

## A Wavering Reed

As you might have noticed, as we begin these messages each Sunday, I often like to start them with a question, a question that we will hopefully find a reasonable answer to during the time that we'll spend together within the message. And I'd like to do that today.

And the question is in some ways similar to the question that Jesus asked His disciples on an occasion just after a visit from the followers of John the Baptist. The question is, "What do you expect to see, to hear, to experience as you enter the doors of this church each Sunday? What is your hope, your expectation as you listen to me preach these sermons?"

As I have pondered this question regarding all the many congregations sitting in their church pews this morning, I have come to realize that the answer to that question is a very diverse one.

Some church congregations are solid in their desires for Christ and they truly want to hear the words of Christ preached, and passionately so. But other congregations are as those described in 2 Timothy 4, there described with the words,

<sup>3</sup> For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, <sup>4</sup> and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. (2 Timothy 4:3-4)

Folks, the reality of these words is obvious to us as we observe the churches of our day, even some of those here in our own neighborhoods.

And so, may I ask us, "Which church do you want this one to be?" And "What kind of preacher do you want to hear me be each Sunday as I stand before you".

Let's pause here for a moment and read about this occasion involving the Lord Jesus as He speaks about John the Baptist. Listen, beginning in verse 24 of Luke chapter 7,

24 When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? 25 What then did you go out to see? A

man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. 26 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 27 This is he of whom it is written, " 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' 28 I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." (Luke 7:24-28)

One of the most powerful and effective weapons that can be used against a person's faith, whether in John the Baptist's generation or our own, is one that comes resident within each of our personalities and is kept there willingly by each of us simply because we do not regard it as being a real threat to us.

That weapon is named and described in many ways. It is sometimes called complacency, or self-satisfaction, or even self-righteousness, but whatever the name we call it by, its effects are the same. It has the ability to convince you and me that we are OK, secure perhaps within the mediocrity of a lifeless Christian walk, saved perhaps yes, but beyond that, without much life at all, without passion, without substance, seeking only and satisfied only by the approval of the people and the culture around us. We live as "reeds" that can be shaken by any wind that blows. And as church members, we often gather to ourselves preachers and teachers who are like us, like "reeds" that can be shaken by any wind that blows.

And that is the subject of Jesus' teaching of the people on this occasion, and He used as the contrast to such behavior the strong and passionate commitment of this man, John the Baptist.

John the Baptist was a man of great passion, completely given over to the calling and to the ministry God had placed upon him. And Jesus, being able to see the deepest depths of John's heart, knew very well how committed John was. And here, Jesus pays him the greatest of all respects and witness that could be given to a man.

And folks, as we have said on other occasions from this pulpit, that of all of the people who would say good things on your or my behalf, and of all of the praise we might receive from people over our lifetime, there is no witness and no testimony that we should desire more than the witness and the testimony of the

Lord Jesus. It is His praise and His acceptance alone that will make the difference both in this life now and in our eternal life to come.

But unfortunately, for the most of us, whether we be of that generation or of our own generation, Jesus is not often able to pay such respect to us. That's because that special deeply held need for satisfaction that resides within us is too often being sought from and met by other sources, sources other than the Lord Jesus, sources that we really should not look to for approval, other people, and other sources who, by their guidance and praise, will often lead us astray.

But also, another element that is within this equation of need for approval is that of our deep set need to succeed, to prosper in the things that we do. We love our successes. And when we combine our desire to succeed with our need for approval, we stumble.

And again, it is most often our choosing of wrong sources to guide us that leads us astray. We get convinced by their words and attracted by their charisma and we follow along behind them blindly.

But here in today's scripture passage, Jesus tells us that if we will only open up our eyes we will recognize them for who they are. He tells us that usually we will find them in fine clothing and living in well-to-do lifestyles.

Does not that description sound very, very familiar to us? Do we not witness that exact measurement of success and approval every moment of every day all around us?

I can't help but recall the occasions that I dared watch the Academy Awards presentations. Those events are filled with actors and producers and directors allowing other actors and producers and directors to say wonderful words of praise about them. And there is no end to the adoration given to the expensive gowns worn by the ladies.

But folks, listen, you and I must be careful to not cast too many stones at those poor wretched souls, because we "Christians" do much the same. So often, in the media interviews conducted with our Christian leaders and our Christian music stars, they look and they talk much the same.

And God warns us about all such things. He tells us clearly that we are not to love this world, neither the things, the habits, the behaviors nor the traditions of this world.

The ways of the world can captivate the hearts of the most devout of Christians and Christian leaders and turn them into “reeds that waver in the wind” . . . all very much like the behavior and lifestyle being warned about here in Jesus’ words.

Listen again. Jesus asked concerning John,

“What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>25</sup>But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed those who are splendidly appareled and live in luxury are in kings’ courts. (Luke 7:24-25)

The people of that day had not seen a true prophet of God for a very long time, many, many generations. All they were accustomed to seeing in their religious leaders was the same as we see in ours today. They then saw well-dressed scribes and pharisees, and well-dressed priests and others. Today, we see well-dressed preachers who preach ear-pleasing rhetoric, words that sound good, but lack real meaning and substance.

