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© I. Chris Imoisili, E-mail: imoisilic@hotmail.com; imoisilic@gmail.com

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DECEITFUL SERVICE IS SELF-DECEIT!

Today's Text: Jeremiah Chap. 48

Extracts:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel,... “*Cursed is he who does the work of the Lord deceitfully. ... Moreover,*” says the Lord, “*I will cause to cease in Moab, the one who offers sacrifices in the high places and burns incense to his gods (and) the riches they have acquired have perished*” [Jer. 48: 1b, 10a, 35, 36b]

*Ted Haggard was a well-known evangelical preacher.¹ At age 50, he pastored the New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado, USA, with a reported membership of fourteen thousand people. He was the president of the National Association of Evangelicals, which boasts a membership of 30-million people. In 2005, **Time** magazine listed him as one of the top 25 most influential evangelicals in America, having been credited with rallying evangelicals behind President Bush during the 2004 elections. He was apparently a happily married minister of God with five children. He was openly opposed to same-sex marriage, and had strongly condemned homosexuality in his speeches and writings. In the mid-term elections held on 7 November 2006, several states voted on propositions to ban same-sex marriage. Haggard was in the forefront among evangelicals campaigning for a ban vote. But on November 1, 2006, a homosexual, Mike Jones, alleged that Haggard had paid for sex with him on an almost monthly basis over the previous three years. After some hesitation, Haggard admitted his guilt and resigned all his church positions in disgrace.*

On why he came out after so long to expose the minister, Jones said, “I had to expose the hypocrisy. He is in the position of influence of millions of followers, and he’s preaching against gay marriage. But behind everybody’s back (he’s) doing what he’s preached against.” Unfortunately, Haggard is not unique. In our homes, churches, offices, schools or businesses, not to talk of government, there are more hypocrites than sincere people. Yet, from today’s lesson, God Himself has said, “Cursed is he who does the work of the Lord deceitfully” [Jer. 48: 10] How do people serve God deceitfully? What is the price of such a lifestyle? How can we deal with the problem? Those and more are the issues that we shall treat in today’s lesson.

¹ Taken from “Ted Taggard,” *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ted_Haggard

1. Who is a deceiver?

To deceive is to delude or mislead. It means to put up a favourable public front that belies a sordid hidden life. Since people see more of our public than private life, they define our character by our public image. Then, one day, our private lives are exposed through some scandal or media leak. Then, people see a different picture and realize that they have been deceived all along. The damage is devastating on both sides. The deceiver loses face and fame and the deceived is disoriented, not knowing who to trust again.

There is another kind of deceiver. Some persons are already irredeemably bad but they go out in the disguise of good persons to tempt good people to fall. Satan is in this category. He is a fallen angel but “he transforms himself into an angel of light.” His ministers, such as ‘false apostles (and) *deceitful workers*’ also transform “themselves into apostles of Christ” and “ministers of righteousness whose end will be according to their works” [1 Cor. 11: 13-15]. So, just as we can be deceived, we can also deceive others. God punishes both.

2. What constitutes deceitful service?

The whole duty of man is to “fear God and keep His commandments” [Eccl. 12: 13]. But we know that, from the days of Adam, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” [Rom. 3: 23]. Therefore, we are all *prone* to deceive or be deceived! So, let no one look at this subject as if it addresses a distant other. It is talking about you and I. It is about *the spiritual gap between our public piety and true service from God’s perspective*. Let us examine a few of the ways in which we serve God deceitfully:

a) *When we do what God has not called us to do*

Jesus told His disciples, “the harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore, *pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest*” [Matt. 9: 37-38]. On another occasion, He reminded them, “You did not choose Me, but *I chose you* and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit” [Jn 15: 16]. So, it is God who chooses in what way we can serve Him. To do otherwise is to serve Him deceitfully.

There are many lines of service in the Lord’s vineyard. Some people are called to be *apostles* or *prophets* or *evangelists* or *pastors* or *teachers*. Collectively, all the ministries are “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry (and) for the edifying of the body of Christ” [Eph. 4: 11- 12]. However, what we see in our churches today are people who have made themselves ministers without any clear evidence of God’s calling. Some people call themselves prophets when all they see are mirages and nightmares, not visions! Some people go on to establish their churches whereas God only required them to work with pastors or other ministers,

just as, for example, Barnabas, Silas, Luke and Timothy worked with Paul.. Some may be called but they rush to start when it is not yet time. After all, God called Jeremiah as a prophet before he was formed in his mother's womb but he did not become one until after he had been born [Jer. 1: 5]. David was anointed king of Israel as a teenager but he was not crowned king until he was thirty years old [2 Sam. 5: 4].

