearing the Gospel? Dear young men and young women, leave Nazareth (and Nagercoil) for Naphtali to save those sitting in the "region and shadow of death" (Mt 4:13-16).

(b) Crossbearing: “Whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple” (Lk 14:27). Most of us have forgotten the commitment we made at the baptismal tank, singing,

I have decided to follow Jesus; No turning back, no turning back!

The Cross before me, the world behind me; No turning back, no turning back!

We are called to carry not the “Cross of Christ” but “our cross.” Jesus made it very specific all through (Mt 10:38; 16:24; Mk 8:34; 10:21; Lk 9:23; 14:27). What Simon the blackman was compelled to bear was just an one-time historical event (Mt 27:32). May be he was a slave. Our crosses are too numerous to enumerate. Let’s look at the commonest among them, illustrating them from the life of Jesus and that of Paul —

- The Cross of Misunderstanding cannot be avoided by any truthful Christian. Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn 2:19). He was actually referring to the temple of His body, but the Jews thought He spoke about the Temple in Jerusalem (vv20,21). This came both as a charge against Him and a challenge (Mt 26:60,61; 27:40). When He told His disciples to beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, they thought He was hinting at them for not bringing bread (Mt 16:6,7). But what He meant was the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees (v12). Apostle Paul was extremely cautious not to burden or take advantage of anyone. But he was accused that he was “cunning” and he caught believers with “guile!” (2 Cor 12:16,17).

- Hardly any Servant of God has escaped the Cross of Scandal. The virgin birth of Jesus was a widespread scandal (Jn 8:41). I’m sure that was a gossip in the region for many many years. Though Paul and his associates “wronged no one, corrupted no one, or defrauded no one,” there were “evil reports” about them. But they treated “honour” and “dishonour” alike (2 Cor 7:2; 6:8). Bouquets and brickbats were the same for them! Folks are known for singing “Hosannah” on Sunday but shouting, “Crucify Him!” on Friday!

- The Cross of Rejection is a heavy one to bear. The proverb from Psalm 118:22 was fulfilled perfectly in Jesus. He Himself quoted it after narrating the Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers who killed not only the servants but also the son of the landowner. “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone” (Mt 21:42). As per Isaiah’s prophecy, Jesus was “rejected by men” (Isa 53:3). People cried out before Pilate when he was examining Him, “Away with this man!” (Lk 23:18). Listen to Paul’s testimony concerning this cross of rejection: “We are treated like the world’s garbage, like everybody’s trash — right up to the present moment” (1 Cor 4:13). No man is fully accepted until he is totally rejected. Unwanted will one day become wanted!

- Then comes the Cross of Physical Weakness. Jesus was crucified in “weakness” (2 Cor 13:4). This speaks of physical weakness, agony and pain. Otherwise when was Jesus weak spiritually? Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians, “I was with you in weakness” (1 Cor 2:3). While he ministered to those in Galatia, he had “physical infirmity” (Gal 4:13). He called it “trial in the flesh” (v14). Who among us is 100% healthy and strong? When we cry unto God, He removes some of our thorns, not all (2 Cor 12:7-10).

- The Cross of Loneliness will be killing. When Jesus wanted His disciples most, they slept off (Mt 26:40). See how pathetic His question was: “What, could you not watch with Me one hour?” When the soldiers arrested Him, “all the disciples forsook Him and fled”

(v56). One “young” disciple left the cloth he had on his body and fled away naked! (Mk 14:51,52). Paul had a similar experience: “At my first defence no one stood with me, but all forsook me” (2 Tim 4:16). There are times when in spite of so many people around us and for us we would feel lonely. This is true of many in leadership. Haunted by sleeplessness, they confess, “I lie awake, and am like a sparrow alone on the housetop” (Psa 102:7). The lot of widows needs no mention.

