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DECEPTION FROM UNEXPECTED QUARTERS

Today's text: Joshua 9: 1-27; Matt. 7: 15-20

Extracts:

1. **“And when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done unto Jericho and Ai, they did work wilily, and went and made as if they had been ambassadors, and took old sacks upon their asses, and wine bottles, old, and rent, and bound up; ... and they went to Joshua unto the camp at Gilgal, and said unto him, and to the men of Israel, We be come from a far country: now therefore make ye a league with us.... And Joshua made peace with them, and made a league with them, to let them live: and the princes of the congregation swore unto them. And it came to pass at the end of three days after they had made a league with them, that they heard that they were their neighbours, and that they dwelt among them” [Josh. 9: 3-4, 6, 15-16].**
2. **“Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits” [Matt. 7: 15-16(a)].**

One of the first lessons they teach students at journalism school is what constitutes news. Students are taught that when a dog bites a man, it is not news because that is the normal expectation. However, if a man were to bite a dog, that would be big news because that is unexpected. A deception is anything that lures us to reject the truth or to accept error. Believers may not have a great deal of problems dealing with deception from expected quarters. It is rare for a known enemy to be able to deceive us because, as the Scriptures put it, you cannot set a trap for a bird that is watching you [Prov. 1: 17]. For example, believers may be able to resist deception from Moslems or Hindus or other non-believers. However, we may find it difficult to fight the one that comes from close range: family, friends and confidants, neighbours and colleagues, and place of worship. It hardly strikes us that “Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light” and his ministers into “ministers of righteousness” [2 Cor. 11: 14-15]. Jesus has warned us that in the last days false prophets and false Christs shall emerge and work signs and wonders such that “if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect” [Matt. 24:24].

In today's lesson, we shall study the deception played on Joshua and the people of Israel by their neighbours, the Gibeonites, and learn some techniques of dealing with deception from unexpected quarters.

1. Background

Joshua and his army had now built an awesome reputation among the then inhabitants of the Promised Land. They did not bother to take prisoners! Therefore, as they advanced on the rest of yet-to-be-conquered territory, the inhabitants worked on different strategies. The Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites formed a united front to fight against Joshua and his troop [**Josh. 9:1-2**]. However, the people of Gibeon, a Hivite town, knew from what had happened to Jericho and Ai, that such a direct confrontation would be futile. So, they decided to try deception! They disguised themselves as ambassadors from a far country and proposed a peace agreement with the nation of Israel. Under the terms of the pact, the Gibeonites would serve as servants while Israel would give them protection [**vv. 3-13**].

The elders of Israel met over the matter and accepted the terms and even sealed it with an oath [**vv. 14-15**]. However, three days later, they were shocked to know that far from being ambassadors from a far country, the Gibeonites were actually their neighbours who lived among them! [**v.16**]. Having sworn to let them live, they could not do anything about it. In the process, they compromised the command of God that “of the *cities* of these people, which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, *thou shalt save nothing that breatheth*: but thou shalt utterly destroy them; namely, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, *the Hivites* and the Jebusites; as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee” [**Deut. 20: 16-17**]. Gibeon was a Hivite city.

The Gibeonites used techniques and skills, which those who practise deception also apply to us today. Here are some of them:

a) *Wiles*

They posed as ambassadors from a far country. To give the impression that they had travelled a long distance, they carried old sacks and old stitched wine skins. Both their shoes and garments were old and dirty. They carried dry bread that had grown moulds! [**Josh. 9: 4-6**]. They were properly disguised as not to be discovered.

