

THE
MACARTHUR
NEW TESTAMENT
COMMENTARY

— JOHN MACARTHUR —

MATTHEW 1-7

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COMMENTARY

MATTHEW 1-7
John MacArthur Jr.

MOODY PRESS/CHICAGO

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diligent colaborer and
loyal personal friend

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Preface

It continues to be a rewarding divine communion for me to preach expositionally through the New Testament. My goal is always to have deep fellowship with the Lord in the understanding of His Word, and out of that experience to explain to His people what a passage means. In the words of Nehemiah 8:8, I strive “to give the sense” of it so they may truly hear God speak and, in so doing, may respond to Him.

Obviously, God’s people need to understand Him, which demands knowing His Word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15) and allowing that Word to dwell in us richly (Col. 3:16). The dominant thrust of my ministry, therefore, is to help make God’s living Word alive to His people. It is a refreshing adventure.

This New Testament commentary series reflects this objective of explaining and applying Scripture. Some commentaries are primarily linguistic, others are mostly theological, and some are mainly homiletical. This one is basically explanatory, or expository. It is not linguistically technical, but deals with linguistics when this seems helpful to proper interpretation. It is not theologically expansive, but focuses on the major doctrines in each text and on how they relate to the whole of Scripture. It is not primarily homiletical, though each unit of thought is generally treated as one chapter, with a clear outline and logical flow of thought. Most truths are illustrated and applied with other Scripture. After establishing the context of a passage, I have tried to follow closely the writer’s development and reasoning.

My prayer is that each reader will fully understand what the Holy Spirit is saying through this part of His Word, so that His revelation may lodge in the minds of believers and bring greater obedience and faithfulness—to the glory of our great God.

Introduction

The central personality of Old Testament prophecy is the coming great King who will rule in God's promised kingdom. Over and over we are told of a special individual who has the righteousness, the wisdom, the power, the authority, and the right to reign not only over Israel but over the entire earth.

This coming great King will have the power to bruise Satan's head (Gen. 3:15), take back man's dominion that was lost through sin, and establish at last a kingdom on earth that will extend into eternity. From Him the "scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet" (Gen. 49:10). That could not be said of any Old Testament king, and could only apply to the coming great King. The host of other predictions that refer to a reign described by such terms as everlasting, eternal, and forever obviously could not apply to a merely human king.

The words of the Lord spoken to David through Nathan had to refer to other than David himself: "And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam. 7:16). David's kingdom was shattered and divided as soon as his successor, Solomon, died—and as yet has never been reestablished.

Yet in Psalm 2 God tells us, "But as for Me, I have installed My King upon Zion, My holy mountain. I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to Me, 'Thou art My Son, today I have begotten Thee. Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Thine inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Thy possession'" (vv. 6-8). David calls the coming One "the King of glory" and "the Lord of hosts" (Ps. 24:10). The coming King is spoken of in similar ways in Psalms 45, 72, 110, and others.

The prophets speak of the great King as both human and divine. Isaiah tells us that He would be born of a virgin (7:14) and that He would be despised, forsaken, stricken, pierced through, crushed, chastened, scourged, oppressed, and afflicted (53:3-7). Daniel speaks of Him as "One

like a Son of Man” (7:13). Yet Isaiah also tells us that “the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace” (9:6-7) and that He will be called “Immanuel,” which means “God with us” (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23). Through Micah, the Lord promised Bethlehem: “From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity” (5:2). Zephaniah tells his people that when this King comes He will be “the King of Israel, the Lord” in their midst (3:15). Zechariah tells us that He will “be just and endowed with salvation” (9:9) and that when He reigns, every family on earth will be able to “go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of hosts” (14:17). The coming great King would be the Man-God.

None of those ancient writers comprehended the full nature of the One of whom they prophesied. “As to this salvation,” Peter tells us, “the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ [that is, Messiah] within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow” (1 Pet. 1:10-11).

The full identity and nature of the predicted King are initially presented and explained in the gospels, of which Matthew is the first. Like a divine spotlight they focus on Jesus and, through one event after another, show Him to be the only One who fulfills all the requirements of those prophesies. By the same token all impostors are unmasked by their inability to fit the predictions.

The whole New Testament acknowledges Jesus as the promised great King. In its twenty-seven books the term *basileia* (kingdom) is used one hundred forty-four times in referring to the reign of Jesus Christ; *basileus* (king) is used directly of Jesus at least thirty-five times; and *basileuō* (to reign) is used of Him some ten times.

AUTHORSHIP

At the time Christ was born, Israel had been under Roman domination for some sixty years. One of the worst aspects of Roman

oppression was the system of taxation, which was methodical, relentless, and ruthless. Two basic taxes were levied—the toll tax, which was comparable to the modern income tax, and the ground tax, a property and land tax.

Roman senators and various other high-ranking officials would buy from the central government at public auction the right of collecting the toll taxes in a given country, province, or region at a fixed rate for a period of five years. Whatever was collected above that amount was kept as profit. Those who held such taxing rights were called *publicani*. The *publicani* would hire others, usually citizens of the country being taxed, to do the actual collecting.

Those collectors had somewhat the same arrangement with the *publicani* that the *publicani* had with Rome. Whatever they managed to collect above the amount demanded by the *publicani* they kept as their own profit. Both the *publicani* and the tax-gatherers, therefore, had strong motivation to exact and collect as much tax as possible—knowing they were backed by the full authority, including the military authority, of Rome.

The tax-gatherers (Greek *telones*) quite naturally were hated by their own people, not only as extortioners but as traitors. In Israel they were ranked with the lowest of human society—sinners, prostitutes, and Gentiles (Matt. 9:10-11; 18:17; 21:31-32; Mark 2:15-16; Luke 5:30; etc.).

Matthew, who was also called Levi, was a tax-gatherer when Jesus called him to be one of the twelve disciples (Matt. 9:9; Mark 2:14). We have little idea as to what sort of person Matthew was before Jesus called him. It is doubtful that he was very religious, because tax-gatherers were ostracized, practically if not officially, from many synagogues and sometimes even from the Temple. It was no doubt partly for that reason that Matthew so quickly responded to Jesus' invitation and that so many other tax-gatherers were attracted to Him (Matt. 9:9-10; 11:19; Luke 15:1). It was rare that they were accepted and befriended by a fellow Jew, especially by a rabbi, or teacher, such as Jesus.

Matthew was particularly modest in writing his gospel account. He always refers to himself in the third person and nowhere speaks of himself as the author. We know of his authorship because his name is attached to all early copies of the manuscripts and because the early church Fathers unanimously attest him to be the book's author.

It is obvious from the text itself that Matthew wrote this gospel before the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70. Apart from that general dating, it is impossible to be dogmatic as to a specific year.

MESSAGE

The first four books of the New Testament report the same gospel account, but from four distinct perspectives. They give the same message with differing but perfectly harmonious emphases. Matthew presents Jesus as the sovereign, whereas Mark presents Him in the extreme opposite role as servant. Luke presents Him as the Son of Man, whereas John presents Him as the Son of God. The same Jesus is shown to be both sovereign God and servant Man.

In presenting the sovereignty of Jesus, Matthew begins his gospel with the genealogy of the Lord—going back to Abraham, the father of the Hebrew people, through King David, Israel’s model king. In presenting Jesus’ servanthood, Mark gives no genealogy at all, because a servant’s lineage is irrelevant. In presenting Jesus as the Son of Man, Luke traces His genealogy back to the first man, Adam. In presenting Jesus as the divine Son of God, John gives no human genealogy or birth and childhood narratives. He opens his gospel by giving, as it were, Jesus’ divine genealogy: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1).

The message of the book of Matthew centers on the theme of Jesus’ kingship. Just as virtually every paragraph of the gospel of John points to something of Christ’s deity, so virtually every paragraph of Matthew points to something of His kingship.

Matthew presents the Messiah King who is *revealed*, the King who is *rejected*, and the King who will *return*. Jesus is painted in royal colors in this gospel as in none of the others. His ancestry is traced from the royal line of Israel; his birth is dreaded by a jealous earthly king; the magi bring the infant Jesus royal gifts from the east; and John the Baptist heralds the King and proclaims that His kingdom is at hand. Even the temptations in the wilderness climax with Satan offering Jesus the kingdoms of this world. The Sermon on the Mount is the manifesto of the King, the

miracles are His royal credentials, and many of the parables portray the mysteries of His kingdom. Jesus identifies Himself with the king's son in a parable and makes a royal entry into Jerusalem. While facing the cross He predicts His future reign, and He claims dominion over the angels in heaven. His last words are that all authority has been given to Him in both heaven and earth (28:18).

Yet Matthew also focuses most uniquely on the rejection of Jesus as King. In no other gospel are the attacks against Jesus' character and Jesus' claims so bitter and vile as those reported in Matthew. The shadow of rejection is never lifted from Matthew's story. Before Jesus was born, His mother, Mary, was in danger of being rejected by Joseph. Soon after He was born, Herod threatened His life, and His parents had to flee with Him to Egypt. His herald, John the Baptist, was put in a dungeon and eventually beheaded. During His earthly ministry Jesus had no place to lay His head, no place to call home. In Matthew's gospel no penitent thief acknowledges Jesus' Lordship, and no friend or loved one is seen at the foot of the cross—only the mockers and scorners. Even the women are pictured at a distance (27:55-56), and in His death Jesus cries out, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (27:46). Only a Gentile centurion speaks a favorable word about the crucified One: "Truly this was the Son of God!" (27:54). When some of the soldiers who had stood guard over the tomb reported its being empty, the Jewish authorities paid them to say that Jesus' body was stolen by His disciples (28:11-15).

Yet Jesus is also shown as the King who ultimately will return to judge and to rule. All the earth one day "will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory" (24:30), His coming will be "at an hour when you do not think He will" (v. 44), and He will come in glory and in judgment (25:31-33).

No reader can fully immerse himself in this gospel without emerging with a compelling sense of both the eternal majesty of the Lord Jesus Christ and the strong power that sin and Satan held over the apostate Israel that rejected Christ.

No gospel is more instructive to those who are the Lord's disciples and who are called to represent Him in the world. The lessons on discipleship are life-changing for the committed reader, as they were for the eleven who were Jesus' first followers. Thus, with all its great themes of majesty and glory, rejection and apostasy, the book of Matthew lacks no

practicality. Woven through all that is the constant thread of revealed instruction for those who are His representatives among men.