(c) Forsaking all: Thirdly, Jesus states the uncompromising condition of discipleship in verse 33 of the chapter we are meditating (Lk 14). “Whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.” He illustrates it by two examples: One is about building a tower and the other is about battling against a troop (vv28-30, 31-32). He stresses the need to “count the cost.” Enthusiasm alone is not sufficient in venturing into God’s work. Half-done jobs are all around us. Counting the cost does not mean that we should not step out for God without sufficient details and resources. What’s the role of faith then? Abraham did not know where he was going and what was in store for him (Heb 11:8). Counting the cost means my readiness to forsake anything I have in order to accomplish the task God assigns to me (Lk 14:33). It is my willingness to go through any hardship or suffering until I finish the work He gives me. I may have to sustain so many earthly losses, but I must not give up, keeping my eyes on the eternal rewards (Heb 11:9). The enemy would fight tooth and nail against me. I should decide once and for all that I would not depend on my own skill or stamina, but be strengthened in the Lord and in the power of His might (Eph 6:10-12). I should never lay down the spiritual weapons but stay alert in prayer (vv13-18). Conflicts would always be there but I must keep moving forward. No failure is final and so I must never give up. I will hold on to God’s infallible assurance that He would be with me when I pass through the floods and walk through the fire (Isa 43:2; Psa 93:3,4).

Jesus concludes this brief discourse with the example of salt (Lk 14:34,35). Once the salt loses its saltiness, it is spread on roads to prevent vegetation growth. This means losing the original purpose of one’s calling. We must maintain fervency till the end in the three areas expounded in the above paragraphs: (a) Do not allow any filial attachment disturb your calling (v26); (b) Do not throw away the crosses God has laid on you (v27); (c) Do not hesitate to sustain any loss for the furtherance of the Kingdom of God (v33). God the Father is *with* you, God the Son is *for* you, and God the Holy Spirit is *in* you, all the three of them to help you maintain fervency till you finish your race. Praise Him!

5) Matthew 11:15 **ENDTIME MINISTRY**

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

Jesus made this challenging statement with reference to John the Baptist and his ministry. John was the forerunner for the First Coming of Christ. We as the Church are called to be the Forerunners for His Second Coming. Here therefore is a call to all of us to involve in the Endtime Ministry with discernment. To understand the entire context, read Matthew 11:2-19 and its parallel passage, Lk 7:18-35.

Because John rebuked Herod for his unlawful relationship with his brother Philip’s wife, he was imprisoned (Mt 14:3,4; Lk 3:19,20). He postponed killing him for fear of the multitudes who had counted him as a prophet (Mt 14:5). Like Joseph of old, John was

imprisoned due to someone else's sin. This happens simply too often. Some of my friends who regularly go for prison ministry tell me, there are simply too many innocent victims. Yes, there are more murderers, thieves and adulterers outside the prison than inside. Jesus had a soft heart for prisoners. Visiting them means visiting Him (Mt 25:36c). We have an epistolary exhortation: "Remember the prisoners as if chained with them, and those who are mistreated, since you yourselves are in the body also" (Heb 13:3). Beloved, do join the prison ministerial teams whenever possible, and support them in whatever way you can. You will earn God's smile (Prov 24:11,12).

Baptist John was quite confused behind the bars. "I prepared the pulpit for Jesus, but I have landed in prison. He said that He was anointed 'to preach deliverance to the captives and to set at liberty those who are oppressed' (Lk 4:18). If this is the Messianic Manifesto, I wonder what's happening to me!" He sent two of his disciples to Jesus to ask Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" (Mt 11:2,3). It was after hearing about the works of Christ, this question came up in his mind (v2)! We are not strangers to such periods of darkness. These are our thoughts: "I introduce Christ to so many people and make them His followers (Jn 1:36,37). I lead folks to genuine repentance and baptize them (Mt 3:2,5,6). I teach them about the baptism with the Holy Spirit (v11). I give so much of exhortation to people to be fruitful in their lives (Lk 3:18). I keep declaring the counsel of God to this generation, even though opposed by certain religious leaders (7:30). I exalt Christ only, and hide myself as much as I can (Jn 3:30). I present Him as the Heavenly Bridegroom and thus prepare people for His Second Coming (v29). What more can I do? Why then this dungeon experience for me?"