How many people that you claim to be your friends or colleagues or fellow worshippers do you actually know? Some may be fugitives from justice, having messed up elsewhere. Many may be parading false credentials that you have taken for granted. How can you know their hearts? Yet, they are in a position to influence your actions and conduct!

b) *Feigned humility*

Joshua and his men were at first skeptical and questioned the Gibeonites, “peradventure ye dwell among us, and how shall we make a league with

you?” [v. 7]. Here, the people of Israel were mindful of God’s command on how to go about peace-making: it had to be initiated by Israel, not the other way round [Deut. 20: 10-12]. At any rate, such peace with the Hivites was out of the question because they were among those that God had specifically asked Joshua to completely destroy. However, in continuation of their clever deception, the Gibeonites feigned (i.e., contrived or pretended) humility. They told Joshua, “we are thy servants” [v. 8]. To underline the fact that they came from afar, they added that they had left home with hot fresh bread that had now become mouldy, their wine skins and garments had now succumbed to the wear and tear of long travel. They went on to still offer those provisions to Joshua and his men [vv. 11-13].

How many times have “humble” people deceived us? They do know how to play to the gallery, i.e., to impress onlookers. They show it when the TV cameras are switched on or when their evaluators are watching them. However, as Jesus has warned, they may actually be ravening wolves in sheep’s clothing! [Matt. 7:15].

c) *They prey on your faith*

The easiest way to deceive believers is to ride in through their faith. The Gibeonites told Joshua that they had come from a far country to become servants “because of the name of the Lord thy God: for we have heard of the fame of Him, and all that He did in Egypt” [v.9]. Who can resist that kind of deception?

2. Look out for unexpected quarters!

We all can easily fall prey, just as Joshua and his people did. Therefore, it is important to have a more enlightened idea of those who constitute our “unexpected quarters.” How do we know them? First, they are people that we trust. They have not failed us in the past and we firmly believe that they *will not* fail us this time. Such people can be found everywhere, but we should note the following:

a) *Family*

Parents, spouses, children, uncles and aunts, cousins, etc., are examples of family members. Ordinarily, the family is there for us through thick and thin. That is why the Psalmist says, “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron’s beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; as the dew of Hermon, and as the

dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: *for there the Lord commanded the blessing even life for evermore*” [Ps. 133: 1-3].

However, as the Scriptures also show, our worst enemies could be members of our family [Micah 7:6; Matt. 10:21; Lk 12:53]. Unless family members are also genuine friends, they may not be any better than the enemies that we are running from outside the home. It was Joseph’s brothers who sold him into slavery in Egypt. Yet, they were the same ones who stained his coat with the blood of animals and reported to their father that they suspected that the young man had been killed by wild animals. As Jacob mourned his “dead” son, “all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him” [Gen. 37:35]. Would an outsider do any worse than that?

b) *Friends and confidants*

We choose our friends and confidants whereas family members are imposed on us by birth for “a man that hath friends must shew himself friendly; and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother” [Prov. 18:24]. Therefore, we tend to trust friends more than family, unless, of course, where our best friends are also family members. Some times, because of this trust, we can be deceived for “mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me” [Ps. 41: 9]. Many trusted friends have been known to mislead others into divorce only to turn around to grab their spouses!

A much bigger deception is played on us by our unquestioning reliance on the world system as symbolized by the computer and the Internet and the media. A good number of us believe that whatever the computer says must be right, without realizing that human beings (with varying ulterior motives) are the ones putting out what we find there. It took mostly the television to deaden our resistance to adultery, promiscuity, abortion and homosexuality. Psychics are doing roaring business with deceptive advertising by luring viewers to have “free readings” about their future. Recently, the US Federal Trade Commission had to clamp down on “Miss Cleo” who claimed to be a “renowned psychic.”¹ Two Florida-based companies actually set her up to invite callers to use their 900 telephone numbers for “free readings.” In truth, callers were billed without being told and by the time the scam was discovered, millions of US dollars had been deceptively stolen from innocent people. Even “Miss Cleo” is suspected to be a fake psychic! Can you then imagine how many people in authority over us in worldly matters [politicians, bankers, mentors, colleagues, heroes/heroines, etc] have deceived us into error without our realizing it?

