

“House Built on the Rock” (Matt 7:24-27): The Challenge of Hearing the Word for Nigerian Christians

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Introduction

The pervasive effect of the Word of God makes it appear to be the only thing that really matters in the world. The Book of Genesis recounts that the whole array of creation was brought into being by the powerful Word of God. The Word of God creates, recreates, enlivens, and resuscitates. It revives the soul. Yet it smites the wicked. Its operations are described with various images; as seed that is sown and expected to bear fruit (Matt 13: 3-8, 18-23), sword, judge, spirit that gives life to dry bones (Ezek 37: 1-10), as rain that gives produce to the earth (Isa 55: 10-11), and so on. Above all, this word took flesh and dwelt among us (John 1: 14). The Word of God acts very powerfully wherever it is accepted, internalized, and obeyed. It generates life and all the positive qualities associated with it. Where it is neglected, the opposite effects are experienced, that is death, destruction and all the negative features associated with it; loss, regret, sorrow, and so on.

At the end of his lengthy inaugural speech on the Mount (Sermon on the Mount), Jesus gave a warning concerning the consequences of obeying or disobeying the words he had spoken; the good news he had proclaimed. This he did in the text of our study (Matt 7:24-27). One who hears his words and keeps them, utilizes them for his life, will be like a wise man, a sensible man who built his house on the rock that enabled it to withstand various adverse forces of life that are bound to affect the house: rain, flood, wind. The one who neglects his word will be like a fool who built his house on the sand that could not support it against those natural forces that are bound to come against it. Jesus says it all in and with this powerful imagery or parable. His words are consequential; they are alive and active, heeding or not heeding them has its respective effects.

The question arises as to how Christians in Nigeria receive the Word of God and what results are perceptible in their lives from their response to the Word of God that they hear. The life of many Christians in Nigeria looks like a house built on the sand rather than on the rock as one observes gross wreckage in their Christian lives and witnessing in the society. There are quarrels, divorce and other marital problems in many families, social life is marked by godlessness, wickedness, violence, dishonesty, distrust, injustice and so on that make life insecure. Personal life is not exempt from the disastrous effect of disobedience and heedlessness to the Word of God. Of course, it is a wrecked personal life that reflects in many a disharmonious social life, family or the wider society. This parlous state of affairs in the life of some Christians in Nigeria needs a re-reading, study and internalization of the text of our study and doing the Word of God that we preach and hear. Thus the life of Christians in Nigeria will be as secure, focused and fulfilling as a house built on the rock by a wise man, rather than the wasteful labour of a foolish man who does not live by the word of God that he heard as presently obtains among many Christians in Nigeria today.

The Background

This text concludes Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) with which he inaugurated his missionary activity. Jesus had spoken extensively on various moral issues that should characterize the lives of his

disciples; the members of the kingdom of God he had come to inaugurate. It was his Magna Charta, a summation of his teachings that launched his ministry. He delivered the words in power as the new lawgiver like, and yet superior to Moses. He declared the type of people who are really blessed and fit for the kingdom of God: the poor (in spirit), the humble, the merciful, the peacemakers, those who thirst for righteousness, those who mourn, the pure of heart, and those who are persecuted for his sake (Matt 5:1-12). He told the disciples that they are the salt of the earth, and a house built on a hill top that cannot be hidden. Thus they should be filled with good works such that people seeing their good deeds would give glory to their father in heaven (Matt 5:13-16).

