

Don't Try To Change The World (Det 11:18-28; Rom 3:21-28; Mat 7:15-29).

- * It becomes now apparent that the honest wish to change the world for sake of the lost was turned into a source of trouble for some churches. It happened because some churches gradually abandoned traditional beliefs and practices on demand of the lost. The outcome of this concession was significant, namely, some churches came to be pretty much as voluntary organizations inwardly, and as theaters outwardly. Next to that, the Christological aspect of worship, fellowship, and discipleship was replaced by the worldly spirit with its emotional, illusionary, and permissive specifics. Therefore, it comes, in the attempt to change the world, some churches have been changed by this world.
- * The given introduction serves as a warning illustration against following after the wish of the lost while they are infants. But the worse scenario is when the lost become leaders! Saying this, we have feeling that the minded listeners yearn to catch wind of the full story. Well, it is what we are going to do breaking down the full story into several components in order you can see parts within whole.
- * The corner stone of our discussion will center around what the lost taught and practices contrary to the teaching of the doctrine of justification by the apostle Paul. For example, in (Rom 3:21-28) our Sunday's reading, the apostle made the significant remark that sinners are justified before God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ apart from their observing the law. This teaching was widely debated within the first communities of believers, and in fact, not everybody accepted Paul's breakthrough. However, some followers pointed the finger to the Scripture where God commands his people to keep the Law and bless or curse consequently, as for example it can be seen in (Det 11:18-28), the texts assigned for today. Here we read, "*See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which command you today, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, (Deut 11:26-28).*" From this component, as well as from other biblical texts, the early Christians concluded that the obedience to the moral Law is the key. Then, does it mean that Paul didn't know Scripture, or disobey God? Most likely Paul tried to obey God in all points and from all his potential, (Php 3:13,14).
- * There was a time when many books of the N.T. had not been written yet, or known. At that time there was quite a few opinions among Christians on the matter of their beliefs. Some believed that a man is justified by keeping God's law, some thought that it is not necessary to keep the Law because of grace, and some maintained that salvation depends neither from the obeying of God's Law nor from grace, but exclusively from the knowledge of the secret principals.
- * With the first example of the false belief, we refer to a group of Jewish Christians known as Ebionites. They were distinguished by their insisting on the ongoing validity of the Jewish Law. We do not know the name of their contemporary teachers, except of Moses. Certainly they were not followers of Ebyon, because Ebyon was not a teacher but it is a word that distinguished them from other communities.

In Hebrew the word Ebyon means *one who is "poor"*. Those Christians accepted the voluntary poverty, as Jesus did, that is why they were called Ebionites. These Christians associated themselves with the disciples of Jesus who was believed to be the Messiah but not divine. But they rejected Paul as the apostle because the teaching he spread around the mediterranean world seemed to them heretical. In short, Ebionites believed that by their own righteousness they would be justified before God.

* The next example of heterodox belief was attached to the anti-Jewish Christians called the Marcionites, the name given in favor of their teacher Marcion. Marcion was condemned as a heretic by all proto-orthodox fathers; but despite this fact, he still had been followed by many. Contrary to the Ebionites, the followers of Marcion looked on the apostle Paul as the apostle of the God of Jesus.

At the same time they believed there was a Jewish God who created the world and gave the Law. Marcion taught that Jesus appeared to save people from the God of the Jews. By dying on the cross, Jesus satisfied the requirements of the Jewish God and brought salvation to his grasp. The writings of Paul and the Gospel of Luke Marcion considered as the canon of the sacred books, if not mentioned that he removed any reference to the God of the Jews or God's laws from the books of that canon. He claimed that these references had been "inserted" by false teachers.

* The last example of the heterodox belief were prescribed to a group of Christians who called themselves Gnostics; that in Greek means *knowledgeable*. Here are the names of some of their leaders; they are Valentinus, Basilides, Saturninus and Simon of Gitta. Their teachings were set around the "secret knowledge" that was thought to be the key to man's salvation. The Gnostics didn't perceive Christ as one who justified a man freely on account of faith alone because in their system of beliefs there was no place for salvation in the Christian sense. Gnostics imagined salvation as the restoration of the cosmic order and illumination of the mind. They didn't associate Christ as the Saviour from sin and death but as one who is the highest spiritual being, or Logos. Therefore, salvation was believed to be the liberation from the physical body, and it solemnly relied on the knowledge given to the elite.

* Now, in the context of the given references to the earliest heterodox belief, we may better understand Jesus' concern regarding false prophets and their teaching. In our Sunday reading from (Mat 7:15-29) Jesus says, *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves, (Mat 7:15)*. With regard to the lost teachers, we learned that Gnostics were the most dangerous because they tried to penetrate the proto Orthodox congregations claiming to be mature in knowledge and spirituality. Having being taught by the apostles the proto orthodox Christians stayed away from such groups as we mentioned and they didn't follow the lost teachers like Marcion, Valentinus, Basilides, Saturninus, Simon of Gitta and others to whom the Lord addresses the words of judgment, ... *'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness,' (v.23)*.

* As we've observed contemporary Christianity, we concluded that Jesus' warning of false prophets and teachers is not taken seriously as it should be. However, who gives an ear to Jesus will recognize the false by their fruits. There are two kind of distinguishing marks: first, the false teaching; and second, the ungodly behavior of the teachers, (Didache 13). With regard to the first mark, we have already distinguished the three most prominent that under different variations affect modern Christianity. Now, let's say few words with regard to the second component that is ungodly behavior. If a prophet or a teacher show ceaseless dictatorship, or proudness, or selfishness or love of money, they are indeed false, don't listen to them and follow after them! Doing this you will escape the destiny of the ungodly to whom the Lord address the words, *'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'* (v.23).

* It seems we have detailed enough on the matter of wrong things; now it is time to say words about right teaching and practice. In order to avoid confusions where Paul teaches of righteousness by faith apart of the Law given in (Rom 3:21-28), we are obliged to give a brief explanation. No doubt, God creates the saving faith in us with a certain purpose. First, God created faith in us in order that we can be declared as righteous persons on the basis of Jesus' merits, – it is just declaration, (v.v.21-23). Thanks be to Christ forever! And second, God created faith in us in order that we become righteous persons naturally by living according to Jesus' teaching of righteousness, – it is actual transformation, (v.31). In other words, along with the declaration of perfect righteousness imputed in us, there should be a *making* righteous, even though we are not perfect. The teaching of the passive and active righteousness is by all means worthy to be believed and followed; doing so we'll not be ashamed before Jesus' throne of judgment.

* Since it is still true that many follow by the broad way, we are given the Spirit who helps lead us away from the devil's pits and troubles. God's voice in us is different from the voices of our flesh and the false prophets; they should be distinguished. The Spirit doesn't teach us to witness falsely and spread lies, or to wish for one's property, or to steal money, or to destroy one's life. The Spirit doesn't teach the idle way of life, or unfaithfulness to a spouse, or to stay away from brotherly fellowship. And the Spirit doesn't say that persons who believe in Jesus but constantly neglect the way of righteousness will be justified before the judgment throne of Christ. Contrary to all these *doesn't*, the voice of Jesus calls us to mortify the sinful deeds of flesh by the Spirit, (Rom 8:13). Amazingly, this kind of righteousness doesn't come by itself; we need to work hard on its behalf. At the same time, the grace of Jesus Christ our God that surpasses all understanding, helps, nourishes and defends us in the present life, and pardons our sins, and preserve us to life everlasting.

Amen