OUTLINE

- The King's ancestry—His genealogy (1:1-17)
- The King's arrival—His virgin birth (1:18-25)
- The King's adoration—the worship of the magi (2:1-12)
- The King's anticipation—the fulfilled prophecies of His coming (2:13-23)
- The King's announcer—John the Baptist (3:1-12)
- The King's affirmation—His baptism; His sonship affirmed by the Father (3:13-17)
- The King's advantage—His defeat of Satan (4:1-11)
- The King's activity—His ministry and miracles (4:12-25)
- The King's address—His manifesto: The Sermon on the Mount (5-7)
 - Righteousness and happiness (5:1-12)
 - Righteousness and discipleship (5:13-16)
 - Righteousness and the Scriptures (5:17-20)
 - Righteousness and morality (5:21-48)
 - Righteousness and practical religion (6:1-18)
 - Righteousness and mundane things (6:19-34)
 - Righteousness and human relations (7:1-12)
 - Righteousness and salvation (7:13-29)

The Gracious King (1:1-17)

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

To Abraham was born Isaac; and to Isaac, Jacob; and to Jacob, Judah and his brothers; and to Judah were born Perez and Zerah by Tamar; and to Perez was born Hezron; and to Hezron, Ram; and to Ram was born Amminadab; and to Amminadab, Nahshon; and to Nahshon, Salmon; and to Salmon was born Boaz by Rahab; and to Boaz was born Obed by Ruth; and to Obed, Jesse; and to Jesse was born David the king. And to David was born Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah; and to Solomon was born Rehoboam; and to Rehoboam, Abijah; and to Abijah, Asa; and to Asa was born Jehoshaphat; and to Jehoshaphat, Joram; and to Joram, Uzziah; and to Uzziah was born Jotham; and to Jotham, Ahaz; and to Ahaz, Hezekiah; and to Hezekiah was born Manasseh; and to Manasseh, Amon; and to Amon, Josiah; and to Josiah were born Jeconiah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

And after the deportation to Babylon, to Jeconiah was born Shealtiel; and to Shealtiel, Zerubbabel; and to Zerubbabel was born Abiud; and to Abiud, Eliakim; and to Eliakim, Azor; and to Azor was born Zadok; and to Zadok, Achim; and to Achim, Eliud; and to Eliud was born Eleazar; and to Eleazar, Matthan; and to Matthan, Jacob; and to Jacob was born Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.

Therefore all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the time of Christ fourteen generations. (1:1-17)

As discussed in the introduction, one of Matthew's major purposes in his gospel, and the primary purpose of chapters 1 and 2, is to establish Jesus' right to Israel's kingship. To any honest observer, and certainly to Jews who knew and believed their own Scriptures, these two chapters vindicate Jesus' claim before Pilate: "You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world" (John 18:37).

Consistent with that purpose of revealing Jesus to be the Christ (Messiah) and the King of the Jews, Matthew begins his gospel by showing Jesus' lineage from the royal line of Israel. If Jesus is to be heralded and proclaimed king there must be proof that He comes from the recognized royal family.

Messiah's royal line began with David. Through the prophet Nathan, God promised that it would be David's descendants through whom He would bring the great King who would ultimately reign over Israel and establish His eternal kingdom (2 Sam. 7:12-16). The promise was not fulfilled in Solomon, David's son who succeeded him, or in any other king who ruled in Israel or Judah; and the people waited for another one to be born of David's line to fulfill the prophecy. At the time Jesus was born the Jews were still anticipating the arrival of the promised monarch and the restored glory of the kingdom.

The Jews' concern for pedigrees, however, existed long before they had a king. After they entered Canaan under Joshua and conquered the region God had promised to them, the land was carefully and precisely divided into territories for each tribe—except the priestly tribe of Levi, for whom special cities were designated. In order to know where to live, each Israelite family had to determine accurately the tribe to which it belonged (see Num. 26; 34-35). And in order to qualify for priestly function, a Levite had to prove his descent from Levi. After the return from exile in Babylon, certain "sons of the priests" were not allowed to serve in the priesthood because "their ancestral registration . . . could not be located" (Ezra 2:61-62).

The transfer of property also required accurate knowledge of the family tree (see, e.g., Ruth 3-4). Even under Roman rule, the census of Jews in Palestine was based on tribe—as can be seen from the fact that Joseph and Mary were required to register in "Bethlehem, because he [Joseph] was of the house and family of David" (Luke 2:4). We learn from

the Jewish historian Josephus that in New Testament times many Jewish families maintained detailed and highly valued ancestral files. Before his conversion, the apostle Paul had been greatly concerned about his lineage from “the tribe of Benjamin” (see Rom. 11:1; 2 Cor. 11:22; Phil. 3:5). For Jews, tribal identification and line of descent were all-important.

It is both interesting and significant that since the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 no genealogies exist that can trace the ancestry of any Jew now living. The primary significance of that fact is that, for those Jews who still look for the Messiah, his lineage to David could never be established. Jesus Christ is the last verifiable claimant to the throne of David, and therefore to the messianic line.

Matthew’s genealogy presents a descending line, from **Abraham** through **David**, through **Joseph**, to **Jesus, who is called Christ**. Luke’s genealogy presents an ascending line, starting from Jesus and going back through David, Abraham, and even to “Adam, the son of God” (Luke 3:23-38). Luke’s record is apparently traced from Mary’s side, the Eli of Luke 3:23 probably being Joseph’s father-in-law (often referred to as a father) and therefore Mary’s natural father. Matthew’s intent is to validate Jesus’ royal claim by showing His legal descent from David through Joseph, who was Jesus’ legal, though not natural, father. Luke’s intent is to trace Jesus’ actual royal blood ancestry through his mother, thereby establishing His racial lineage from David. Matthew follows the royal line through David and Solomon, David’s son and successor to the throne. Luke follows the royal line through Nathan, another son of David. Jesus was therefore the blood descendant of David through Mary and the legal descendant of David through Joseph. Genealogically, Jesus was perfectly qualified to take the throne of David.

It is essential to note that in His virgin birth Jesus not only was divinely conceived but through that miracle was protected from regal disqualification because of Joseph’s being a descendant of **Jeconiah** (v. 12). Because of that king’s wickedness, God had declared of Jeconiah (also called Jehoiachin or Coniah) that, though he was in David’s line, “no man of his descendants will prosper, sitting on the throne of David or ruling again in Judah” (Jer. 22:30). That curse would have precluded Jesus’ right to kingship had He been the natural son of Joseph, who was in Jeconiah’s line. Jesus’ legal descent from David, which was always traced through the father, came through Jeconiah to Joseph. But His blood descent, *and His*

human right to rule, came through Mary, who was not in Jeconiah's lineage. Thus the curse on Jeconiah's offspring was circumvented, while still maintaining the royal privilege.

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (1:1)

Biblos (book) can also refer to a record or account, as is the case here. Matthew is giving a brief record of **the genealogy** (*genesis*, "beginning, origin") **of Jesus Christ. Jesus** is from the Greek equivalent of Jeshua, or Jehoshua, which means "Jehovah (Yahweh) saves." It was the name the angel told Joseph to give to the Son who had been miraculously conceived in his betrothed, Mary, because this One who would soon be born would indeed "save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). **Christos (Christ)** is the Greek form of the Hebrew *māshîah* (Eng., messiah), which means "anointed one." Israel's prophets, priests, and kings were anointed, and Jesus was anointed as all three. He was *the Anointed One, the Messiah*, whom the Jews had long expected to come as their great deliverer and monarch.

Yet because of their unbelief and misunderstanding of Scripture, many Jews refused to recognize Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. Some rejected Him for the very reason that His parents were known to them. When He went back to His hometown of Nazareth He "began teaching them in their synagogue, so that they became astonished, and said, 'Where did this man get this wisdom, and these miraculous powers? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us?'" (Matt. 13:54-56). On another occasion, others in Jerusalem said of Jesus, "The rulers do not really know that this is the Christ, do they? However, we know where this man is from; but whenever the Christ may come, no one knows where He is from" (John 7:26-27). A short while later, "Some of the multitude therefore, when they heard these words, were saying, 'This certainly is the Prophet.' Others were saying, 'This is the Christ.' Still others were saying, 'Surely the Christ is not going to come from Galilee, is He?'" (John 7:40-41). Still others, better taught in the Scriptures but unaware of Jesus' lineage and birthplace, said, "Has not the

Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" (v. 42).

The genealogy establishes the Messiah's royal lineage. Matthew's intent is not to have the reader digress into a study of each person listed, but is to show that all of these persons point to the royalty of Christ.

THE GRACIOUS KING

Even so, from Matthew's genealogy we learn more than Jesus' lineage. We also see beautiful reflections of God's grace. Jesus was sent by a God of grace to be a King of grace. He would not be a King of law and of iron force, but a King of grace. His royal credentials testify of royal grace. And the people He chose to be His ancestors reveal the wonder of grace, and give hope to all sinners.

The graciousness of this King and of the God who sent Him can be seen in the genealogy in four places and ways. We will look at these in logical, rather than chronological, order.

THE GRACE OF GOD SEEN IN THE CHOICE OF ONE WOMAN

And to Jacob was born Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ. (1:16)

God showed His grace to Mary by choosing her to be the mother of Jesus. Although descended from the royal line of David, Mary was an ordinary, unknown young woman. Contrary to claims of her own immaculate conception (her being conceived miraculously in her own mother's womb), Mary was just as much a sinner as all other human beings ever born. She was likely much better, morally and spiritually, than most people of her time, but she was not sinless. She was deeply devout

and faithful to the Lord, as she demonstrated by her humble and submissive response to the angel's announcement (Luke 1:38).

Mary needed a Savior, as she herself acknowledged at the very beginning of her song of praise, often called the Magnificat: "My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant" (Luke 1:46-48). The notions of her being co-redemptrix and co-mediator with Christ are wholly unscriptural and were never a part of early church doctrine. Those heretical ideas came into the church several centuries later, through accommodations to pagan myths that originated in the Babylonian mystery religions.

Nimrod, a grandson of Ham, one of Noah's three sons, founded the great cities of Babel (Babylon), Erech, Accad, Calneh, and Nineveh (Gen. 10:10-11). It was at Babel that the first organized system of idolatry began with the tower built there. Nimrod's wife, Semiramis, became the first high priestess of idolatry, and Babylon became the fountainhead of all evil systems of religion. In the last days, "the great harlot" will have written on her forehead, "BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH" (Rev. 17:5). When Babylon was destroyed, the pagan high priest at that time fled to Pergamum (or Pergamos; called "where Satan's throne is" in Rev. 2:13) and then to Rome. By the fourth century A.D. much of the polytheistic paganism of Rome had found its way into the church. It was from that source that the ideas of Lent, of Mary's immaculate conception, and of her being the "queen of heaven" originated. In the pagan legends, Semiramis was miraculously conceived by a sunbeam, and her son, Tammuz, was killed and was raised from the dead after forty days of fasting by his mother (the origin of Lent). The same basic legends were found in counterpart religions throughout the ancient world. Semiramis was known variously as Ashtoreth, Isis, Aphrodite, Venus, and Ishtar. Tammuz was known as Baal, Osiris, Eros, and Cupid.

Those pagan systems had infected Israel centuries before the coming of Christ. It was to Ishtar, "the queen of heaven," that the wicked and rebellious Israelite exiles in Egypt insisted on turning (Jer. 44:17-19; cf. 7:18). While exiled in Babylon with his fellow Jews, Ezekiel had a vision from the Lord about the "abominations" some Israelites were committing even in the Temple at Jerusalem—practices that included

“weeping for Tammuz” (Ezek. 8:13-14). Here we see some of the origins of the mother-child cult, which has drawn Mary into its grasp.

The Bible knows nothing of Mary’s grace except that which she received from the Lord. She was the recipient, never the dispenser, of grace. The literal translation of “favored one” (Luke 1:28) is “one endued with grace.” Just as all the rest of fallen mankind, Mary needed God’s grace and salvation. That is why she “rejoiced in God [her] Savior” (Luke 1:47). She received a special measure of the Lord’s grace by being chosen to be the mother of Jesus; but she was never a source of grace. God’s grace chose a sinful woman to have the unequalled privilege of giving birth to the Messiah.

THE GRACE OF GOD SEEN IN THE DESCENDANTS OF TWO MEN

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (1:1)

Both **David** and **Abraham** were sinners, yet by God’s grace they were ancestors of the Messiah, the **Christ**.