Next he set out to perfect the Law and the Prophets, using the speech technique of thesis and antithesis (You have heard that it was said...But I say to you...) ¹ to preach a higher order of morality that captures the spirit of the law rather than the mere letter of the law. The disciples must be perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect (*teleios*). For Miriam Perlewitz, “perfect, when applied to the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, advocates that all actions be fully one with God who is Good and who acts from the perspective of the end”. ² God is the standard of perfection and he is the Father whom the disciples as his children should imitate and resemble. They should keep away from immorality, violence, wickedness, injustice even in thought. They should love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. Their virtues must surpass those of the scribes and the Pharisees if they would be qualified to be his disciples and those to enter the kingdom of heaven. Hence Daniel J. Harrington says that Matthew “wanted to show that Jesus interpreted the Torah in such a way as to lead to its goal and its fullness.” ³

Jesus taught them many things besides. He taught them the prayer “Our Father”, the proper way to go about pious activities: prayer, fasting, alms giving; all to be done in secret to the glory of God who would observe it and reward them accordingly. This contradicts the outward show of hypocrites who would like to be hailed for their pious deeds without seeking God’s pleasure as the goal of their actions. He taught them absolute confidence in God’s providence rather than being anxious that smacks of faithlessness. They should first seek the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and God will provide all their needs even as he takes care of lesser creatures that do not labour for their food. They do not have to be judgmental of others, but preoccupied first with self-perfection. He encouraged them to pray to God in confidence trusting in his goodness. Jesus then went on to warn about the dire consequences of not doing what they heard. He used some images including that of the house built on rock with which he concluded the discourse.

In the words of Wilfrid J. Harrington, “when the Sermon on the Mount is compared with the rest of the New Testament, it becomes clear that these words of Jesus – his moral teaching- were preserved primarily because they were part of the essential structure of the Gospel. Jesus did make demands; he did lay down the law of the Messiah. There is no conflict between the Gospel and the Law; the law of Christ. The Gospel is not only kerygma and didache, it is also a moral code, and this was so from the beginning.” ⁴ Some scholars do not regard the Sermon on the Mount as a moral code or a law. In the opinion of John Drane, “Jesus’ teaching was not a law, but an ethic of freedom. Consequently, Jesus did not burden his followers with rules and regulations, but gave them principles and guidelines by which to structure their lives. These principles were more concerned with what people are, than with what they do; not because actions were unimportant to Jesus, but because he realized that the way people behave depends on their inner motivation and self-understanding. Jesus provided his disciples with a compass from which they could get their bearings, rather than a map which would provide them with specific directions.” ⁵ One can say that inasmuch as Jesus did not set down new codes, he fulfilled his stated intention of fulfilling or perfecting the already existing Law given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai that has often been misinterpreted by the

¹Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* in Daniel J. Harrington, ed.; Sacra Pagina, vol. 1, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 90.

² Miriam Perlewitz, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1988, 38.

³Daniel J. Harrington, 90

⁴ Wilfrid J. Harrington, *Key to the Bible*, vol. III Record of Fulfilment: The New Testament (Cranfield, Ohio: Alba Books, 1975) 43.

⁵ John Drane, *Introducing The New Testament* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1999), 166.

religious authority till his time. All the same, they were meant to be acted on, to be guides for the life of the disciples. Amos N. Wilder assesses the teaching as a prophetic injunction, and more besides. In his words, “the larger part of Jesus’ ethical teaching falls in the category of prophetic injunction. With this is combined a considerable amount of observation and of appeal to the wisdom tradition. Jesus himself spoke as a prophet and a teacher. The prophets always went deeper and asked more than the letter of the statutes. Yet Jesus deepened the requirements whether of prophets or of wise men; he was more conscious of God’s action and its reality. He was the prophet and the bearer of the kingdom of God.”⁶

Michael J. Crosby identifies the three images employed by Jesus to conclude the Sermon on the Mount as “triad of contrasts”, all taken from Q.⁷ With three pairs of contrary situations, Jesus paints the picture of the results and challenges of keeping his words. These are found in 7:13-14, 15-23, 24-27. In 7:13-14, he counselled the disciples to enter by the narrow gate, for wide and spacious is the road that leads to perdition, and many follow it. The road that leads to life is narrow and only but few find it. Keeping and doing the word could pose problems and difficulties that can scare many people away, but it leads to life, and only few people might be willing to take the trouble. According to Adrian Leske, “this is an exhortation to become part of the faithful and not simply to follow the crowd or give in to social pressure and thus become lost.”⁸