¹ “FTC charges “Miss Cleo” Promoters with Deceptive Advertising, Billing and Collection Practices,” February 14, 2002, <http://www.ftc.gov/opa/2002/02/accessresource.htm>

c) *Fellow believers*

Here lies our greatest threat. You expect that people be into religion/worship for heaven's sake. In reality, many people are there for material or psychological gains. They show signs and wonders but not with the power of the Holy Spirit. Take the case of Simon, the sorcerer, who "used sorcery and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one. To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, this man is the great power of God" [Acts 8: 9-10].

Even for those who may have special gifts from God, such as prophecy, they may be more concerned about their status than about glorifying God. For example, God sent a young prophet to king Jeroboam of the Northern kingdom of Israel to warn him about his conduct in the house of God. The young prophet was specifically told not to eat or drink anything offered him there and not to return by the same way that he had entered the city [1 Kgs 13: 1-13]. The son of an old prophet ran home to tell his father of the young prophet's exploits. The old prophet pursued the departing young prophet and brought him to his house. He offered him food, which the young man turned down on account of God's command that he should neither eat nor drink in that city. The old prophet replied, "I am a prophet also as thou art; and *an angel spake unto me by the word of the Lord* saying, Bring him back with thee into thine house, that he may eat bread and drink water." The Bible adds "But he lied unto him" [v. 18]. Did the young man expect a fellow prophet of the living God to lure him into disobedience? Did he know that the older man was deceiving him? Well, the young prophet ate and drank. For his disobedience, he died, killed by a lion that spared his horse! [vv. 20-24]. The old prophet kept his status intact as the great power of God in that kingdom!

3. Overcoming deception from unexpected quarters

When we fall to deception from unexpected quarters, a number of consequences follow. First, we are forced to compromise our spiritual values. Joshua and his people had to live with the shame of sparing the lives of the Gibeonites that they could easily have defeated. Although Joshua cursed them to become "hewers of wood and drawers of water" for the congregation for life, the Gibeonites would certainly prefer that to defeat and death! [Josh. 9: 27]. The second consequence is an underlying disobedience of the word of God. Perhaps out of love or fear, Adam ate the forbidden fruit offered him by his wife and lost his privileged position with God [Gen. 3:6]. In the earlier example, the young prophet died while his deceiver, the old prophet, lived.

The source of all deception is, of course, Satan. In the words of Paul, "for such are false apostles, *deceitful* workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of

Christ. And no wonder; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore, it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness” [2 Cor. 11: 13-15]. So, we should expect that as we approach end times, the methods of deception are going to become more subtle and the sources much more unexpected. Look at the amount of sexual immorality and corruption being uncovered in many denominations today?

We can overcome deception from unexpected quarters as follows:

a) *Always ask God first*

God is All-knowing. Therefore, He can see through any deception even before it is conceived. In today’s lesson, we are told, “And the men took of their victuals, and *asked not counsel at the mouth of the Lord*” [Josh. 9: 14]. Joshua failed in Ai because he did not ask God first. He has failed here again for the same reason. The lesson that it teaches us is that we must never consider anything too trivial to ask the Lord’s position on because He will always reward those who diligently seek Him [Heb. 11:6].

b) *Look at fruits, not gifts or talents*

A good soccer coach will train his defenders to always focus on the ball rather than on the mesmerizing moves of attackers. In like manner, it is the spiritual character rather than the “good manners” of people that we should focus upon. Good manners are culture-dependent but spiritual character is God-centred. Somebody can prophesy, perform wonders or give wise counsel and still live in sin because God’s gifts and calling “are without repentance” (i.e., not withdrawn) [Rom. 11:29]. If a brilliant child refuses to go to school, God does not withdraw the high intelligence from him/her. That is why Jesus has warned us, “Ye shall know them by their fruits” [Matt. 7:16]. So, watch out for the spiritual fruits of your family and friends, colleagues and heroes, ministers, prayer partners, counselors and fellow worshippers, and you won’t be deceived!

Do not deceive yourself by behaving as if you cannot be deceived. Satan never gives up, neither should you let down your guard.