

Church of God, The Eternal

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The Causes of Spiritual Fruitlessness

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Dear Brethren:

The year of 1991 witnessed phenomenal events in both the world and in the church. Who would have believed the dramatic events that took place and are yet taking place in Eastern Europe and Russia? We stated some years ago that before a New World Order could appear there would have to be an amelioration of communism. This is indeed taking place. As far as events in the church are concerned, we have warned repeatedly that there would be those of long standing who would be in danger of falling away. The prophet Daniel warned of it when he wrote, "And some of them of understanding shall fall, to try them, and to purge, and to make them white, even to the time of the end: because it is yet for a time appointed" (Dan. 11:35). Yes, in the fulfillment of this prophecy, some of understanding have, during 1991, indeed, fallen away. What is the year of 1992 going to bring forth?

The Parable of the Sower

There is a parable in Matthew 13 that can be applied to the coming year as well as the years ahead, warning us of the possible pitfalls that we all face. Notice it:

And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow; And when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up: Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them: But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold (Matt. 13:3-8).

Jesus later explained the meaning of the parable to His disciples:

Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower. When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side. But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended. He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful. But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty (Matt. 13:18–23).

Jesus listed the specific reasons why three out of the four failed. It was because Satan took advantage of an inability to grasp the significance of what had been heard, or there was a lack of character so profound that tribulation or persecution led to a surrender of principles, or the amenities of the world were too great to overcome. But, Jesus did not, in this parable, give the reasons why some of them were successful.

Enter at the Strait Gate

Even in failure human nature is such that often it will not own up to it, or face reality. Jesus illustrated this in Matthew 22. When a certain individual was not properly dressed for the marriage supper (proper dress signifying righteousness), we read:

And he [the king] saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 22:12–13).

Here was one who tried to pass roll without the proper credentials. The parable illustrates that one cannot be a Christian and enter into the kingdom of God if he is not truly righteous. Jesus warned:

Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able. When once the master of the house is risen up, and hath shut to the door, and ye begin to stand without, and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open unto us; and he shall answer and say unto you, I know you not whence ye are: Then shall ye begin to say, We have eaten and drunk in thy presence, and thou hast taught in our streets. But he shall say, I tell you, I know you not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out. And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God. And, behold, there are last which shall be first, and there are first which shall be last (Luke 13 :24–30).

Notice the chilling revelation here. They ate and drank in His presence; they listened to Him teach. Yet, they failed. They were workers of iniquity (lawlessness). As Paul wrote, "They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate" (Titus 1:16).

The Parable of the Nobleman

In the parable of the nobleman, Jesus detailed the successful and the unsuccessful. Notice the rewards and punishment.

He said therefore, A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return. And he called his ten servants, and delivered them ten pounds, and said unto them, Occupy till I come. But his citizens hated him, and sent a message after him, saying, We will not have this man to reign over us. And it came to pass, that when he was returned, having received the kingdom, then he commanded these servants to be called unto him, to whom he had given the money, that he might know how much every man had gained by trading. Then came the first, saying, Lord, thy pound hath gained ten pounds. And he said unto him, Well, thou good servant: because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities. And the second came, saying, Lord, thy pound hath gained five pounds. And he said likewise to him, Be thou also over five cities. And another came, saying, Lord, behold, here is thy pound, which I have kept laid up in a napkin: For I feared thee, because thou art an austere man:

thou takest up that thou layedst not down, and reapest that thou didst not sow. And he saith unto him, Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee, thou wicked servant. Thou knewest that I was an austere man, taking up that I laid not down, and reaping that I did not sow: Wherefore then gavest not thou my money into the bank, that at my coming I might have required mine own with usury? And he said unto them that stood by, Take from him the pound, and give it to him that hath ten pounds. (And they said unto him, Lord, he hath ten pounds.) For I say unto you, That unto every one which hath shall be given; and from him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away from him (Luke 19:12–26).

Those who are successful in their Christian calling will be greatly rewarded. Those who are unsuccessful will be severely punished. The question we need to ask ourselves is: Are we determined to be successful or will *we* fulfill part of a dreadful prophecy of Daniel?

The Fruits of Success and of Failure

As noted earlier, Jesus did not explain why a certain percentage of those called were successful in the parable of Matthew 13. He did state, however, "But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty" (Matt. 13:23). So, hearing, that is, listening, and understanding what was said is essential in bearing fruit. But what kind of fruit are we talking about? In Romans 6:22 the Apostle Paul speaks of "fruit unto holiness." He describes these fruits in Galatians—the fruits of success:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts (Gal. 5:22–24).

These are the fruits of success each of us must produce in our spiritual lives. But what are the fruits of failure? Notice these in Galatians 5, also:

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders,

drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19–21).