In 7:15-23, Jesus warns about those who hear, and even proclaim or preach the word of God but do not act on them, and so do not bear good fruits. They are false prophets, and hypocrites. They are to be identified by their fruits, for a good tree does not bear bad fruits neither does a bad tree bear good fruits; each produces fruits according to its kind. Those who do not bear good fruits will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Similarly, people will invoke the name of Jesus, but only those who do the will of the Father in heaven will enter the kingdom of God. Commenting on this imagery George A. Buttrick explains: “The whole passage is momentous for Christian leadership. The marks of a false prophet are here given, and they convict us. False prophets are outwardly true: their manner- sheep’s clothing- appears to certify them as members of the flock of Christ. But they are ravaging in their influence: they leave the Church stripped of funds, chaotic in emotion rather than serene, and drained of homespun virtue and staying power. They are correct in theology and ardently punctilious in their phraseology: Lord, Lord. They even win a measure of success: they drive out demons and work cures, and crowds gather to their message. The reader should notice the truth of this description when applied to a mercenary class of evangelists.”⁹ This commentary cannot be too strange to Nigerians with the current spate of aberrations among some self-acclaimed pastors, and other preachers of the Word, and Christian leaders, some of whom are swindlers, murderers, fraudsters, ritual killers, and all manner of unchristian and inhuman criminalities that are associated with them, or brought in accusation against them, that are often found to be true, despite the massive disciples they command.

The third of the “triad of contrasts” is the house built on the rock and the one built on the sand and their ability to withstand the onslaught of natural forces that is bound to come (7:24-27). This is the last of the three warnings in imagery, and with it Jesus concluded his long ethical discourse.

The Text: Matthew 7:24-27

⁶ Amos N. Wilder, “The Sermon on the Mount” in George A. Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. vii (New York : Abingdon Press, 1951) , 163.

⁷Michael H. Crosby, *House of Disciples, Church, Economics & Justice in Matthew* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988) 194.

⁸Adrain Leske, “Matthew” in William R. Farmer et alii, eds., *The International Bible Commentary: An Ecumenical Commentary for Twenty-First Century* (Bangalore: Theological Publication, 1998) 13.

⁹ George A. Buttrick, “The Gospel According to St. Matthew” in George A. Buttrick et alii, ed., *The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. vii (New York, Abingdon Press, 1951), 331

Here Jesus compares the reception of the Word of God, his words, with building a house. The person who hears the word of God and does it, “will be likened to a sensible man (*andri phronimō*), who built his house upon the rock (*hostis okodoμ esen autou ten oikian epi ten petran*). Rain fell, floods came, wind blew and struck that house, but it did not fall, for it was founded upon the rock. Everyone who hears his words and *does not do them* (*me poion autous*), will be likened to a foolish man (*andri morō*) who built his house upon sand (*epi ten ammon*). Rain fell, floods came, and wind blew and struck that house and it fell, and it was a great fall. John L. McKenzie points out that “the words of Jesus are a call and a challenge to action; they are not mere teaching, and understanding them is an insufficient response. The challenge is serious; failure to meet it is followed by catastrophe- ‘great is the fall’¹⁰. He adds that “the fall is an eschatological catastrophe.”¹¹ Sherman E. Johnson notes that this parable is not very new neither was Matthew’s Jesus the first to employ it. Already it is a rabbinical parable found, for instance in the work of Abot R. Nathan and reads: “A man who has works and has learnt much Torah, to what may he be likened? To a man who builds below with stones and above with adobe; and when much water comes and surrounds it, the stones are not moved from their place. But a man who has no good works and learns Torah, to what may he be likened? To a man who builds first with adobe and then with stones, and when even small streams come, they are immediately toppled over.”¹² However, the genius of Jesus in using familiar stories and parables to drum home his message in a very understandable manner cannot be overstressed. Johnson observes that “Matthew’s form of the parable is more primitive and its two characters more Palestine than Luke’s who wrote mainly for gentile community. The wise one builds on a rock, but the foolish one builds a house of mud bricks in a wadi or dry torrent bed, which is smooth and inviting, like South western arroyos. When spring and fall rains come, such water courses may quickly become raging rivers. Luke, on the other hand, thinks of the wise man as digging deep to build foundations. This is perhaps more natural in a Greco-Roman city.”¹³

