

“Every Man Walketh in a Vain Shew”

It is written in Psalm 39, and verse 6, that “surely every man walketh in a vain shew ...”. The marginal rendering for “vain shew” is “image”. Every man walks according to the image that men expect of him. Truly this is seen in myriads of examples of today’s iniquitous world – whether it be the images presented through the Television, the Newspapers, even the radio, and a whole host of other mediums by which images are presented that appeal to the flesh. And with this comes added pressures for brethren and sisters of Christ – are we going to be conformed to the Image of the World, or the Image of Christ. The Scriptures are clear: “be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable and perfect, will of God” (Rom. 12:2). The question remains therefore, for us to answer individually: Which image are we becoming conformed to?

The Apostle Paul was “moved” by the Holy Spirit to write to the Corinthians about this very matter:

“Do ye look on things *after the outward appearance*? If any man trust to himself that he is Christ’s let him of himself think this again, that as he is Christ’s even so are we Christ’s” (2 Cor. 10:7).

And again,

“we commend not ourselves again unto you, but give you occasion to glory on our behalf, that ye may have somewhat to answer *them which glory in appearance, and not in heart*” (2 Cor. 5:12).

The allusion here, is to David who succeeded Saul as King over Israel. Saul was the kind of man that the people wanted: head and shoulders over them all. But it was David, not Saul, who stood before Yahweh as a man after His Own Heart. So Samuel was told:

“look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for Yahweh seeth not as man seeth; for *man looketh on the outward appearance, but Yahweh looketh on the heart*” (1 Sam.16:7)

Notice the echoes of language between this passage and 2 Corinthians, as cited above. What mattered was the spirit of a man, and not his physical stature. It is also interesting to notice that the reference in 2 Corinthians 10 (above) is in the context of fighting a battle: “the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds ...” (verse 4). One of the allusions in this place would appear to be to Saul, a man who was a mighty warrior according to his image – yet who lacked the faith to lead Israel into battle with the Philistines first, and then the Amalekites. He had a reputation for being a man of war - yet a mere “stripling” showed greater faith than he. Knowing that Yahweh looks upon the heart, we ought to be courageous, not fearful in our warfare of faith, for our Master has gone before as the “captain of salvation” to lead us into his victory and glory.

Our New Testament reading for today contains the Master’s words of rebuke against the Pharisees and Scribes – both of whom delighted in the outward appearance:

“all their works they do to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, and love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues” (Mat. 23:5-6).

“Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness” (Mat. 23:7).

The allusion in these places, again, has a background in the events concerning Saul and David. 1 Samuel chapter 9 describes how Saul and his Servant were brought, and made to sit “in the chiefest place” above all the others:

“Samuel took Saul and his servant, and brought them into the parlour, and made them sit *in the chiefest place* among them that were bidden, which were about thirty persons” (1 Sam. 9:20).

This was when Saul was “little” in his own sight (1 Sam. 15:17). Being humbled before his God and Samuel the Prophet, he was given the honour of being able to sit in the “chief” seats of the feast. But when he became puffed up, and wilfully disobeyed Yahweh’s commandments, he lost his Throne and the Kingdom.

The parallel account of Luke 14 seems to make this allusion clearer, although the feast here is specifically a “wedding”, which was not so in Saul’s case:

“When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him; and he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, “Give this man place”; and thou with shame to take the lower room. But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend come up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. ***For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and the that humbleth himself shall be exalted***” (Lu. 14:8-10)

Saul provides an example of both one who was humble, and became exalted – but also one who became lifted up in pride, and was therefore brought down low.

It is most interesting to note that this theme of sitting in high or low places is brought out again in James chapter 2. Here, the standpoint is different: whereas in the words of the Master it is the One sitting who is the focal point, here it is the One who commands where he should sit:

“If there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man and in vile raiment; and ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?” (Jas. 2:2-4).

Notice the point being made here – which is in harmony with our considerations of the Master’s words in Matthew 23 – we ought not judge according to outward appearance, or be respecters of persons. As brethren of Messiah, and partakers of his mystical Body, we must be “kindly affectioned one to another, with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another ... mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits” (Rom. 12:10, 16).