David sinned terribly in committing adultery with Bathsheba and then compounded the sin by having her husband, Uriah, killed so that he could marry her. As a warrior he had slaughtered countless men, and for that reason was not allowed to build the Temple (1 Chron. 22:8). David was a classic example of a poor father, who failed to discipline his children, one of whom (Absalom) even tried to usurp the throne from his own father by armed rebellion.

Abraham, though a man of great faith, twice lied about his wife, Sarah. Out of fear for his life and lack of trust in God, he told two different pagan kings that she was his sister (Gen. 12:11-19; 20:1-18). In so doing he brought shame on Sarah, on himself, and on the God in whom he believed and whom he claimed to serve.

Yet God made Abraham the father of His chosen people, Israel, from whom the Messiah would arise; and He made David father of the

royal line from whom the Messiah would descend. Jesus was the Son of David by royal descent and Son of Abraham by racial descent.

God's grace also extended to the intervening descendants of those two men. Isaac was the son of promise, and a type of the sacrificial Savior, being himself willingly offered to God (Gen. 22:1-13). God gave the name of Isaac's son, Jacob, (later renamed Israel) to His chosen people. Jacob's sons (Judah and his brothers) became heads of the tribes of Israel. All of those men were sinful and at times were weak and unfaithful. But God was continually faithful to them, and His grace was always with them, even in times of rebuke and discipline.

Solomon, David's son and successor to the throne, was peaceful and wise, but also in many ways foolish. He sowed seeds of both domestic and spiritual corruption by marrying hundreds of wives—most of them from pagan countries throughout the world of that time. They turned Solomon's heart, and the hearts of many other Israelites, away from the Lord (1 Kings 11:1-8). The unity of Israel was broken, and the kingdom soon became divided. But the royal line remained unbroken, and God's promise to David eventually was fulfilled. God's grace prevailed.

A careful look at the descendants both of Abraham and of David (vv. 2-16) reveals people who were often characterized by unfaithfulness, immorality, idolatry, and apostasy. But God's dealing with them was always characterized by grace. **Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham,** was sent to overcome the failures of both those men and of all their descendants, and to accomplish what they could never have accomplished. The King of grace came through the line of two sinful men.

THE GRACE OF GOD SEEN IN THE HISTORY OF THREE ERAS

Therefore all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the time of Christ fourteen generations. (1:17)

From Matthew's summary of the genealogy we see God's grace at work in three periods, or eras, of Israel's history.

The first period, **from Abraham to David**, was that of the patriarchs, and of Moses, Joshua, and the judges. It was a period of wandering, of enslavement in a foreign land, of deliverance, of covenant-making and law-giving, and of conquest and victory.

The second period, **from David to the deportation to Babylon**, was that of the monarchy, when Israel, having insisted on having human kings like all the nations around them, discovered that those kings more often led them away from God and into trouble than to God and into peace and prosperity. That was a period of almost uninterrupted decline, degeneracy, apostasy, and tragedy. There was defeat, conquest, exile, and the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. Only in David, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah do we see much evidence of godliness.

The third period, **from the deportation to Babylon to the time of Christ**, was that of captivity, exile, frustration, and of marking time. Most of the men Matthew mentions in this period—from Shealtiel to Jacob the father of Joseph—are unknown to us apart from this list. It is a period shrouded largely in darkness and characterized largely by inconsequence. It was Israel's Dark Ages.

Nevertheless, God's grace was at work on behalf of His people through all three periods. The national genealogy of Jesus is one of mingled glory and pathos, heroism and disgrace, renown and obscurity. Israel rises, falls, stagnates, and finally rejects and crucifies the Messiah that God sent *to* them. But God, in His infinite grace, yet sent His Messiah *through* them.

THE GRACE OF GOD SEEN IN THE INCLUSION OF FOUR OUTCASTS

and to Judah were born Perez and Zerah by Tamar; and to Perez was born Hezron; and to Hezron, Ram; and to Ram was born Amminadab; and to Amminadab, Nahshon; and to Nahshon, Salmon; and to Salmon was born Boaz by Rahab; and to Boaz was born Obed by Ruth; and to

Obed, Jesse; and to Jesse was born David the king. And to David was born Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah. (1:3-6)

Matthew's genealogy also shows us the work of God's grace in His choosing four former outcasts, each of them women (the only women listed until the mention of Mary), through whom the Messiah and great King would descend. These women are exceptional illustrations of God's grace and are included for that reason in the genealogy that otherwise is all men.

The first outcast was **Tamar**, the Canaanite daughter-in-law of **Judah**. God had taken the lives of her husband, Er, and of his next oldest brother, Onan, because of their wickedness. Judah then promised the young, childless widow that his third son, Shelah, would become her husband and raise up children in his brother's name when he grew up. After Judah failed to keep that promise, Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and tricked him into having sexual relations with her. From that illicit union were born twin sons, **Perez and Zerah**. The sordid story is found in Genesis 38. As we learn from the genealogy, **Tamar** and **Perez** joined **Judah** in the messianic line. Despite prostitution and incest, God's grace fell on all three of those undeserving persons, including a desperate and deceptive Gentile harlot.

The second outcast also was a woman and a Gentile. She, too, was guilty of prostitution, but for her, unlike Tamar, it was a profession. **Rahab**, an inhabitant of Jericho, protected the two Israelite men Joshua sent to spy out the city. She lied to the messengers of the king of Jericho in order to save the spies; but because of her fear of Him and her kind act toward His people, God spared her life and the lives of her family when Jericho was besieged and destroyed (Josh. 2:1-21; 6:22-25). God's grace not only spared her life but brought her into the messianic line, as the wife of **Salmon** and the mother of the godly **Boaz**, who was David's great-grandfather.

The third outcast was **Ruth**, the wife of **Boaz**. Like Tamar and Rahab, **Ruth** was a Gentile. After her first husband, an Israelite, had died, she returned to Israel with her mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth was a godly, loving, and sensitive woman who had accepted the Lord as her own God. Her people, the pagan Moabites, were the product of the incestuous

relations of Lot with his two unmarried daughters. In order to preserve the family line, because they had no husbands or brothers, each of the daughters got their father drunk and caused him to unknowingly have sexual relations with them. The son produced by Lot's union with his oldest daughter was Moab, father of a people who became one of Israel's most implacable enemies. Mahlon, the Israelite man who married **Ruth**, did so in violation of the Mosaic law (Deut. 7:3; cf. 23:3; Ezra 9:2; Neh. 13:23) and many Jewish writers say his early death, and that of his brother, were a divine judgment on their disobedience. Though she was a Moabite and former pagan, with no right to marry an Israelite, God's grace not only brought **Ruth** into the family of Israel, but later, through Boaz, into the royal line. She became the grandmother of Israel's great King David.

The fourth outcast was Bathsheba. She is not identified in the genealogy by name, but is mentioned simply as the wife of **David** and the former **wife of Uriah**. As already mentioned, David committed adultery with her, had her husband sent to the battlefield to be killed, and then took her as his own wife. The son produced by the adultery died in infancy, but the next son born to them was **Solomon** (2 Sam. 11:1-27; 12:14, 24), successor to David's throne and continuer of the messianic line. By God's grace, Bathsheba became the wife of David, the mother of Solomon, and an ancestor of the Messiah.

The genealogy of Jesus Christ is immeasurably more than a list of ancient names; it is even more than a list of Jesus' human forebears. It is a beautiful testimony to God's grace and to the ministry of His Son, Jesus Christ, the friend of sinners, who "did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt. 9:13). If He has called sinners by grace to be His forefathers, should we be surprised when He calls them by grace to be His descendants? The King presented here is truly the King of grace!

2

[The Virgin Birth \(1:18-25\)](#)

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her, desired to put her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins.” Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which translated means, “God with us.” And Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took her as his wife, and kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus. (1:18-25)

Biblical history records some amazing and spectacular births. The birth of Isaac to a previously barren woman nearly one hundred years old, who was laughing at the thought of having a child, was a miraculous event. The womb of Manoah’s barren wife was opened and she gave birth to Samson, who was to turn a lion inside out, kill a thousand men, and pull down a pagan temple. The birth of Samuel, the prophet and anointer of

kings, to the barren Hannah, whose womb the Lord had shut, revealed divine providential power. Elizabeth was barren, but through the power of God she gave birth to John the Baptist, of whom Jesus said there had yet been no one greater “among those born of women” (Matt. 11:11). But the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus surpasses all of those.

Fantasy and mythology have counterfeited the virgin birth of Jesus Christ with a proliferation of false accounts intended to minimize His utterly unique birth.

For example, the Romans believed that Zeus impregnated Semele without contact and that she conceived Dionysus, lord of the earth. The Babylonians believed that Tammuz (see Ezek. 8:14) was conceived in the priestess Semiramis by a sunbeam. In an ancient Sumerian/Assyrian story inscribed on a wall, Tukulti II (890-884 B.C.) told how the gods created him in the womb of his mother. It was even claimed that the goddess of procreation superintended the conception of King Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.). At the conception of Buddha, his mother supposedly saw a great white elephant enter her belly. Hinduism has claimed that the divine Vishnu, after incarnations as a fish, tortoise, boar, and lion, descended into the womb of Devaki and was born as her son Krishna. There is even a legend that Alexander the Great was virgin born by the power of Zeus through a snake that impregnated his mother, Olympias. Satan has set up many more such myths to counterfeit the birth of Christ in order to make it seem either common or legendary.

Modern science even speaks of parthenogenesis, which comes from a Greek term meaning “virgin born.” In the world of honey bees, unfertilized eggs develop into drones, or males. Artificial parthenogenesis has been successful with unfertilized eggs of silkworms. The eggs of sea urchins and marine worms have begun to develop when placed in various salt solutions. In 1939 and 1940, rabbits were produced (all female) through chemical and temperature influences on ova. Nothing like that has ever come close to accounting for human beings; all such parthenogenesis is impossible within the human race. Science, like mythology, has no explanation for the virgin birth of Christ. He was neither merely the son of a previously barren woman nor a freak of nature. By the clear testimony of Scripture, He was conceived by God and born of a virgin.

Nevertheless, religious polls taken over the past several generations reveal the impact of liberal theology in a marked and

continuing decline in the percentage of professed Christians who believe in the virgin birth, and therefore in the deity, of Jesus Christ. One wonders why they want to be identified with a person who, if their judgment of Him were correct, had to have been either deceived or deceptive—since all four gospels explicitly teach that Jesus considered Himself to be more than a man. It is clear from the rest of the New Testament as well as from historical records that Jesus, His disciples, and all of the early church held Him to be none other than the divine Son of God. Even His enemies knew He claimed such identity (John 5:18-47).

A popular religious personality said in an interview a few years ago that he could not in print or in public deny the virgin birth of Christ, but that neither could he preach it or teach it. “When I have something I can’t comprehend,” he explained, “I just don’t deal with it.” But to ignore the virgin birth is to ignore Christ’s deity. And to ignore His deity is tantamount to denying it. Real incarnation demands a real virgin birth.