Proverbs tells us, "In the house of the righteous is much treasure: but in the revenues of the wicked is trouble" (Prov. 15:6). Success produces many good things, if it is according to the fruits of righteousness. But what is the reward of evil fruit? The answer according to this parable is "trouble." By contrast, the word "blessed" in the Bible carries the connotation of happiness. The spiritual success story is ensconced in happiness because one who is successful spiritually is happy—the result of being dedicated to God. Read it in Psalm 119:1–3:

Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord.
Blessed are they that keep his testimonies, and that seek him with the whole heart. They also do no iniquity: they walk in his ways.

The works of the flesh—the story of failure—demonstrate a way of life that is rebellious toward God, a way that reflects the worst traits of human nature. These traits do not lead to happiness and the end result is death (Rom. 6:23).

Jesus said, "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled" (Matt. 5:6). Yes, indeed, many pleasant fruits result from this kind of orientation. Such are likened to a good tree. Jesus said good and bad fruits are easy to recognize.

Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them (Matt. 7:17–20).

The success story has its own reward for those who continually maintain an interest in God and His way of life, who are studying God's word and praying daily, who faithfully obey His commandments and reverence His sabbaths and Holy Days, and who in a humble spirit continually seek God's correction.

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and

night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper (Ps. 1:1–3).

What is the story behind those who are unsuccessful? In comparing the above we can ascertain that those who fail have merely a superficial interest in God's way of life, they study and pray if it is convenient at the time, they take no delight in the sabbath and Holy Days, and correction from God's word is for others and never for themselves. They are, in effect, non-producing trees. They are, as the Apostle Paul said, oriented toward the flesh. "For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit" (Rom. 8:5). Jesus illustrated what should be done to non-producing trees:

He spake also this parable; a certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down (Luke 13:6–9).

Those who are not producing often fail to realize the import of Jesus words, "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit" (John 15:2). Those who do not produce will eventually be removed from the body. They will be spewed out of His mouth. "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:15–16). Like the servant who failed to perform, they shall suffer accordingly. "And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes" (Luke 12:47).

What is the state of mind for those who are failing—dying spiritually? For one thing they love the way of error, even though they may not realize it. Jesus described them when he said, "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). While they may profess the truth and appear to be religious, the Bible warns them, "Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17).

We have called attention to the fact that one must be a listener of God's word in order to be successful. Jesus stated:

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it (Matt. 7:24–27).

Those who listen and understand are of God; those who fail to listen are not. "He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God" (John 8:47). Remember the strong warning from Jesus:

Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire (Matt. 7:17–19).

Are there some among us who are failing, who are in reality spiritually dead? Paul said those among us who live in pleasure, that is, whose entire orientation is fleshly, are spiritually dead. "But she that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth" (1 Tim. 5:6). Such, the Bible tells us are twice dead.

These are spots in your feasts of charity, when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear: clouds they are without water, carried about of winds; trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots (Jude 1:12).

These are those who died once in Christ but now have died spiritually. They are reserved for the lake of fire! Notice this fearful warning:

Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. For if we sin wilfully after that we have

received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:23–31).

We Must Abide in the Vine

To be successful, brethren, we must be properly oriented. This orientation must be God and Christ directed. When our priorities are essentially material, when we are obsessively seeking for the monetary compensations of the world, when this quest becomes the all consuming drive, we are in grave danger. God promises to take care of His people, to supply their needs. We must not confuse our wants with our needs then blame God when we do not realize those wants. Jesus said, ". . . beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of things which he possesses" (Luke 12:15). He also said, ". . . If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed" (John 8:31). We must be faithful to the calling given us. We must not deviate even the slightest. We must not be seeking an out, using some artificial doctrinal dispute to justify a departure. We must continue in the word of Jesus. Also, we must be in union with God and Christ. Jesus emphasized, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me" (John 15:4). Being in union with Christ means being attached to the Body of Christ. This is why Christ emphasized, "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). We can bear the proper spiritual fruit if we are attached to the Body, not detached from it. That Body is *one*.

We have seen what has happened in the world and in the church this past year. We have no control over what happens in the world. Prophecy must needs be fulfilled. But we can control what happens to ourselves. We can see to it, individually, that we will not become a spiritual casualty, thereby fulfilling Daniel 11:35. "And some of them of understanding shall fall, to try them, and to purge, and to make them white, even to the

time of the end: because it is yet for a time appointed." Those who fulfill this prophecy are those who have produced no true spiritual fruit. They are the failures, the unsuccessful. Let us not allow ourselves to become spiritually fruitless. The responsibility is ours and ours alone.

In Christian love,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Raymond C. Cole". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial 'R' and 'C'.

Raymond C. Cole