

BAIT AND SWITCH

We've all heard about bait and switch schemes, where a product or service turns out not to be at all what was advertised. In fact, the daily news is awash with what appears to be the most massive bait and switch scheme even seen and which is being perpetrated by our own government. But this is not a political piece.

Even the Bible has a bait and switch story. Jacob served Laban seven years in order to marry the beautiful young Rachel, but Laban gave him the ugly older sister Leah instead. It may have served Jacob right, since he was a deceiver himself, but it was clearly not what he signed up for.

In reading Jesus' explanation of the parable of the sower, the first sentence stood out to me. "When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart" (Matt. 13:19). We interpret that to mean "when someone hears the gospel." But is the gospel we share – the message that Jesus died for our sins so that we can be forgiven and receive eternal life – the full equivalent to "the message about the kingdom?"

The good news that both John the Baptist and Jesus shared was, "The kingdom of God is at hand." God was instituting His rule over the earth in a way He had not done thus far. The Jews understood the Messiah to be the One who would inaugurate God's rule over the earth. And to them that meant a military hero who would overthrow the Roman occupiers and set up God's kingdom, with Jerusalem as the capital of the world. God would rule over the affairs of men directly. He would be in charge. People would not only worship Him, but would do whatever He said.

There are many who are happy to receive the "good" part of the gospel. They are relieved to have the guilt of their sin removed, overjoyed to be viewed by God as righteous because of the perfectly-lived life of Christ, and moved by the hope of heaven in their future. But have we done them a disservice by not telling them Jesus is not only their Savior but also their Lord, their Master, the Boss, if you will?

Do we contribute to their misunderstanding of the message of the kingdom by failing to tell them the whole story? Do we neglect to mention Jesus' call to self-denial? Is His command to love and serve others, even the "least of these," forgotten? In this era of instant gratification, do we think the call to persevere to the end would be too much to ask? Are we afraid His warning that His followers would be misunderstood, persecuted, and even martyred, would scare them away? Don't we owe it to them to let them know that, while it is pre-eminently worth it, there is a cost involved?

What are we looking for in our Messiah? Do we only want the goodies and a way out of our temporal and eternal troubles? The Jews were resistant to much of Jesus' teaching (not to mention His claim to Deity). Are we resistant to His call to humility, service, righteousness, reconciliation, spiritual warfare, and perseverance in trusting Him through affliction, illness, trial, and persecution? Are we reluctant to share the fullness of the gospel with others?

Jesus was careful to make sure His followers knew the totality of what He was asking of them. He spent three years teaching His disciples both the good and the hard parts of what the kingdom of God would entail. Even when He appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, He said He would show him how much he would have to suffer for His name's sake (Acts 9:16). His was no bait and switch scheme. May we follow in His footsteps, not only in faith and obedience, but also in making sure we are not a party to the evil one in his theft of what is sown in people's hearts.