But such unbelief should not surprise us. Unbelief has been man’s greatest problem since the Fall and has always been man’s majority view. But “What then?” Paul asks. “If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar” (Rom. 3:3-4). Every faithful prophet, preacher, or teacher at some time has asked with Isaiah and Paul, “Lord, who has believed our report?” (Rom. 10:16; cf. Isa. 53:1). But popular opinion, even within the church, has not always been a reliable source of truth. When men pick and choose which parts of God’s Word to believe and follow, they set themselves above His Word and therefore above Him (cf. Ps. 138:2).

Matthew’s purpose in writing his gospel account was partly apologetic—not in the sense of making an apology for the gospel but in the more traditional sense of explaining and defending it against its many attacks and misrepresentations. Jesus’ humanity was often maligned and His deity often denied. Possibly during His earthly ministry, and certainly after His death and resurrection, it is likely Jesus was slandered by the accusation that He was the illegitimate son of Mary by some unknown man, perhaps a Roman soldier garrisoned in Galilee. It was Jesus’ claim of deity, however, that most incensed the Jewish leaders and brought them to demand His death. “For this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also

was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God” (John 5:18).

It is surely no accident, therefore, that the beginning of Matthew’s gospel, at the outset of the New Testament, is devoted to establishing both the regal humanity and the deity of Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus’ being both human and divine, there is no gospel. The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the central fact of Christianity. The whole superstructure of Christian theology is built on it. The essence and the power of the gospel is that God became man and that, by being both wholly God and wholly man, He was able to reconcile men to God. Jesus’ virgin birth, His substitutionary atoning death, resurrection, ascension, and return are all integral aspects of His deity. They stand or fall together. If any of those teachings—all clearly taught in the New Testament—is rejected, the entire gospel is rejected. None makes sense, or could have any significance or power, apart from the others. If those things were not true, even Jesus’ moral teachings would be suspect, because if He misrepresented who He was by preposterously claiming equality with God, how could anything else He said be trusted? Or if the gospel writers misrepresented who He was, why should we trust their word about anything else He said or did?

Jesus once asked the Pharisees a question about Himself that men have been asking in every generation since then: “What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?” (Matt. 22:42). That is the question Matthew answers in the first chapter of this gospel. Jesus is the human Son of man and the divine Son of God.

As we have seen, the first seventeen verses give Jesus’ human lineage—his royal descent from Abraham through David and through Joseph, His legal human father. The Jewish leaders of New Testament times acknowledged that the Messiah would be of the royal line of David; but, for the most part, they agreed on little more than that concerning Him.

History informs us that even the conservative Pharisees did not generally believe that the Messiah would be divine. Had Jesus not claimed to be more than the son of David, He may have begun to convince some of the Jewish leaders of His messiahship. Once He claimed to be God, however, they rejected Him immediately. Many people still today are willing to recognize Him as a great teacher, a model of high moral character, and even a prophet from God. Were He no more than those things, however, He could not have conquered sin or death or Satan. In

short, He could not have saved the world. He would also have been guilty of grossly misrepresenting Himself.

It is interesting that certain condescending interpreters of the New Testament acknowledge that Matthew and other writers sincerely believed and taught that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, that He had no human father. But, they claim, those men were uneducated and captive to the usual superstitions and myths of their times. They simply picked up on the many virgin birth legends that were common in the ancient world and adapted them to the gospel story.

It is true that pagan religions of that day, such as those of Semiramis and Tammuz, had myths of various kinds involving miraculous conceptions. But the immoral and repulsive character of those stories cannot be compared to the gospel accounts. Such stories are Satan's vile counterfeits of God's pure truth. Because the virgin birth of Jesus Christ is crucial to the gospel, it is a truth that false, satanic systems of religion will deny, counterfeit, or misrepresent.

Matthew's account of Jesus' divine conception is straightforward and simple. It is given as history, but as history that could only be known by God's revelation and accomplished by divine miracle. It is essential to the incarnation.

After establishing Jesus' human lineage from David, Matthew proceeds to show His divine "lineage." That is the purpose of verses 18-25, which reveal five distinct truths about the virgin birth of Christ. We see the virgin birth conceived, confronted, clarified, connected, and consummated.

THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. (1:18)

Though it does not by itself prove divine authorship, the very fact that the account of Jesus' divine conception is given in but one verse strongly suggests that the story was not man-made. It is simply not characteristic of human nature to try to describe something so absolutely momentous and marvelous in such a brief space. Our inclination would be to expand, elaborate, and try to give every detail possible. Matthew continues to give additional information related to the virgin birth, but the *fact* of it is given in one sentence—the first sentence of verse 18 being merely introduction. Seventeen verses are given to listing Jesus' human genealogy, but only part of one verse to His divine genealogy. In His divinity He “descended” from God by a miraculous and never-repeated act of the Holy Spirit; yet the Holy Spirit does nothing more than authoritatively state the fact. A human fabrication would call for much more convincing material.

Birth is from the same Greek root as “genealogy” in verse 1, indicating that Matthew is here giving a parallel account of Jesus' ancestry—this time from His Father's side.

We have little information about **Mary**. It is likely that she was a native of Nazareth and that she came from a relatively poor family. From Matthew 27:56, Mark 15:40, and John 19:25 we learn she had a sister named Salome, the mother of James and John (who therefore were Jesus' cousins). From Luke 3 we receive her Davidic lineage. If, as many believe, the Eli (or Heli) of Luke 3:23 was Joseph's father-in-law (Matthew gives Joseph's father as Jacob, 1:16), then Eli was Mary's father. We know that Elizabeth, the wife of Zacharias, was Mary's “relative” (Luke 1:36), probably her cousin. Those are the only relatives, besides her husband and children, of whom the New Testament speaks.

Mary was a godly woman who was sensitive and submissive to the Lord's will. After the angel Gabriel's announcement that she would be the mother of “the Son of God,” Mary said, “Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:26-38). Mary was also believing. She wondered how she could conceive: “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34). But she never questioned the angel was sent from God or that what he said was true. Elizabeth, “filled with the Holy Spirit,” testified of Mary, “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord” (v. 45). Mary's humble reverence, thankfulness, and love for God is seen in her

magnificent Magnificat, as Luke 1:46-55 is often called. It begins, “My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. . . . For the Mighty One has done great things for me; and holy is His name” (vv. 47, 49).

We know even less of **Joseph** than of Mary. His father’s name was Jacob (Matt. 1:16) and he was a craftsman, a construction worker (*tektōn*), probably a carpenter (Matt. 13:55). Most importantly, he was a “righteous man” (1:19), an Old Testament saint.

It is possible that both Joseph and Mary were quite young when they were betrothed. Girls were often betrothed as young as twelve or thirteen, and boys when they were several years older than that.

By Jewish custom, a betrothal signified more than an engagement in the modern sense. A Hebrew marriage involved two stages, the *kiddushin* (betrothal) and the *huppah* (marriage ceremony). The marriage was almost always arranged by the families of the bride and groom, often without consulting them. A contract was made and was sealed by payment of the *mohar*, the dowry or bride price, which was paid by the groom or his family to the bride’s father. The *mohar* served to compensate the father for wedding expenses and to provide a type of insurance for the bride in the event the groom became dissatisfied and divorced her. The contract was considered binding as soon as it was made, and the man and woman were considered legally married, even though the marriage ceremony (*huppah*) and consummation often did not occur until as much as a year later. The betrothal period served as a time of probation and testing of fidelity. During that period the bride and groom usually had little, if any, social contact with each other.

Joseph and Mary had experienced no sexual contact with each other, as the phrase **before they came together** indicates. Sexual purity is highly regarded in Scripture, in both testaments. God places great value on sexual abstinence outside of marriage and sexual fidelity within marriage. Mary’s virginity was an important evidence of her godliness. Her reason for questioning Gabriel’s announcement of her conception was the fact that she knew she was a virgin (Luke 1:34). This testimony protects from accusation that Jesus was born of some other man.

But Mary’s virginity protected a great deal more than her own moral character, reputation, and the legitimacy of Jesus’ birth. It protected the nature of the divine Son of God. The child is never called the son of

Joseph; Joseph is never called Jesus' father, and Joseph is not mentioned in Mary's song of praise (Luke 1:46-55). Had Jesus been conceived by the act of a man, whether Joseph or anyone else, He could not have been divine and could not have been the Savior. His own claims about Himself would have been lies, and His resurrection and ascension would have been hoaxes. And mankind would forever remain lost and damned.

Obviously Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit is a great mystery. Even had He wanted to do so, how could God have explained to us, in terms we could comprehend, how such a blending of the divine and human could have been accomplished? We could no more fathom such a thing than we can fathom God's creating the universe from nothing, His being one God in three Persons, or His giving an entirely new spiritual nature to those who trust in His Son. Understanding of such things will have to await heaven, when we see our Lord "face to face" and "know fully just as [we] have been fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12). We accept it by faith.

The virgin birth should not have surprised those Jews who knew and believed the Old Testament. Because of a misinterpretation of the phrase "A woman shall encompass a man" in Jeremiah 31:22, many rabbis believed the Messiah would have an unusual birth. They said, "Messiah is to have no earthly father," and "the birth of Messiah shall be like the dew of the Lord, as drops upon the grass without the action of man." But even that poor interpretation of an obscure text (an interpretation also held by some of the church Fathers) assumed a unique birth for the Messiah.

Not only had Isaiah indicated such a birth (7:14), but even in Genesis we get a glimpse of it. God spoke to the serpent of the enmity that would henceforth exist between "your seed and her [Eve's] seed" (Gen. 3:15). In a technical sense the seed belongs to the man, and Mary's impregnation by the Holy Spirit is the only instance in human history that a woman had a seed within her that did not come from a man. The promise to Abraham concerned "his seed," a common way of referring to offspring. This unique reference to "her seed" looks beyond Adam and Eve to Mary and to Jesus Christ. The two seeds of Genesis 3:15 can be seen in a simple sense as collective; that is, they may refer to all those who are part of Satan's progeny and to all those who are a part of Eve's. That view sees the war between the two as raging for all time, with the people of righteousness eventually gaining victory over the people of evil. But "seed" also can be singular, in that it refers to one great, final, glorious

product of a woman, who will be the Lord Himself—born without male seed. In that sense the prediction is messianic. It may be that the prophecy looks to both the collective and the individual meanings.

Paul is very clear when he tells us that “When the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman” (Gal. 4:4). There is no human father in that verse. Jesus had to have one human parent or He could not have been human, and thereby a partaker of our flesh. But He also had to have divine parentage or He could not have made a sinless and perfect sacrifice on our behalf.

THE VIRGIN BIRTH CONFRONTED

And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her, desired to put her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.” (1:19-20)

As already mentioned, although Joseph and Mary were only betrothed at this time (v. 18), he was considered her **husband** and she was considered his **wife**. For the very reason that he was **a righteous man**, Joseph had a double problem, at least in his own mind. First, because of his righteous moral standards, he knew that he should not go through with the marriage because of Mary’s pregnancy. He knew that he was not the father and assumed, quite naturally, that Mary had had relations with another man. But second, because of his righteous love and kindness, he could not bear the thought of shaming her publicly (a common practice of his day in regard to such an offense), much less of demanding her death, as provided by the law (Deut. 22:23-24). There is no evidence that Joseph felt anger, resentment, or bitterness. He had been shamed (if what he assumed had been true), but his concern was not for his own shame but for Mary’s. He was **not wanting to disgrace her** by public exposure of her supposed

sin. Because he loved her so deeply he determined simply **to put her away secretly**.