Dear friend, you are not the first one in human history or Church history to go through such a puzzling and perplexing situation. This is the price to be paid by anyone who desires to go higher and higher in Christian life and work. Jesus' testimony about John was that he was "more than a prophet" and "greatest among prophets" (Mt 11:9,11). Jesus confirmed that he was the "Elijah to come" as prophesied by prophet Malachi (v14; Mal 4:5,6). Here's the picture of the endtime prophetic ministry of the Church. The entire Church is called to be a prophetic community. This is the prophecy of Joel for the "last days" (Acts 2:16-18). "Sons, daughters, menservants, maidservants" and all shall prophesy! No age or sex or class distinction whatsoever! Then you ask, "How about the question raised by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:29, 'Are all prophets?'" The obvious answer is, No. Here Paul was dealing with ministerial gifts in the Church, especially for those in leadership (v28). Do all have gifts of healing? No! But all believers can pray for one another for healing, and God would heal and raise up the sick (Js 5:16). So many signs will follow those who believe (Mk 16:16-18). Any believer can cast out demons in the Name of Christ. For a broader treatment of this subject, read my 100-page book, *Prophet-Priest-King*.

Dear preacher friend, as you prepare your sermons, wait sufficiently in the presence of God seeking His fresh anointing so you may be prophetic on the pulpit. Prophetic preaching will be punching, penetrating and persuasive. This is what Jesus meant when He said, "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of Heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it" (Mt 11:12). In this endtime ministry, there is no big scope for *foretelling*. What's there to foretell after we have got the Book of Revelation with an Amen? Today's need is for *forthtelling* the hard Biblical truths without fear or

favour. Tell the rich to give away 50% to the poor; warn the Government officials against corruption; admonish the policemen not to misuse their authority; and so on (Lk 3:10-14). The Word of God is a sword, not a butter knife (Eph 6:17)! It cuts open the false coverings of the hearers and make them stand naked before God's sight (Heb 4:12,13). I seek prophetic anointing whenever I sit to write also. The taste of the pudding is in the eating. The spiritually-minded will know the difference between what comes from the head and what pours out through the heart (1 Cor 2:10-14). It is the prophetic ministry that will bring back order to the families, the Churches and the communities (Lk 1:17; Mal 4:5,6). If our sermons are prophetic, even "dry bones" will become a "dynamic battalion" (Ezek 37:1-10).

Only the pseudo-prophets and the pillow-prophets would become popular (Ezek 13:1-9). The world will never like those who carry burning messages from God's altar. It would call John a "demoniac" and Jesus a "drunkard" (Mt 11:18,19). The virgin Church will never become popular in this "adulterous and sinful generation" which will always be seeking sensational signs (Mt 12:39; 16:4; Mk 8:38). That's why the Birthday message of the Church was, "Be saved from this crooked generation" (Acts 2:40). Beloved, don't seek popularity, but endeavour to influence and impact the society. Shun the devil's majority and join God's minority. It is the Little Flock to which the Father God desires to give the Kingdom (Lk 12:32). If you try to become a "friend of the world" through compromise, you would become an "enemy of God" (Js 4:4). There's no middle ground. *"He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"*

6) Matthew 13:43b WATCHFULNESS IN ENDTIMES

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

Jesus made this oft-repeated terse statement at the end of the Parable of the Tares (Mt 13:24-30,36-43). This is the second of the seven Parables Jesus put forth in Matthew 13 to explain the Kingdom of Heaven. The first one was the Parable of the Sower which we studied second in this Series. Only these two Parables end with the statement, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" The Parable of Tares, which we consider now, has specific reference to the "end of this age" (Mt 13:39,40). Here therefore is a call to Watchfulness in Endtimes.

It was "while men slept" the enemy sowed tares among the wheat (Mt 13:25). Here's a prediction of endtime apostasy. The very first sign of endtimes that Jesus mentioned was deception through false prophets (24:4,5,11). Apostle Paul specifically warned the leaders of the Ephesian Church about this in his farewell address: Acts 20:29-31, "After my departure ravenous wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch!" Yes, deceptive doctrines either enter from outside or spring up from within. The second one is more dangerous than the first. One or two individuals would have been corrupted by listening to a popular preacher who is either totally wrong or who teaches half truth. They become the leaven of the Pharisees affecting the whole lump. Extreme cautiousness by systematic teaching of sound doctrine by the Pastors is the only way to safeguard the flock (2 Tim 4:2-4; Tit 2:1). Repeating only the "Fear not" sermons, Sunday after Sunday, is sure to open the floodgates of false doctrines. Where

are the messages on the “terror of the Lord?” (2 Cor 5:11). Do not keep your congregational members in the milkstage too long. Let them start chewing meat. Only then they would grow in the art of discernment (Heb 5:12-14).