The word of God is a material for building up one’s life. It is used to build up society also as individual members build themselves up with it. For McKenzie, “it is action, not knowledge or profession of belief that furnishes the secure foundation for the life of the disciple.”¹⁴ If one hears the word of God and acts on it; does (*poiein*) it, his life will be built as securely as a house built upon the rock that can withstand the natural forces and buffetings of life. Like those natural forces that a house encounters, human life is subject to natural and man-made adverse forces; the vicissitudes of life. Challenges of life, hardships, oppositions, persecutions, quest for well-being, etc, abound and form part of human experiences. These can pull a Christian, a disciple down unless his or her life is firmly built on the Word of God. If one is able to live by the Word of God one hears, if one does the will of the heavenly Father, one’s life will be securely established; able to withstand various adverse conditions of life that threaten one’s faith in God. As A. Leske points out, “to build one’s house on a rock would have readily been understood by the audience to mean ‘to build one’s life on God’, since God was often referred to as ‘the Rock’ (Deut 32:4-31; Ps 62:6; Isa 26:4). A life built on this covenant relationship with God cannot fall, no matter how strong the forces against it.”¹⁵ If however one hides under the mere pretext of hearing the word of God without doing it, one can only end up being a false prophet, a hypocrite. He will prove himself by bearing bad fruit, and will be ineligible for admission into the kingdom of God. His will be ‘a great fall’, an eschatological disaster. In

¹⁰John L. McKenzie, “The Gospel According to Matthew” in Raymond E. Brown et alii (ed), *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1969) 75.

¹¹McKenzie, 75.

¹²Sherman E. Johnson, “The Gospel According to Matthew” in George Arthur Buttrick, ed. *The Interpreters Bible* Vol. VII, (New York: Abingdom Press, 1951) 334.

¹³Johnson, 335

¹⁴McKenzie, 176

¹⁵Leske, 1347-1348

the words of Raymond E. Brown, “the praise of those who hear Jesus’ words (7:24-27) as building a well-founded house almost constitutes a judgment against those who reject him.”¹⁶

Leske sees the import of this text as evocative of the Deuteronomic sermon with its covenant injunction of two ways (life and prosperity, death and adversity, Deut 30:15-18).¹⁷ He assessed the text this way: “the phrase ‘everyone...who hears these words of mine and acts on them’ is similar to the frequent exhortations to hear the words of the covenant and do them found in Deuteronomy (e.g. 5:1; 6:3). The sermon is thus identified as the new covenant, one that renews the original intent of the covenant at Sinai but is to be written in the hearts of the people (Jer 31:31-34; Isa 51:7).”¹⁸ For Benedict T. Viviano, “‘these words of mine’ points back to the Sermon itself as a kind of Torah. For Matthew following the word of Jesus is wisdom about life. Luke lacks this sapiential emphasis.”¹⁹ Such is the import of this powerful imagery on the reception of the word of God, and what it can do in a person’s life. It is either one obeys it and lives according to its demands, and is wise and sensible, experiencing a well ordered life established solidly on cordial relationship with God, the everlasting, dependable rock of refuge, or one labours in vain and reaps destruction, having built one’s house, one’s life on the sand of hypocrisy.