Apoluō means literally **to put . . . away**, as translated here, but was the common term used for divorce. Joseph's plan was to divorce her **secretly**, though before long everyone would have guessed it when the marriage never materialized. But for a while, at least, she would be protected, and she would live.

While he **considered this**, however, **an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream** and allayed his fears. **“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid [stop being afraid] to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.”** This verse emphasizes the supernatural character of the whole event. To reinforce the encouraging words, as well as to verify Jesus' royal lineage, the angel addressed Joseph as **son of David**. Even though He was not the real son of Joseph, Jesus was his legal son. His Father, in actuality, was God, who conceived Him by the Holy Spirit. But His royal right in the Davidic line came by Joseph.

The phrase **that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit** is profound. In those words is the ultimate testimony to the virgin birth. It is the testimony of the holy angel from the Lord God Himself.

One critic has waved his fist at God and called Him an unholy liar with these words: “There was nothing peculiar about the birth of Jesus. He was not God incarnate and no virgin mother bore him. The church in its ancient zeal fathered a myth and became bound to it as a dogma.” But the testimony of Scripture stands.

THE VIRGIN BIRTH CLARIFIED

“And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins” (1:21)

As if to reinforce the truth of Jesus' divine conception, the angel tells Joseph that **she will bear a Son**. Joseph would act as Jesus' earthly

father, but he would only be a foster father. Luke's genealogy of Jesus through Mary's line accurately says He was "*supposedly* the son of Joseph" (3:23, emphasis added).

Joseph was told to name the **Son . . . Jesus**, just as Zacharias was told to name his son John (Luke 1:13). We are not told the purpose or significance of John's name, but that of **Jesus** was made clear even before His birth. **Jesus** is a form of the Hebrew Joshua, Jeshua, or Jehoshua, the basic meaning of which is "Jehovah (Yahweh) will save." All other men who had those names testified by their names to the Lord's salvation. But this One who would be born to Mary not only would testify of God's salvation, but would Himself be that salvation. By His own work **He** would **save His people from their sins**.

THE VIRGIN BIRTH CONNECTED

Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which translated means, "God with us." (1:22-23)

At this point Matthew explains that Jesus' virgin birth was predicted by God in the Old Testament. The Lord clearly identifies the birth of Christ as a fulfillment of prophecy. **All this** refers to the facts about the divine birth of Jesus Christ. And the great miracle of His birth was the fulfillment of **what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet**. That phrase gives a simple, straightforward definition of biblical inspiration as the Word of the Lord coming through human instruments. God does the **saying**; the human instrument is only a means to bring the divine Word to men. Based on these words of the Lord given through Matthew, the Old Testament text of Isaiah must be interpreted as predicting the virgin birth of Jesus Christ.

Matthew repeatedly uses the phrase **might be fulfilled** (2:15, 17, 23; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:54; etc.) to indicate ways in which Jesus,

and events related to His earthly ministry, were fulfillments of Old Testament prophecy. The basic truths and happenings of the New Testament were culminations, completions, or fulfillments of revelation God had already made—though often the revelation had been in veiled and partial form.

The scene in Isaiah 7 is the reign of King Ahaz in Judah. Though son of the great Uzziah, he was a wicked king. He filled Jerusalem with idols, reinstated the worship of Molech, and burned his own son as a sacrifice to that god. Rezin, king of Syria (Aram), and Pekah, king of Israel (also called Samaria at that time), decided to remove Ahaz and replace him with a king who would do their bidding. In the face of such a threat to the people of Israel and to the royal line of David, Ahaz, instead of turning to God for help, sought the help of Tiglath-pileser, the evil king of the Assyrians. He even plundered and sent to Tiglath-pileser the gold and silver from the Temple.

Isaiah came to Ahaz and reported that God would deliver the people from the two enemy kings. When Ahaz refused to listen, Isaiah responded with the remarkable messianic prophecy of 7:14.

How did a prediction of the virgin birth of Messiah fit that ancient scene? Isaiah was telling the wicked king that no one would destroy the people of God or the royal line of David. When the prophet said, “The Lord shall give you a sign,” he used a plural *you*, indicating that Isaiah was also speaking to the entire nation, telling them that God would not allow Rezin and Pekah, or anyone else, to destroy them and the line of David (cf. Gen. 49:10; 2 Sam. 7:13). Even though the people came into the hands of Tiglath-pileser, who destroyed the northern kingdom and overran Judah on four occasions, God preserved them just as He promised.

Isaiah also refers to another child who would be born; and before that child (Maher-shalal-hash-baz) would be old enough to “eat curds and honey” or “know enough to refuse evil and choose good,” the lands of Rezin and Pekah would be forsaken (7:15-16). Sure enough, before the child born to Isaiah’s wife was three years old those two kings were dead. Just as that ancient prophecy of a child came to pass, so did the prophecy of the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. Both were signs that God would not ultimately forsake His people. The greatest sign was that **Immanuel, which translated means, “God with us,”** would come.

In Isaiah 7:14, the verse here quoted by Matthew, the prophet used the Hebrew word *'almâ*. Old Testament usage of *'almâ* favors the translation “virgin.” The word first appears in Genesis 24:43, in connection with Rebekah, the future bride of Isaac. The King James Version reads, “Behold I stand by the well of water; and it shall come to pass, that when the virgin cometh forth to draw water.” In verse 16 of the same chapter Rebekah is described as a “damsel” (*na'ārâ*) and a “virgin” (*b^etûlâ*). It should be concluded that *'almâ* is never used to refer to a married woman. The word occurs five other times in Scripture (Ex. 2:8; Ps. 68:25; Prov. 30:19; Song of Sol. 1:3; 6:8), and in each case contains the idea of a virgin. Until recent times, it was always translated as such by both Jewish and Christian scholars.

The most famous medieval Jewish interpreter, Rashi (1040-1105), who was an opponent of Christianity, made the following comment: “Behold the *'almâ* shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel” means that our Creator shall be with us. And this is the sign: The one who will conceive is a girl (*na'ārâ*) who never in her life has had intercourse with any man. Upon this one shall the Holy Spirit have power.” It should be noted that in modern Hebrew the word *virgin* is either *'almâ* or *b^etûlâ*. Why did not Isaiah use *b^etûlâ*? Because it is sometimes used in the Old Testament of a married woman who is not a virgin (Deut. 22:19; Joel 1:8).

'Almâ can mean “virgin,” and that is how the Jewish translators of the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) translated the word in Isaiah 7:14 (by the Greek *parthenos*, “virgin”)—several hundred years before the birth of Christ. The “sign” of which Isaiah spoke was given specifically to King Ahaz, who feared that the royal line of Judah might be destroyed by Syria and Israel. The prophet assured the king that God would protect that line. The birth of a son and the death of the kings would be the signs guaranteeing His protection and preservation. And in the future there would be a greater birth, the virgin birth of God incarnate, to assure the covenant with God’s people.

Matthew did not give the term *'almâ* a Christian “twist,” but used it with the same meaning with which all Jews of that time used it. In any case, his teaching of the virgin birth does not hinge on that word. It is made incontestably clear by the preceding statements that Jesus’ conception was “by the Holy Spirit” (vv. 18, 20).

The **name** of the **Son** born to a virgin would be **Immanuel, which translated means, “God with us.”** That **name** was used more as a title or description than as a proper name. In His incarnation Jesus was, in the most literal sense, **God with us.**

The fact that a **virgin shall be with child** is marvelous—a pregnant virgin! Equally marvelous is that she **shall call His name Immanuel.**

The Old Testament repeatedly promises that God is present with His people, to secure their destiny in His covenant. The Tabernacle and Temple were intended to be symbols of that divine presence. The term for tabernacle is *mishkān*, which comes from *shākan*, meaning to dwell, rest, or abide. From that root the term *shekinah*. has also come, referring to the presence of God’s glory. The child born was to be the Shekinah, the true Tabernacle of God (cf. John 1:14). Isaiah was the instrument through which the Word of the Lord announced that God would dwell among men in visible flesh and blood incarnation—more intimate and personal than the Tabernacle or Temple in which Israel had worshiped.

THE VIRGIN BIRTH CONSUMMATED

And Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took her as his wife, and kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus. (1:24-25)

That **Joseph arose from his sleep** indicates that the revelatory dream had come to him while he slept (cf. v. 20). Such unique, direct communication from God was used on other occasions to reveal Scripture (see Gen. 20:3; 31:10-11; Num. 12:6; 1 Kings 3:5; Job 33:14-16). It should be noted that all six New Testament occurrences of *onar* (“to dream”) are in Matthew and concern the Lord Jesus Christ (see 1:20; 2:12-13, 19, 22; 27:19).

We know nothing of Joseph’s reaction, except that he immediately obeyed, doing **as the angel of the Lord commanded him.** We can imagine how great his feelings of amazement, relief, and gratitude must

have been. Not only would he be able to take his beloved Mary as his wife with honor and righteousness, but he would be given care of God's own Son while He was growing up.

That fact alone would indicate the depth of Joseph's godliness. It is inconceivable that God would entrust His Son into a family where the father was not totally committed and faithful to Him.

We know nothing else of Joseph's life except his taking the infant Jesus to the Temple for dedication (Luke 2:22-33), his taking Mary and Jesus into Egypt to protect Him from Herod's bloody edict and the return (Matt. 2:13-23), and his taking his family to the Passover in Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve (Luke 2:42-52). We have no idea when Joseph died, but it could have been well before Jesus began His public ministry. Obviously it was before Jesus' crucifixion, because from the cross Jesus gave his mother into the care of John (John 19:26).

Apparently the marriage ceremony, when Joseph **took her as his wife**, was held soon after the angel's announcement. But he **kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son**. Matthew makes it clear that she remained a virgin **until she gave birth**, implying that normal marital relations began after that time. The fact that Jesus' brothers and sisters are spoken of numerous times in the gospels (Matt. 12:46; 13:55-56; Mark 6:3; etc.) prove that Mary did not remain a virgin perpetually, as some claim.

As a final act of obedience to God's instruction through the angel, Joseph **called His name Jesus**, indicating that He was to be the Savior (cf. v. 21).

The supernatural birth of Jesus is the only way to account for the life that He lived. A skeptic who denied the virgin birth once asked a Christian, "If I told you that child over there was born without a human father, would you believe me?" The believer replied, "Yes, if he lived as Jesus lived." The greatest outward evidence of Jesus' supernatural birth and deity is His life.

Fools and Wise Men

(2:1-12)

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him.” And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born. And they said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet, ‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for out of you shall come forth a Ruler, who will shepherd My people Israel.’”

Then Herod secretly called the magi, and ascertained from them the time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, “Go, and make careful search for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, that I too may come and worship Him.” And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country by another way. (2:1-12)

Continuing his thrust to establish Jesus’ right to Israel’s true and final kingship, in chapter 2 Matthew gives three additional evidences of

Jesus of Nazareth's legitimate, unique, and absolute royal right to the throne of David. In chapter 1 we saw the evidence of Jesus' royal genealogy and of His virgin birth. In the present chapter we first see the testimony of the magi, who came to give homage and gifts to the infant Jesus, "He who has been born King of the Jews" (2:2). The powerful oriental kingmakers from Persia traveled a great distance to recognize and honor a King in whose coronation they had no part, a King far greater than any they had ever, or would ever, set on a throne.