Folks, again our minds and our hearts do seem to be especially desirous of that sort of thing. We love symbolism and we will exchange real substance for symbolism without thinking through it, that’s because symbolism seems always to be more vivid and inspiring and it lacks the drudgery of duty and hard work and obedience that real substance and commitment require. Fancy clothing and eloquent words have far more appeal to us.

There in Jesus’ day, the Scribes and the Pharisees, and other church leaders dressed well and lived well. And while their words had the appearance of self-denial and of strong obedience to the demands of the Law, Jesus could easily see through their façade. He knew that they truly were like “reeds, wavering in the wind”.

And Jesus knew also that the people who went out into the wilderness to hear John the Baptist were truly seeking something more than they had been accustomed to in their religion. They didn’t know what that might be, but they knew what they had was not working out for them.

And here, Jesus put the whole frustrating dilemma into simple words that both they and we can understand.

This description, “reeds shaken by the wind” tell about men, preachers and teachers, who are not strong in their testimony, but are instead weak and willing to adjust their messages to accommodate their listeners. They are “reeds” waving in whatever direction the winds of demand dictate, men who seek after temporal rewards of fine clothing and easy lifestyles, rather than the more rigid requirements of God. And here, Jesus points to the dramatic contrast by asking the people to consider the actions, the behavior and the manner of dress of John the Baptist as compared to the Scribes and Pharisees.

John was not the usual “reed, blowing in the wind”, and neither did he choose the fine garments of the priesthood, although he himself was legitimately a priest by birth, son of a priest, Zachariah.

John’s message, his manner of dress and his lifestyle was in direct opposition and a direct affront to the others in the priesthood. He was strong in character. He refused to accept the sin that was so prevalent around him, sin that the other priests refused to address, sin like that of their leader, King Herod who had taken his own brother’s wife to be his own.

Why had the Scribes and the Pharisees and the Chief Priests not themselves joined with John in publicly condemning Herod for his sins? Their behavior was precisely what Jesus was describing in His words “reeds blowing in the wind”. They were weak-willed, afraid and unwilling to address difficult matters of sin.

And folks, when the church willingly chooses to abdicate its responsibilities, then everyone suffers, from the highest in governmental leadership down to the lowest level of citizenry. That was so then and it is so now.

Just imagine what might have taken place had the priesthood and the church members of Jesus’ day united in righteous condemnation of Herod’s ways. Perhaps Herod might have turned from his wicked ways and history might have taken a different course.

But they didn't, and he didn't, and we are left where we are, there with Jesus and John the Baptist calling out to the people to repent and to turn from their wicked ways, and John ending up in prison and soon to die.

Some of the people listened and obeyed, but many did not and that disobedience has continued on down through the generations into our own. We are very much like the people and the church leaders of Jesus' day.

We, in our generation, love to hear rhetoric, symbolism over substance, words that please and tickle our ears. And we choose governmental leaders and church leaders and pastors and evangelists that tell us only those things that we most want to hear.

And that is why God has given us these scriptures, words of truth that are intended to point us to the paths of righteousness.

Here, we are being warned to not follow after those secular leaders and those church leaders who are "reeds that wave in the wind", men and women who tickle our ears with their fancy words of platitude and praise, but do not challenge us with the demands of the gospel.

We are warned not to follow after such church leaders as those popular preachers and teachers of today who tell us that if we want to look and to be like them in their many successes, all we need to do is to simply "believe real hard" and then "speak" them into being, and they will then be ours.

Folks, my commitment to the Lord and to you as Pastor of this church must be to ever and always preach the solid truths of this gospel, and to never allow myself to become one of those "reeds that wave in the wind". And it is your responsibility to hold me to it.

I must always speak the truths of God clearly and plainly without concern for any lack of approval I might receive.

And this church must never reach for and desire those more tantalizing "social" forms of the gospel that are going forth out of many pulpits today. Social gospel is poisonous to our souls, leading anyone who listens to it to become like "reeds that waver in the wind".

Let me say again that, like the church of Jesus' day, too many of our own churches are caught up in a misguided theology that promises that if we will just "pray the sinners prayer" and join into the activities and churchy behaviors, we will be rewarded with good health and a pleasant lifestyle in this life, and a wonderful eternal life with Christ in heaven.

And yes, there is some truth to that belief, but not always. If our relationship with Christ does not have the passion and the commitment and the purposes of Christ within it, then we may, one day, stand sadly in judgment and hear words that we do not want to hear, words from the Lord Jesus that tell us to "depart from Me, I never knew you". Folks, I do fear that that is a real danger that faces many people within the churches of our day.

These simple words of Jesus remind us and demand of us that we not seek after church leaders that are "reeds shaken by the wind", and that we ourselves not be those same kinds of "reeds shaken by the wind", but instead, we must be men and women who have a deep and committed passion for the person of Christ.

Do you have that passion? Do you want to have that passion? You can! I can! All that we have to do is surrender ourselves over to God's Holy Spirit and He will bring that passion into us. That is a promise that God will fulfill. Listen to these precious words in Ezekiel 36 that I have read to us often, and we will close.

<sup>26</sup>I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup>I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

Let's pray.