When God has not specifically called us, we are likely to look for spiritual power from another source. Like the Egyptian magicians in the time of Pharaoh, we may be able to perform wonders and miracles but they are not from God. Jesus underlined this possibility when He said, "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practise lawlessness'" [Matt. 7: 22-23].

b) *When we rely on church wisdom*

Christian doctrine, based on the truth of the Scriptures, is summarized in the Apostles' Creed which is accepted by *all Christian denominations*. Therefore, what separates one denomination from another is nothing but church doctrine which may or may not be biblical. For example, some denominations have anointed women or gay bishops. Some denominations do not allow their clergy to marry. Some denominations wear white garments. Some denominations worship on Saturday instead of Sunday. *None of such church wisdom is central to Christian doctrine*. The danger is that church wisdom is significantly influenced by popular culture and (inter or intra) church politics.

A good example can be found in what Jeroboam (a former servant of Solomon's) did soon after he became king of the northern kingdom of Israel following the death of King Solomon. Rehoboam, Solomon's son, ruled the smaller southern kingdom of Judah with Jerusalem as its capital. For fear that allowing his subjects to go and worship there in Solomon's temple would jeopardize his own tenure, Jeroboam counterfeited places of worship in Bethel and other places within the northern kingdom, established worship days and appointed priests who were not from the tribe of Levi [1 Kgs 12: 25-33]. As the king stood by the altar in Bethel to worship God (for so it appeared to his subjects), a man of God from Judah came in and told him, "This is the sign which the Lord has spoken: surely the altar shall split apart, and the ashes on it shall be poured out." It happened [1 Kgs 13: 1-3]! God cannot be deceived.

We should be careful how much premium we place on church wisdom as a measure of true worship because "there is no salvation in any other name

under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” except “by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” [Acts 2: 10, 12].

c) *When we do not practise what we preach*

Our ability to influence others stems from what they see us do more than what they hear us say. Jesus told the Jews, “the Son can do nothing of Himself, *but what He sees the Father do, ... the Son also does in like manner*” [Jn 5: 19]. Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ” [1 Cor. 11: 1]. What should they imitate in Paul? As he told the Philippians, they are the things which they had *learned, received, heard and seen* [Phil. 4: 9].

However, some people try to influence what people see of them by placing undue emphasis on rituals instead of the essence. The Pharisees were the butt of Christ’s criticism of such posturing [Mk 7: 1-8], and He condemned hypocrisy on several occasions. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, He taught His disciples to avoid outward show for public approval or attention. Instead, they should focus on what pleases God in such practices as giving [Matt. 6: 1-4], praying [vv. 5-6] and fasting [vv. 16-18]. Paul openly withstood Peter and his missionary team when they stopped eating and living with the Gentile Christians in Antioch as soon as some Jewish Christians came from Jerusalem because “they were not straightforward with the truth of the gospel” [Gal. 2: 11-14]. In short, because God is Spirit, those who truly worship Him must do so in spirit and in truth [Jn 4: 24].

For those of us (parents, teachers, leaders, etc) that are placed in the position to influence others, we stand the chance to delude or mislead them by posing as we are not. When they find us out later, they can develop what can be called *retrospective revulsion*. That is, they will backdate their disdain and hatred to wipe away the admiration that they once had for us. They might have done certain things then according to their reading of our character that they might now regret. Many weak believers have left the church on account of the hypocrisy of their priests and pastors. Children have been known to turn against parents that they used to admire when they found out about their hypocrisy.

I remember the case of a university lecturer in Nigeria who gave high grades to his students in a prerequisite course to cover up the fact that he taught them less than half of the course work. At the end of the semester, the students hailed him as a great teacher. However, when they got to the advanced course, they discovered that they would have to do remedial studies in the prerequisite course to catch up. As the lecturer himself was to confide in a close friend later, that was the end of his respect in that college. The following year, he resigned and moved elsewhere! Clearly, to do one’s work deceitfully has a cost. With God’s work, it is much more. That is the kernel of today’s bible lesson.