The next evidence of Christ's kingship is shown in a negative, or reverse, way, through the antagonism and hatred of Herod. Herod's devious scheme to discover and destroy this unknown baby shows his fear that the magi's declaration about the Child could be correct, and gives unintended testimony to Jesus' true royalty. Herod knew that he himself was a usurper to the throne on which he sat only by virtue of Rome—who herself ruled Judah only by the "right" of military force. Herod was an Edomite, not a Jew, and had no legitimate claim to be the Jew's king. He therefore feared and hated even the suggestion of a rival claimant. But even the hatred of the false king gave indirect testimony to the identity of the true King.

The third evidence of Christ's kingship given in chapter 2 is presented through four fulfilled messianic prophecies. Some three hundred thirty Old Testament predictions concern Jesus Christ. In chapter 2 Matthew points out four of those prophecies that were fulfilled during Jesus' infancy. There is no reasonable possibility that even those four—much less all three hundred thirty—could have been fulfilled accidentally in the life of a single individual. That fact in itself is overwhelming evidence of God's sovereign control of history and of the utter reliability of His Word.

Matthew uses the four prophecies as a literary framework around which he presents the events recorded in this chapter. Each of the predictions is directly related to a geographical location closely related to Jesus' birth and early childhood. The four locations are Bethlehem, Egypt, Ramah, and Nazareth.

The present passage—built around the prediction of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem—focuses on the coming of the magi to worship Jesus, the One they somehow knew had **been born King of the Jews**. Within this story we also see the reaction of Herod and of the chief priests and scribes to that same news. In this brief text we see examples of the three basic

responses that men made to Jesus when He was on earth, the same three responses that men throughout history have made to the Lord. Some, like Herod, are hostile to Him; some, like the chief priests and scribes, are indifferent to Him; and some, like the magi, worship Him.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE MAGI

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him.” (2:1-2)

The events described in this passage probably occurred several months **after Jesus was born**. We see from 2:11 that Jesus’ family was now staying in a house rather than the stable where He was born (Luke 2:7). Jesus, therefore, would already have been circumcised, and Mary would have completed her period of purification (Luke 2:21-27). The fact that she offered “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons” (Luke 2:24) instead of the normal lamb (Lev. 12:6-8) indicates that the family was poor. Had this offering been made after the magi with their expensive gifts (Matt. 2:11) had already visited Jesus, the lamb could easily have been afforded and would have been required.

BETHLEHEM OF JUDEA

As it still is today, **Bethlehem** was then a small town five or six miles south of Jerusalem, in the fertile hill country of **Judea** (Judah). It is cradled between two ridges and was located along the main ancient highway from Jerusalem to Egypt. It was once called Ephrath, or

Ephrathah, and is referred to by that name several times in the Old Testament (Gen. 35:16; Ruth 4:11; Ps. 132:6; Mic. 5:2). The town came to be called **Bethlehem** after the conquest of Canaan under Joshua, its new name meaning “house of bread.”

It was at Bethlehem that Jacob buried Rachel (Gen. 35:19), the traditional site of whose tomb is still shown to tourists today. It was also here that Ruth met and married Boaz (Ruth 1:22; 2:4) and that their illustrious grandson, David, grew up and tended sheep (1 Sam. 17:12, 15). By the time of Jesus’ birth, it had long been called “the city of David” (Luke 2:4,11). The prophet Micah specifically promised that the Messiah would come from this small village (5:2).

HEROD THE KING

This **Herod**, known as “the Great,” is the first of several Herods mentioned in the New Testament. Julius Caesar had appointed his father, Antipater, to be procurator, or governor, of Judea under the Roman occupation. Antipater then managed to have his son Herod appointed prefect of Galilee. In that office Herod was successful in quelling the Jewish guerilla bands who continued to fight against their foreign rulers. After fleeing to Egypt when the Parthians invaded Palestine, Herod then went to Rome and in 40 B.C. was declared by Octavian and Antony (with the concurrence of the Roman senate) to be the king of the Jews. He invaded Palestine the next year and, after several years of fighting, drove out the Parthians and established his kingdom.

Because he was not Jewish, but Idumean (Edomite), Herod married Mariamne, heiress to the Jewish Hasmonean house, in order to make himself more acceptable to the Jews he now ruled. He was a clever and capable warrior, orator, and diplomat. In times of severe economic hardship he gave back some tax money collected from the people. During the great famine of 25 B.C. he melted down various gold objects in the palace to buy food for the poor. He built theaters, race tracks, and other structures to provide entertainment for the people, and in 19 B.C. he began the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. He revived Samaria and built the beautiful port city of Caesarea in honor of his benefactor Caesar

Augustus (Octavian's title). He embellished the cities of Beirut, Damascus, Tyre, Sidon, and Rhodes, and even made contributions to rebuilding work in Athens. He built the remarkable and almost impregnable fortress of Masada, where in A.D. 73 nearly a thousand Jewish defenders committed suicide rather than be captured by the Roman general Flavius Silva.

But Herod was also cruel and merciless. He was incredibly jealous, suspicious, and afraid for his position and power. Fearing his potential threat, he had the high priest Aristobulus, who was his wife Mariamne's brother, drowned—after which he provided a magnificent funeral where he pretended to weep. He then had Mariamne herself killed, and then her mother and two of his own sons. Five days before his death (about a year after Jesus was born) he had a third son executed. One of the greatest evidences of his bloodthirstiness and insane cruelty was having the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem arrested and imprisoned shortly before his death. Because he knew no one would mourn his own death, he gave orders for those prisoners to be executed the moment he died—in order to guarantee that there would be mourning in Jerusalem. That barbaric act was exceeded in cruelty only by his slaughter of “all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its environs, from two years old and under” (Matt. 2:16) in hopes of killing any threat to his throne from the One the magi said had **been born King of the Jews**.

MAGI FROM THE EAST

Few biblical stories are as well known, yet so clouded by myth and tradition, as that of the **magi**, or wise men, mentioned by Matthew. During the Middle Ages legend developed that they were kings, that they were three in number, and that their names were Casper, Balthazar, and Melchior. Because they were thought to represent the three sons of Noah, one of them is often pictured as an Ethiopian. A twelfth-century bishop of Cologne even claimed to have found their skulls.

The only legitimate facts we know about these particular **magi** are the few given by Matthew in the first twelve verses of chapter 2. We are not told their number, their names, their means of transportation to

Palestine, or the specific country or countries from which they came. The fact that they came from the east would have been assumed by most people in New Testament times, because the magi were primarily known as the priestly-political class of the Parthians—who lived to the east of Palestine.

The magi first appear in history in the seventh century B.C. as a tribe within the Median nation in eastern Mesopotamia. Many historians consider them to have been Semites, which if so, made them—with the Jews and Arabs—descendants of Noah's son Shem. It may also be that, like Abraham, the magi came from ancient Ur in Chaldea. The name magi soon came to be associated solely with the hereditary priesthood within that tribe. The magi became skilled in astronomy and astrology (which, in that day, were closely associated) and had a sacrificial system that somewhat resembled the one God gave to Israel through Moses. They were involved in various occult practices, including sorcery, and were especially noted for their ability to interpret dreams. It is from their name that our words *magic* and *magician* are derived.

A principle element of magian worship was fire, and on their primary altar burned a perpetual flame, which they claimed descended from heaven. The magi were monotheistic, believing in the existence of only one god. Because of their monotheism, it was easy for the magi to adapt to the teaching of the sixth-century B.C. Persian religious leader named Zoroaster, who believed in a single god, Ahura Mazda, and a cosmic struggle between good and evil. Darius the Great established Zoroastrianism as the state religion of Persia.

Because of their combined knowledge of science, agriculture, mathematics, history, and the occult, their religious and political influence continued to grow until they became the most prominent and powerful group of advisors in the Medo-Persian and subsequently the Babylonian empire. It is not strange, therefore, that they often were referred to as “wise men.” It may be that “the law of the Medes and Persians” (see Dan. 6:8,12,15; Esther 1:19) was founded on the teachings of these magi. Historians tell us that no Persian was ever able to become king without mastering the scientific and religious disciplines of the magi and then being approved and crowned by them, and that this group also largely controlled judicial appointments (cf. Esther 1:13). Nergal-sar-ezer the

Rab-mag, chief of the Babylonian magi, was with Nebuchadnezzar when he attacked and conquered Judah (Jer. 39:3).

We learn from the book of Daniel that the magi were among the highest-ranking officials in Babylon. Because the Lord gave Daniel the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream—which none of the other court seers was able to do—Daniel was appointed as “ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon” (Dan. 2:48). Because of his great wisdom and because he had successfully pleaded for the lives of the wise men who had failed to interpret the king's dream (Dan. 2:24), Daniel came to be highly regarded among the magi. The plot against Daniel that caused him to be thrown into the lions' den was fomented by the jealous satraps and the other commissioners, not the magi (Dan. 6:4-9).

Because of Daniel's high position and great respect among them, it seems certain that the magi learned much from that prophet about the one true God, the God of Israel, and about His will and plans for His people through the coming glorious King. Because many Jews remained in Babylon after the Exile and intermarried with the people of the east, it is likely that Jewish messianic influence remained strong in that region even until New Testament times.

During both the Greek and Roman empires the magi's power and influence continued in the eastern provinces, particularly in Parthia. As mentioned above, it was the Parthians that Herod, in behalf of Rome, drove out of Palestine between 39 and 37 B.C., when his kingship of Judea began. Some magi—many of them probably outcasts or false practitioners—lived in various parts of the Roman Empire, including Palestine. Among them was Simon of Samaria (Acts 8:9), whom tradition and history have come to refer to as Simon Magus because of his “practicing magic” (Greek, *mageuō*, derived from the Babylonian *magus*, singular of *magi*). The Jewish false prophet Bar-Jesus was also a sorcerer, or “magician” (Greek, *magos*). These magicians were despised by both Romans and Jews. Philo, a first-century B.C. Jewish philosopher from Alexandria, called them vipers and scorpions.

The **magi from the east** (the word literally means “from the rising” of the sun, and refers to the orient) who came to see Jesus were of a completely different sort. Not only were they true magi, but they surely had been strongly influenced by Judaism, quite possibly even by some of

the prophetic writings, especially that of Daniel. They appear to be among the many God-fearing Gentiles who lived at the time of Christ, a number of whom—such as Cornelius and Lydia (Acts 10:1-2; 16:14)—are mentioned in the New Testament.

When these magi, however many there were, **arrived in Jerusalem**, they began asking, “**Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?**” The Greek construction (**saying** is a present participle emphasizing continual action) suggests that they went around the city questioning whomever they met. Because they, as foreigners, knew of the monumental birth, they apparently assumed that anyone in Judea, and certainly in Jerusalem, would know of this special baby’s whereabouts. They must have been more than a little shocked to discover that no one seemed to know what they were talking about.

During that time there was widespread expectation of the coming of a great king, a great deliverer. The Roman historian Suetonius, speaking of the time around the birth of Christ, wrote, “There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world.” Another Roman historian, Tacitus, wrote that “there was a firm persuasion that at this very time the east was to grow powerful and rulers coming from Judea were to acquire a universal empire.” The Jewish historian Josephus reports in his *Jewish Wars* that at about the time of Christ’s birth the Jews believed that one from their country would soon become ruler of the habitable earth.