In the Parable the labourers asked the owner whether they could immediately pluck out the tares. But he would have them grow along with the wheat until the final harvest when the harvesters would first gather the tares and burn them (Mt 13:28-30). Jesus compared the tares to the “sons of the wicked one” (v38). No Christian congregation is made up of only believers. There are nominal Christians or nominal believers in every Church. They would have been baptized but never born again. They are not Isaacs but Ishmaels. Even in the 12-member cabinet of Jesus, there was a “son of perdition” (Jn 17:12). A “mixed multitude” will always be there among the chosen people of God (Num 11:4). “Sheep” and “goats” would stay mixed (Mt 25:32). Even wolves may be Church members in sheep’s clothing (7:15). The Pergamos Church had followers of Balaam (Rev 2:14). The Thyatira Church had women like Jezebel (v20). The nominals outnumber real Christians in some Churches. This condition cannot totally be changed now, but the responsibility on the Church leadership is huge. They must ensure that each member comes into a living relationship with Christ through genuine repentance and wholehearted faith. Premature babies will develop complications.

After Jesus narrated this Parable of the Tares and two other Parables, His disciples came to Him when He was in the house, after He sent away the multitudes, and asked Him, “Explain to us the Parable of the Tares of the Field” (Mt 13:36). Yes, everytime we open the Bible, we must pray, “Open my eyes, O Lord, that I may see wondrous things from Your Law” (Psa 119:18). See how many times the Psalmist prays for “understanding” God’s Word (Psa 119:34,73,125,144,169). Here’s the need for “sustained” meditation of the Bible. We have forgotten this art in this fast-food era. Only those who give themselves to painstaking study of the Scriptures can dig out the “hidden treasures” (Prov 2:4,5). As I often use to say, “You can find only pebbles on the shore; but if you want pearls, you must go for deep-sea diving!” Use Study Bibles and Bible Commentaries freely. My 36-page booklet, “*Unless someone guides me,*” will help you choose safe study aids.

7) Revelation 2 & 3 REPENTANCE & RESTORATION

“He who has an ear, let him hear!” (Rev 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22).

So far Jesus made this quaint statement while addressing the general audience or His disciples, as we have seen in the six references made in this Article. Now He is specifically speaking to the Church(es). The first six statements were made by Him while He was on earth. This set of seven was spoken by Him from Heaven! Whether on earth or from Heaven, He uses the same words. In Revelation 2 & 3, He repeats this statement seven times! That tells us its importance and significance. His message to each of the seven Churches differs from the other. But basically its a call for Repentance and Restoration. The word “repent” occurs six times in these seven letters (2:5,16,21,22; 3:3,19). In the Gospels, Jesus said “ears,” but now here in Revelation, it is “ear!” As a staunch believer in the verbal inspiration of the Bible, I would interpret this difference to mean more specificity. In this section, I would deduce a few overall lessons for our practical Church life —

(a) These seven Churches, namely Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea, represent the entire Church age from the Descent of the Holy Spirit to the Descent of Jesus Christ from Heaven. We notice an obvious downward trend. During the period of the first Church (Ephesus), we see Christ “in the midst” of the seven golden lampstands (Rev 2:1). As we come to the last Church (Laodicea), we see Him outside “at the door” (3:20). In the first period, He was “walking” in the midst of the Churches, which means He was actively at work with full liberty. But now He is simply “waiting” outside! The Church doesn’t seem to miss its “Lord”. It is as busy as ever with its aggressive programmes and “wealthy” projects, all without the fire of the Spirit (vv16,17). In revival preaching, we are normally challenged, “Where are we?” But I think the right question is, “Where is Christ?”