3. The high cost of doing God's work deceitfully

The 48th chapter of the book of Jeremiah is a prophecy against the nation of Moab. As you may already know, the Moabites were the descendants of Lot, the nephew of Abraham's [read **Gen. 19: 1-37**]. Lot had lived in Sodom and Gomorrah with his wife and two daughters. When God was about to destroy those cities for sexual immorality, the angels hurried Lot and his family into safety. However, his wife looked back, contrary to God's command not to do so, and she was turned into a pillar of salt. His two daughters, fearing that the rest of the world had been destroyed in the fire and that their family line could become extinct, got their father drunk and took turns to lie with him. They each had a son by him. The first daughter's son was called Moab, the father of the people of Moab. Clearly, deceit was the foundation of Moab. For example, it was Balak, a Moabite king, who hired Balaam to curse the children of Israel on their way from Egypt [**Num. 22: 4**]. On account of that, God told Moses that no Moabites should enter the assembly of the Lord "even to the tenth generation" and none of their descendants should do so "forever" [**Deut. 23: 3-4**].

In today's study, God told the Moabites through the prophet Jeremiah, "cursed is he who does the work of the Lord deceitfully" [**Jer. 48: 10**]. Examine the following features of the national life of Moab at the time that their cousins and neighbours, the children of Israel, were living in captivity in Babylon for their sins:

- The Moabites trusted in their works (idols) and in their treasures [**Jer. 48: 7**].
- In spite of their idolatrous practices, the nation was not in captivity like Israel. Instead, Moab was "at ease from his youth; he has settled on his dregs, and has not been emptied from vessel to vessel, nor has he gone into captivity. Therefore his taste remained in him, and his scent has not changed" [v. 11].
- Moab exalted itself against the Lord for "he is exceedingly proud, of his loftiness and arrogance and pride, and of the haughtiness of his heart.' *Yet, Israel had become a derision for such things* [vv. 25- 29]

Moab was a bad example for Israel. Therefore, it could have been living in self-deceit to think that God would tolerate from its people what He had not accepted from their favoured cousins, the children of Israel. *If God does not punish unbelievers for their hideous sins, believers could be lured into admiring sin and imitating sinners* [**Ps. 73: 1-18**]. Therefore, God was going to bring about "a general lamentation on all the housetops of Moab and in its streets" and the Lord would break Moab "like a vessel in which is no pleasure" [vv. 37, 42]. God would destroy their gods and their false worship and the nation's wealth derived there from would perish [vv. 35, 36].

Moab is hardly different from today's world. Just as it was secular and materialistic, so is today. Just as false worship was arrogantly practised in the name of freedom, so do we have some churches mainstreaming sin as acceptable conduct. As a result, unchristian conduct among both the clergy and the laity is hardly preached against nor condemned so as not to appear to be judgmental. Pastors and their families are diverting church funds and collections for personal use and the congregation is doing nothing about it. Instead, the church board is busy trying to prevent any such scandals from leaving the pulpit.

Writing to the church at Corinth, Paul said [**1 Cor. 5: 9-13**]:

I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reveler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore, put away from yourselves the evil person.

4. Conclusion: Come clean with God!

God still punishes sin. Therefore, let nobody lure you into a false sense of security with such clichés as “everybody is doing it,” or “God is merciful!” Remember that God is also a consuming fire [**Heb. 12: 29**]. To serve God deceitfully is to be a liar and *all* liars “shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone” [**Rev. 21: 8**]. Therefore, come clean with God by admitting that you can never be good on your own or human terms. He sees the heart but humans see the outside. You cannot hide anything from him. Confess your sins and ask Jesus to be your Mediator before His Father.

In today's bible text, God promised, “Yet I will bring back the captives of Moab in the latter days” [**Jer. 48: 47**]. Ruth, the great-grandmother of David [**Ruth 4: 13-17**] was a Moabite [**Ruth 1: 4**]. So, in God's infinite mercy, they have been grafted into the lineage of Jesus the Christ. If you can renounce Satan and all his deceitful works and, like Ruth make the God of Israel your God [**Ruth 1: 16**], you will be restored to full fellowship with Him, no matter your recent past.

To serve God deceitfully is to live in self-deceit!