The Nigerian Context

The Christian scene in Nigeria looks promising as a house of disciples with many and ever multiplying Christian churches or communities. Every nook and corner of the city and the countryside is filled with churches sprouting and noisy. People troupe to churches. Pastors; the dispensers of the word, miracle workers, prophets and prophetesses, deacons, evangelists, Apostles and senior Apostles, prayer houses and ministries, all dot the Nigerian scene. Crusades and break-through gatherings, Christmas, Easter, Beginning of the Year and End year retreats and crusades are common experiences of a seemingly vibrant Christian community ever ready to witness to the word. But how much is the word obeyed? How much is the word lived? The result that Jesus laboured to point out stares the Christian communities in Nigeria in the face as the fruits reaped in Nigeria portend a bad tree rather than a good one. Some political leaders, most of whom are Christians are nothing but robbers and thieves of the public fund. Election is conducted with the highest perfection of dishonesty, violence and wickedness. The electorate, most of whom are Christians, are neck deep into all manner of unchristian conduct during elections and in other affairs of the society.

Nothing of the beatitudes, fulfilment of the law, trust in God or basic human goodness are called to mind in the pursuit and exercise of political office. The general public is not exempt from the macabre dance. Corruption is the generic name for all these unchristian mentality and acute lawlessness in Nigeria of which Christians and non Christians are both guilty. In the words of Lucius I. Ugorji, “Corruption involved moral decay, ethical rottenness and loss of integrity. In Nigeria it has many faces. It appears as bribery, embezzlement, inflation of bills, abuse of office, nepotism, looting of public property, impersonation, false declaration, cheating, deceit forgery, quackery, OBT /419, buying and manipulation of votes, etc.”²⁰ These unethical behaviour are canonized among many Nigerians, Christians and non – Christians alike. Is this not building a house on the sand that leads to personal and societal destruction that is presently experienced in Nigeria? Hence the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria in their communiqué of February 1999 writes: “We are painfully aware that corruption has eaten deep into the very fabric of the Nigerian society. It has become so pervasive that many now accept it as the “Nigerian way of

¹⁶Raymond E. Brown *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2000) 180.

¹⁷Leske, 1347.

¹⁸Leske, 1347.

¹⁹ Benedict T. Viviano, “The Gospel According to Matthew” in Raymond E. Brown et alii, ed., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 647.

²⁰Lucius I. Ugorji *Witness in Charity and Truth* (Enugu: Snaap, 2002) 98.

life”, or the Nigeria way of doing things. People now speak about a so called “Nigerian Factor” when they mean corruption.”²¹

Joseph D. Bagobiri writing a foreword to “Corruption in Nigeria” an the edited work of Catholic laity Council of Nigeria, 1999 Annual Conference at Uyo writes: “The Catholic Bishops were quick in warning that if things are allowed to continue the way they are now, corruption will eventually bring about the death both of individual Nigerians and the Nation itself”²². This prophecy has been fulfilled, Nigeria ranks among the most corrupt nations in the world and life has become very insecure. Robbery, assassination, fraud, and dishonesty abound. One takes a risk on one’s life to trust the other. Morality continues to nose-dive, and every person is sighing under the weight of corruption with lip-service to the faith in the word of God.

The Word, the Text, and Nigerian Christian Context

The text under survey speaks eloquently to Nigerian Christians (disciples). The image of a building is a very familiar one all over the world. Could one be thriving in self deception by building on the sand rather than on the rock? The text makes it clear that such an endeavour amounts to foolishness rather than wisdom. One labours unto destruction rather than security and well-being. Nigerian Christians, high and low, preacher and audience must think twice and deeply too. The word of God throws light on all facets of life for the guidance of the hearer and bearer of the word.