Another characteristic of those who glory in men, was the pretence of making long prayers in order to get praise of the people, and be regarded as holy and pious men:

“Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye devour widows houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation” (Mat. 23:14).

Notice the point here: lengthy prayers were being made for entirely selfish reasons, whereas the needs of the Widows were not only ignored, but they bound greater burdens upon them, which they were not able to bear. “pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this: “To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27). Being entirely consumed with the desire to be well thought of by men, they neglected the needs of others. And ironically, the Widows were specifically marked out as a category under the Law, which should have been provided for, and protected: “*ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child*” (see Ex. 22:22; Deut. 10:18; Deut. 24:17,19,20 etc).

This disposition was aptly summarised by the words of Yahweh, as spoken by the Prophet Isaiah:

“to turn aside the needy from judgment, and to take away the right from the poor of my people, *that widows may be their pray, and that the may rob the fatherless*” (Isa. 10:2).

“ ... this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, *but have removed their heart far from me*, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men ...” (Isa. 29:13).

Delighting to utter words in the pretence of making prayer, the Pharisees honoured Yahweh in their speech. Yet in neglecting those who needed help and support, their hearts were far removed from the Righteousness of Yahweh: in works they denied him. And it wasn't as if they were really making prayers: that Master uncovered them as being entirely for a “pretence!”

So it was that the Pharisees had an outward veneer of religiosity, but the fact of the matter is that they were only concerned with their own good, and reputation. So the Master likens them to beautifully kept graves – a picture of beauty, yet literally containing nothing but death:

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited sepuchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness” (Mat. 23:27).

An expression conveying a similar sense was used by the Master in application to the ecclesia at Sardis:

“I know thy works, that thou *hast a name that thou livest, and art dead*. Be watchful therefore, and strengthen the things that remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God” (Rev. 3:1-2).

In these things, there is a most important and pertinent warning for us, living in the last days. It is possible to have an outward appearance of believing the Truth, and a reputation for having a zeal to maintain its purity. But unless we humble ourselves under the Mighty Hand of Yahweh, and seek

to live the life required of Him we shall remain in the congregation of the dead. Unless we tend to the needs of Christ's little ones instead of seeking our own glory, our religion is but a sham, like the Pharisee's.

Bro HP Mansfield writes most appropriately of this situation:

““I know thy works” will be the declaration pronounced upon all ecclesial centres soon. Is our Ecclesia confident of a favourable verdict? Does it have “a name”, a reputation of being spiritually active, alive, constantly growing and involved in many facets of the truth? Does its inner spiritual life and loyalty to Christ's instructions justify that reputation?”

Sardis was an active ecclesia whose fame had spread far and wide. It had a reputation for its enthusiasm, warmth, steadfastness, and resourcefulness in Gospel proclamation. It sponsored many speakers whose labours took them into various parts, and this gave the appearance of an ecclesia vibrant with the power of the truth, backed by sound leadership.

While they basked in the sunshine of such accolades, they were oblivious of their low standing in the sight of Deity. “Thou art dead”, was the Spirit's estimation! Dead because, as the narrative implies, they had ceased to “watch” (v. 2). They had forgotten the real purpose for which the truth had been entrusted to their care (v. 3); the reality of Christ's coming had grown dim (v. 3); and they had allowed the polluting influences of the world to stain the holy vesture they had put on at their induction into Christ (v. 4).

Sardis was dead because its spiritual guides failed to take the necessary action to stem the growing influence of Nicolaitanes, Balaamites, and Jezebels. ***They lacked the courage to make unpopular decisions, choosing rather popularity with their contemporaries than risk their opposition.*** The progressives, or liberals, gained control of the ecclesia, introducing doctrines and practices reprehensible to Christ. Because of this the faithful had been reduced to "a few names" (v.4); but those few were recorded in the Lamb's *Book Of Life*. ”

The lessons are clear, and the implementation of them is vital for our salvation. But only we can individually decide on whether or not we seek the praise of men, or the praise of God (Rom. 2:29).

Chris Maddocks

*“Most men will proclaim everyone his own goodness:
But a faithful man who can find?”*

(Proverbs. 20:6)