(b) These seven Churches are also representative of all Churches today. Five out of seven were sternly rebuked; only two were strongly commended. These are the Church in Smyrna and the one in Philadelphia. Both are evangelistic and missionary-minded Churches (Rev 2:9,10; 3:7,8). Not five but all the ten virgins slept off (Mt 25:5). Who can deny that most of our Churches are sleeping? Sleeping or slumbering or even snoring! The “midnight cry” and the “trimming of the lamps” speak of the endtime Revival (vv6,7). The good news is that Christ has not given up on any Church or written off any denomination — Evangelical or Liberal, Pentecostal or non-Pentecostal! He “loves” even the Laodicean Church! That’s the only Church to which He writes, “As many as I love, I rebuke and discipline” (Rev 3:19). Some of my fundamentalist and conservative friends may charge me of compromising. But I stand on the “solid foundation of God” which has this “seal:” “The Lord knows those who are His,” and “Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity” (2 Tim 2:19). In God’s “great house” there are not only gold and silver vessels but also wooden and clay vessels, some for the dining table and others for the kitchen use (v20). What’s important is that they must be washed and clean for use (v21). Gold vessels cannot be used for cooking; and clay pots are not so fitting for serving on the dining table.

(c) The call to each Church is for “overcoming.” This means, all Churches have failures, in different areas of course! Jesus calls “individuals” to overcome. He repeatedly says, “He who overcomes ...” The health of each Church depends ultimately on its individual members. Christ who is knocking at the door expects “anyone” to open the door (Rev 3:20). Is not the strength of a chain gauged by its weakest link? Because of a few members who had party spirit, Apostle Paul called the entire Corinthian Church “carnal” (1 Cor 3:1-4). The spiritually weakest members need special attention and greater care (12:23-25). There’s no unimportant member in the Body of Christ. What a revolution this understanding would bring in our Church life!

(d) The message to each Church is from Jesus, but the voice is that of the Holy Spirit (See Rev 2:1&7; 8&11; 12&17; etc.). God the Father is in Heaven. God the Son is seated in Heaven at the Father’s right hand. God the Holy Spirit is the One on earth today in all His Personality. He is the One preparing the Church as the Bride for Jesus the Heavenly Bridegroom. We can call Genesis to Malachi as the Dispensation of the Father, Matthew to John as the Dispensation of the Son, and Acts to Revelation as the Dispensation of the Spirit. That’s why the last page of the Bible ends with “the Spirit and the Bride” (Rev 22:17). As such, even though the Holy Spirit is mentioned third in the Trinitarian Godhead,

He must not be treated as a “third” person! He is coequal with the Father and the Son. Our life and ministry must be God-honouring, Christ-centred and Spirit-guided. Read my 320-page book, *Bible Power*, for a balanced treatment of this subject.

(e) The reward promised to overcomers in each of the seven Churches are for the overcomers of all the Churches: Tree of Life, No Second Death, Hidden Manna, Rule over Nations, White Garments, New Name and Heavenly Throne! Dear Christian, cheer up! Get up! Run!

(f) The message to each of the seven Churches is different from the other. But have you noticed the common message to all the Churches? “Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last!” (Rev 1:17). Be optimistic! Be confident that “He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the Day of Jesus Christ!” (Phil 1:6).

Conclusion

“*He who has ears to hear, let him hear!*” Jesus has made this precise statement thirteen times in the Bible.

Jesus calls us to *Personal Purity*. Jesus calls us to *Proper Response to God’s Word*. Jesus calls us to a *Shining Life*. Jesus calls us for *Maintaining Fervency*. Jesus calls us to involve in the *Endtime Ministry*. Jesus calls us to *Watchfulness in Endtimes*. Jesus calls us for *Repentance and Restoration*. If we hear His voice today, let’s not harden our hearts!

Besides personal study, you may use this Article in your Bible Study Groups or Prayer Fellowships, taking one point per sitting. I preached it as a 2-hour sermon, English-Kannada, on 26 Jan 2020 in a Sunday Service to a 3000-member congregation in Hubli, pastored by my friend Mr. A. Michael Achary, an ex-Missionary of the Blessing Youth Mission. Preachers can break it into seven Sermons. This is God’s voice for the day.