As seen in the writings of the Roman poet Virgil (70-19 B.C), Rome was expecting its own golden age. Augustus Caesar, Herod’s benefactor, had for some time been hailed as the savior of the world. Many magi could be found in the great cities of the west, including Athens and Rome, and were frequently consulted by Roman rulers. The Romans were looking for a coming great age, wise men from the east had long influenced the west with their ideas and traditions, and—though the particulars varied considerably—there was a growing feeling that from somewhere a great and unprecedented world leader was about to arise.

We are not told *how* the God of revelation caused the magi to know that the **King of the Jews** had been born, only that He gave them the sign of **His** [the One called **King**] **star in the east**. Almost as much speculation has been made about the identity of that **star** as about the identity of the men who saw it. Some suggest that it was Jupiter, the “king of the

planets.” Others claim that it was the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, forming the sign of the fish—which was used as a symbol for Christianity in the early church during the Roman persecutions. Still others claim that it was a low-hanging meteor, an erratic comet, or simply an inner vision of the star of destiny in the hearts of mankind.

Since the Bible does not identify or explain the star, we cannot be dogmatic, but it may have been the glory of the Lord—the same glory that shone around the shepherds when Jesus’ birth was announced to them by the angel (Luke 2:9). Throughout the Old Testament we are told of God’s glory being manifested as light, God radiating His presence (Shekinah) in the form of ineffable light. The Lord guided the children of Israel through the wilderness by “a pillar of cloud by day... and in a pillar of fire by night” (Ex. 13:21). When Moses went up on Mount Sinai, “to the eyes of the sons of Israel the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a consuming fire on the mountaintop” (Ex. 24:17). On a later occasion, after Moses had inscribed the Ten Commandments on stone tablets, His face still glowed with the light of God’s glory when he returned to the people (Ex. 34:30).

When Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James, and John, “His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light” (Matt. 17:2). On the Damascus road, just before Jesus spoke to him, Saul of Tarsus was surrounded by “a light from heaven” (Acts 9:3), which he later explained was “brighter than the sun” (26:13). In John’s first vision on the Island of Patmos, he saw Christ’s face “like the sun shining in its strength” (Rev. 1:16). In his vision of the New Jerusalem, the future heavenly dwelling of all believers, he reports that “the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb” (Rev. 21:23).

Both the Hebrew (*kôkâb*) and the Greek (*astēr*) words for star were also used figuratively to represent any great brilliance or radiance. Very early in the Old Testament the Messiah is spoken of as a “star [that] shall come forth from Jacob” (Num. 24:17), and at the end of the New Testament He refers to Himself as “the bright morning star” (Rev. 22:16). It was surely the glory of God, blazing as if it were an extremely bright star—visible only to the eyes for whom it was intended to be seen—that appeared to the magi in the east and later guided them to Bethlehem. It was a brilliant manifestation of “the sign of the Son of Man” (see Matt.

24:29-30; Rev. 1:7). The Shekinah glory of God stood over Bethlehem just as, centuries before, it had stood over the Tabernacle in the wilderness. And just as the pillar of cloud gave light to Israel but darkness to Egypt (Ex. 14:20), only the eyes of the magi were opened to see God's great light over Bethlehem.

That the magi were *not following* the star is clear from the fact that they had to inquire about where Jesus was born. They **saw His star in the east**, but there is no evidence that it continued to shine or that it led them to Jerusalem. It was not until they were told of the prophesied birthplace of the Messiah (2:5-6) that the star reappeared and then guided them not only to Bethlehem but to the exact place "where the Child was" (v. 9).

These travelers from the east had come to Palestine with but one purpose: to find the One **born King of the Jews** and **worship Him**. The word **worship** is full of meaning, expressing the idea of falling down, prostrating oneself, and kissing the feet or the hem of the garment of the one honored. That truth in itself shows that they were true seekers after God, because when He spoke to them, in whatever way it was, they heard and responded. Despite their paganism, quasi-science, and superstition they recognized God's voice when He spoke. Though having had limited spiritual light, they immediately recognized God's light when it shone on them. They had genuinely seeking hearts, hearts that the Lord promises will never fail to find Him (Jer. 29:13).

On a plane trip several years ago I was hoping that whoever sat next to me would take a nap and not want to talk, so that I could get some urgent work done. The Lord obviously had other plans, because as soon as the man next to me saw I was studying he asked if I were a teacher. I replied that I was not a classroom teacher but that I did teach the Bible. His next question was, "Can you tell me how to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ?" After I explained the way of salvation, he received Christ. He was looking for God's light and, like the magi, when he saw it he knew it.

THE AGITATION OF HEROD

And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born. And they said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet, ‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for out of you shall come forth a Ruler, who will shepherd My people Israel.’”

Then Herod secretly called the magi, and ascertained from them the time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, “Go, and make careful search for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, that I too may come and worship Him.” (2:3-8)

The response of **Herod** was exactly the opposite of that of the magi. Whereas the magi rejoiced at hearing of Jesus’ birth, **when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled.** The king’s anxiety is not hard to understand. In the first place, he was sitting on a political and religious powder keg. He had driven the Parthians out of Palestine but had to continue fighting the bands of Jewish zealots who wanted their country to be free from Roman occupation and domination. Especially in light of his intense jealousy and paranoia, any mention of another king of the Jews sent him into a frenzy of fear and anger.

The fact that the magi themselves were probably Parthians, or closely associated with the Parthians, gave Herod special cause for concern. Because the magi at this time were still powerful in the east, it is likely that they traveled with a large contingent of soldiers and servants—causing their presence in Jerusalem to seem even more threatening to Herod. Because of their wealth, prestige, and power, they had the appearance and demeanor of royalty—which is why they have long been traditionally pictured and sung about as kings from the Orient. The magi were not simple mystics and, as mentioned above, their number could have been considerably more than three. To Herod, the appearance of this impressive company portended a renewed political threat from the east. And though He was by now some seventy years old, he wanted to maintain his position and power to the end, and did not want to spend his last years in warfare.

The ruling body in the Parthian-Persian empire at this time was much like the Roman senate. They were the king-makers in an almost absolute way, and were composed entirely of magi. They had become discontent with the weak king that presently ruled them and were looking for someone more capable to lead them in a campaign against Rome. Caesar Augustus was old and feeble, and since the retirement of Tiberius the Roman army had had no commander in chief. The time was propitious for the east to make its move against Rome.

That **all Jerusalem with him** was also troubled may indicate that their concern, like Herod's, was political and military. Perhaps they too viewed the magi as the precursors of another conquest by the Parthians, who had sent this forward body ahead to discover and perhaps even crown some new king that would rule Palestine in Parthia's behalf—much in the same way that Herod ruled it in Rome's behalf. The fact that the magi came to worship the newborn king would not have indicated to Herod or the others in Jerusalem that the mission of the magi was purely religious. The magi had long been known as much for their politics as for their religion, and the practice of worshiping the king or emperor was then common in both the east and the west.

It is more likely, however, that the concern of the populace was not directly about the magi but about Herod's reaction to them. By bitter experience they knew that Herod's agitation usually meant maniacal bloodshed. He did not bother to identify his enemies carefully. Anyone even suspected of doing him harm or of threatening his position or power was in considerable danger. In his sweeping carnage many totally innocent people were often destroyed. The people's fear for their own safety was well founded. Although Herod's maliciousness was not vented against Jerusalem, it would shortly be vented against Bethlehem, her small neighbor to the south, when the enraged king ordered the slaughter of all the infant male children there (Matt. 2:16). Herod feared for the throne, which was not really his, and Jerusalem knew what Herod's fear meant. It meant rebellion, bloodshed, and terrible suffering.

Herod's first response to the news of the magi was to gather **together all the chief priests and scribes of the people and to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born.** Obviously Herod connected the King of the Jews with the Messiah, the **Christ.** Though Herod was not himself a Jew he knew Jewish beliefs and customs rather well. The current

messianic expectations of most Jews at that time was more for a political and military deliverer than a spiritual savior—an expectation apparently shared by Jesus' own disciples (Acts 1:6).

THE CHIEF PRIESTS

All Jewish **priests** were of the priestly tribe of Levi and, even more particularly, descendants of Aaron, the first high priest. In some ways the priests were like the magi, having considerable political as well as religious power.

First among the **chief priests** was the high priest. According to Old Testament law, there was to be but one high priest at a time, who served for life and whose special and unique duty it was to enter the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement and offer sacrifice for all the people. But by the time of Christ the office had become subject to political favoritism and even purchase. High priests were appointed and removed at the whim of various rulers. Consequently, there were often several living at one time. And, though the ones who had been removed from office lost their high priestly function, they usually kept the title, as well as considerable prestige and power (see Luke 3:2). The ruling high priest also presided over the Sanhedrin, a type of combined senate and supreme court, made up of seventy of the key Jewish religious leaders.

Another of the **chief priests** was the captain of the Temple, who was appointed by and responsible to the high priest. Among his powers, approved by the Romans, was that of arrest and imprisonment. He therefore was allowed to have a rather large contingent of soldiers, all Jewish, at his disposal, who acted as the Temple police. He ranked second to the high priest in authority.

The others included among the chief priests were not a particular category but were composed of various other leading, influential priests, including the leaders of the daily and weekly course of priests, the Temple treasurer, and other Temple overseers and officials. Together with the high priests and the captain of the Temple, they formed the priestly aristocracy often referred to loosely as the **chief priests**. For the most part, these chief priests were Sadducees, whereas the normal priests were Pharisees. By

New Testament times they had become little more than a group of corrupt, religiously oriented politicians. From the time of Jesus' birth to His crucifixion they are shown by the gospel writers to have been in opposition to the true revelation and work of the Lord.

SCRIBES

The **scribes** were primarily Pharisees, authorities on Jewish law, scriptural and traditional, who were often referred to as lawyers. They had considerable prestige among Jews, and were recognized as the key scholars of religious Judaism. They were conservative theologically, held a literalistic view of Scripture, and were generally legalistic and strict in regard to both ceremonial and moral law. Those of the scribes who were Sadducees were liberal in their interpretation of Scripture, not believing in such things as the resurrection and angels (Acts 23:8). Whether conservative or liberal, however, the scribes of Jesus' day were alike in their opposition to Him.

Herod called together all of those Jewish religious leaders, who were both politicians and theologians, in order **to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born** (the imperfect tense of **inquire** suggests a constant asking). Although they proved that they knew where His birth was predicted to be (common knowledge among the Jews, John 7:42), they showed no belief or special interest in the announcement of the magi that they had seen the star given as a sign of that birth.

In any case, the **chief priests and scribes** told Herod what he wanted to know, referring him to the specific passage (Mic. 5:2) where the birthplace is predicted. Out of **Bethlehem** would **come forth a Ruler**. The last phrase, **Who will shepherd My people Israel**, is not from Micah, but does express the emphasis of One who would rule. Either the Jews said this or Matthew added the words as his own comment to indicate the kind of **Ruler the Christ** would be. Though the popular idea of a shepherd is that of kind, tender care (Ps. 23), the Scripture emphasis is also on authority and strong, even stern, leadership. The combination of a **Ruler** (*hēgemōn*) who will **shepherd** (*poimainō*) shows that the shepherding function is more than tender care. It is sovereign dominance. Nowhere is

that made more clear than by the use of the verb *poimainō* in Revelation 2:27; 12:5; and 19:15. In each of those verses the verb is justifiably translated “rule”—and “with a rod of iron” at that. Its appearance in Revelation 7:17, as well as its use in John 21:16; Acts 20:28; and 1 Peter 5:2, could warrant a similar rendering. The point is that the statement here in Matthew is a consistent elucidation of the idea of a shepherd’s being a **Ruler**, and thus fits the intent of Micah’s prediction. Unlike Herod, Jesus not only would be a legitimate King of the Jews, but would also be the final and perfect **Ruler of Israel**.