Jesus spoke so marvellously and threw so much light on some life and doctrinal perplexing issues that his audiences were astonished at the authority with which he spoke, not like the scribes. He had spoken on the real attitudes for real happiness, the beatitudes; he had perfected the teachings of the law and the prophets, taught the Our Father that establishes filial attitude in prayer, as well as proper ways of practicing piety, issue of judgment, trustful prayer, and confidence in God’s providence and so on. These and many others are proper attitudes expected of the disciples of the kingdom of God he was inaugurating. He concluded by giving stern warnings on poor reception of the word. Hypocrisy can never be helpful. One who hears the word must act on it in order to benefit from it. By so doing, the individual and the society will live godly lives and be better for it like a house built upon the rock. Hearing the word and not bearing good fruit with it leaves a person or a society in a great fall like house built on the sand. Commenting on the futility of hypocrisy Buttrick writes: “the temporary success of professionalism in Christianity need not deceive us. Men who used Lord, Lord as an incantation in the early Church won, in some instances, a striking success. But their harvest had no root and soon withered. Only real Christianity survives.”²³

If Nigerian Christians are to be true to their calling, the word of God should cease to be an article of commerce that the seller does not consume, and even the “buyer” buys it for the fun of it. People should learn to build their lives on and by the word of God they hear and preach, and not simply make boast of lengthy, verbose, noisy prayer and quotation of biblical passages. This attracts to the denunciation of the Psalmist (Ps 50:16-21):

But to the wicked God says: “What right have you to recite my statutes, or take my covenant on your lips? For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you. You make friends with a thief when you see one, and you keep company with adulterers. You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your mouth frames deceit. You sit and speak against your kin; you slander your own mother’s child. These things you have done and I have been silent; you thought that I was one just like yourself. But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you.

²¹Joseph Bagobiri “Foreword: Corruption in Nigeria” in Alice Awan et alii, ed., *Corruption in Nigeria* (Abuja, Catholic Laity Council of Nigeria, 2000) iii.

²²Bagobiri, iii.

²³George A. Buttrick, 333-334

There is a similar denunciation in Isaiah 29:13, “these people honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me”, also cited by Jesus in Matt 15:7-9. The Word of God is a bulwark, a rampart to those who believe it and keep it. Thus individual and communal lives are built up and firmly established against the forces of life; persecutions, trials, temptations and oppositions. Nigerian Christians will be true disciples of the kingdom of God when they live by the Word of God they hear and preach. When this happens corruption will be a thing of history and the society will progress. Presently the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Judiciary and other anti-corruption agencies are very busy because the preachers and hearers of the word in Nigeria are not doers of the word. Else, why is there power failure while N16bn has been sunk into it? Why is every facet of Nigerian life hugely infested with lawlessness, violence, greed, etc? Why is every thing going backward including education, economy etc? Why is there reneging on promises when Jesus has said, let your yes be yes and your no be no, any other thing comes from evil? Yet Christians and Christian activities abound everywhere, even in government houses. Few people who try to keep the word of God in private and public life make a great difference worthy of emulation, transforming the society for the better in their respective areas.

Conclusion

The word of God looms large in human life and in the whole of creation. Various images can be employed to capture different aspects of approaching it either in its being, operation or reception. The word of God can be regarded as rain that waters the ground and brings about the fruitfulness of the land (Isa 55:10-11). It is the spirit and life (John 6:63). It is the seed that the sower sowed that yields fruit according to the disposition of the land.

In the text of our study, the effect of the reception of the word is given in the image of a building. By the word of God one's life is built up. One who lives by the word is firmly established in all he does. He is a disciple and member of the kingdom of God. One who hears the word but ignores it can only pretend to be built up. But he is a hypocrite, a false prophet and this is manifested in the fruit the person bears. Besides, the person is like a foolish man who builds his house on the sand that cannot withstand natural forces that are bound to hit the house. In the words of M H. Crosby, “House concludes the last section of the Sermon on the Mount as it concludes the first section of the Sermon (5:15). The entire ethos contained within this first of Jesus' teaching makes it abundantly clear that authentic discipleship is manifested by house members who do their heavenly Father's will by good works manifested in justice.”²⁴ Christians in Nigeria and elsewhere are called upon to build upon the rock by keeping God's word in order that the happiness and blessings of the kingdom of God may be theirs; their lives made secure and firmly established like a house built on the rock. God's word is consequential; to possess and keep it is security, to ignore it is destruction; personal, national, and even an eternal disaster.

²⁴Grosby, 194