Even the unbelieving, politicized, self-serving Jewish leaders recognized that God’s Word clearly spoke of a literal, personal Messiah—a historical figure, born in Bethlehem in Judea, come to rule Israel. They did not accept Him when He was born or when He preached and taught or when He suffered and died; they were, in fact, His supreme enemies. Yet they acknowledged that the One predicted to come would be sent by the Lord to rule the Lord’s people. Contrary to what many, perhaps most, unbelieving Jews today think, those ancient teachers of Israel knew that the coming Messiah, **the Christ**, would be more than a godly attitude or the personified perfection of the Jewish kingdom. The Messiah would be a real man born among men, sent to rule men. Those chief priests and scribes had a far from perfect idea of what Christ would be like and of what He would do, but they had more than enough knowledge to have enabled them to recognize Him when He came and to know that they, like the magi, should worship Him. They knew, but they did not believe. Consequently, a few years later their initial indifference to Jesus would turn to rejection and persecution. These who now ignored Him would soon become His hateful, venomous murderers.

The magi had much less knowledge of the true God than did the Jewish leaders, but what they knew of Him they believed and followed. The Jewish leaders had the letter of God’s Word, which, by itself, kills because it judges and condemns those who know it but do not know and accept the One who has given it. The Gentile magi, on the other hand, had little of the letter of God’s Word but were remarkably responsive to God’s Spirit, who “gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6).

We see in this account the three typical responses to Jesus Christ that men have made throughout history. Some, like Herod, are immediately hateful, wanting to know nothing of God’s way except how to

attack and, if possible, destroy it. Others, like the chief priests and scribes, pay little if any attention to God and His way. They are those over whom Jeremiah heartbrokenly lamented, “Is it nothing to all you who pass this way?” (Lam. 1:12). What they know of God they do not accept or obey. At most, He is given lip service. Eventually, of course, this second group inevitably joins the first—because indifference to God is simply hatred that is concealed and rejection that is delayed.

Others, however, like the magi from the east, accept the Lord when He comes to them. They may have little of His light initially, but because they know it is *His* light, they believe, obey, and worship—and live.

After Herod received the information he wanted from the Jewish leaders, he **secretly called the magi, and ascertained the time the star appeared**. His concern was for the **time** of the star’s appearance, not its meaning or significance. It was enough for him to know only that the sign pointed to the birth of someone who could be a threat to his own power and position. The time of the star’s appearance would indicate the age of the child who had been born.

Herod then instructed the magi to proceed with their mission and then report their findings to him as they returned home. He hypocritically gave them a good-sounding reason for wanting to know the exact location and identity of the **Child**—in order that **I too may come and worship Him**. His ultimate purpose, of course, was made clear by what he actually did. When the magi, again obedient to the Lord’s leading (2:12), did not report to Herod, he ordered his soldiers to slaughter every male child in and around Bethlehem that was under two years of age (v. 16), in order to guarantee, he thought, the destruction of his rival newborn “King.”

THE ADORATION BY THE MAGI

And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And they came into the house and saw the

Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country by another way. (2:9-12)

We are not told what, if anything, the magi told Herod. They had no way of knowing his wicked intent. They proceeded to Bethlehem, not because of Herod's instruction, but because at last they knew where to find the One they had come to worship. The Lord gave them even more specific help, leading them directly to Jesus. **The star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was.** That the star was not a physical heavenly body is again evident from the fact that it was able to stand directly over the house where Jesus and His family now lived—which for obvious reasons could not be possible for an actual star (cf. Ex. 40:34-38; Ezek. 10:4).

The magi were overwhelmed that the special star reappeared to them. It seems almost as if Matthew was at a loss for words to describe their ecstasy: **And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.** The original text piles up superlatives to emphasize the extent of exhilaration they felt, thus indicating to us their uniquely strong interest in this great event.

Joseph and his family were no longer in the stable but had found a **house** in which to live until the Lord told them where to go and what to do next. It was there that the magi found the One for whom they had so diligently searched, and at last **they fell down and worshiped Him.** In His wonderful grace God had led them to His Son and allowed them to see Him face to face. Charles Wesley captured the experience in his beautiful Christmas hymn: "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate deity; pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel!"

Matthew is careful to say that the magi **worshiped Him**, that is, **the Child**, not His **mother**. They knew better than Cornelius, who attempted to worship the apostle Peter (Acts 10:25), and the crowd at Lystra who tried to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:11-13). No doubt the magi were delighted to meet both Mary and Joseph, who had been so specially favored by God to be entrusted with caring for His own

Son while He grew to manhood. But they worshiped only Jesus. Only He was God, and only He was worthy of adoration.

It was also **to Him** that **they presented** their **gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh**. Their giving was not so much an addition to their worship as an element of it. The gifts were an expression of worship, given out of the overflow of adoring and grateful hearts.

Right worship is always, and must be, the only basis for right giving and right learning and right service. Giving that is generous but done apart from a loving relationship with God is empty giving. Learning that is orthodox and biblical but is learned apart from knowing and depending on the Source of truth, is empty knowledge, like that of the chief priests and scribes. Service that is demanding and sacrificial but done in the power of the flesh or for the praise of men is empty service.

Throughout history **gold** has been considered the most precious of metals and the universal symbol of material value and wealth. It was used extensively in the construction of the Temple (see 1 Kings 6-7, 9; 2 Chron. 2-4). It was also a symbol of nobility and royalty (see Gen. 41:4; 1 Kings 10:1-13; etc.). Matthew continually presents Christ as the King, and here we see the King of the Jews, the King of kings, appropriately being presented with royal gifts of gold.

The Savior of the world is also the true King of the world, and He will not be Savior of those who will not accept Him as sovereign Lord. As wonderful as Jesus' saviorhood was to them, the early Christians' first known creed was "Jesus is Lord," acknowledging His rule.

The great British admiral Lord Nelson was known for treating vanquished opponents with courtesy and kindness. After one naval victory a defeated officer strode confidently across the quarterdeck of Nelson's ship and offered the admiral his hand. With his own hand remaining at his side, Nelson replied, "Your sword first, sir, and then your hand." Before we can be Christ's friends, we must be His subjects. He must be our Lord before He can be our elder Brother.

Frankincense was a costly, beautiful-smelling incense that was used only for the most special of occasions. It was used in the grain offerings at the Tabernacle and Temple (Lev. 2:2,15-16), in certain royal processions (Song of Sol. 3:6-7), and sometimes at weddings if it could be afforded.

Origen, the great church Father, suggested that frankincense was the incense of deity. In the Old Testament it was stored in a special chamber in front of the Temple and was sprinkled on certain offerings as a symbol of the people's desire to please the Lord.

Myrrh was also a perfume, not quite so expensive as frankincense but nevertheless valuable. Some interpreters suggest that myrrh represents the gift for a mortal, emphasizing Jesus' humanity. This perfume is mentioned often in Scripture, beginning in Genesis (37:25; 43:11). Mixed with wine it was also used as an anesthetic (Mark 15:23), and mixed with other spices it was used in preparation of bodies for burial, even Jesus' body (John 19:39).

Those were the magi's gifts to Jesus. **Gold** for His royalty, **frankincense** for His deity, and **myrrh** for His humanity.

We do not know what was done with the gifts, but it seems reasonable that they were used to finance the trip to Egypt and to help support the family while there (see Matt. 2:13-15).

With their mission of worship and adoration completed, the magi left Bethlehem. But **having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country by another way.** No doubt they expected to hear at a later date the details of the life and accession to the throne of the Child born in Bethlehem.

The warning by God suggests that He was directly communicating with these men, and that their role in the whole event was by divine design. In fact, it may have been the same method, **a dream**, by which He originally brought them to Jerusalem in search of the King. The use of dreams as a means of divine communication is seen in Genesis 28:12; 31:11; Numbers 12:6; 1 Kings 3:5; and Job 33:14-16. Even the birth of Christ was accompanied by other special revelatory dreams (Matt. 1:20-23; 2:13,19-20, 22).

So the magi avoided **Herod** and traveled a homeward route that would allow them to escape his notice—a feat that was not simple, due to the nature and size of their entourage.

Scripture records nothing else about these unusual visitors from the east, but blessed and grateful as they were, they surely must have witnessed of the Messiah in **their own country.** Because they were among the kingmakers of Parthia, it is likely that the news of Jesus became as

well known in the courts of the east as it one day would become in the palace of Caesar (Phil. 1:13; cf. 4:22).

The King Fulfills Prophecy_(2:13-23)

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, “Arise and take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him.” And he arose and took the Child and His mother by night, and departed for Egypt; and was there until the death of Herod, that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, “Out of Egypt did I call My Son.”

Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its environs, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the magi. Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying, “A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; and she refused to be comforted, because they were no more.”

But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, “Arise and take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child’s life are dead.” And he arose and took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he departed for the regions of Galilee, and came and resided in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He shall be called a Nazarene.” (2:13-23)

The first of the four Old Testament passages around which Matthew presents the events of chapter 2 is that of the Messiah's being born in Bethlehem (2:6; cf. Mic. 5:2), which has been discussed in relation to the coming of the magi. The other three are given in the present text. One refers to the escape to Egypt, another to the slaughter at Ramah, and the other to the return to Nazareth.

THE ESCAPE TO EGYPT

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise and take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him." And he arose and took the Child and His mother by night, and departed for Egypt; and was there until the death of Herod, that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "Out of Egypt did I call My Son." (2:13-15)

The coming of the magi no doubt was a time of great encouragement and assurance to Joseph and Mary, confirming the wondrous words of the angels to them (Matt. 1:20-23; Luke 1:26-38), to Zacharias (Luke 1:11-20), and to the shepherds (Luke 2:8-14). It also confirmed the testimonies of Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45) and of Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25-38) about the Child to whom Mary gave birth. Even these wise men from far-off Parthia had been told the news by God and came to worship Jesus and give Him gifts.

But the rejoicing was short-lived. No sooner had the magi departed than **an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream**, giving him a warning from God. This news was not of joy and hope, but of danger and urgency. **Arise and take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to**

search for the Child to destroy Him. Just as the magi had been warned by God to disobey Herod (v. 12), Joseph was now warned by God to flee the evil, murderous king.

From *pheugō* (to **flee**) we get our word *fugitive*, one who escapes from something or someone. The word is here in the present imperative, indicating the beginning of action that is to be continued. Joseph and his family were immediately to begin fleeing, and were not to stop until they were safely within **Egypt** and beyond the reach of Herod. The distance from Bethlehem to the border of Egypt was about 75 miles, and another 100 miles or so would have been required to get to a place of safety in that country. Traveling with a baby made the trip both slower and more difficult.

Egypt was a natural asylum for the young Jewish family. During the period of Greek rule of the Mediterranean world, which occurred during the intertestamental period, Alexander the Great established a sanctuary for Jews in Alexandria, the Egyptian city he named for himself. Throughout the Roman rule that followed, that city was still considered a special place of safety and opportunity for Jews. The Jewish philosopher and historian Philo, himself a prominent resident of Alexandria, reported that by A.D. 40, a few years after the death of Christ, the city's population included at least one million Jews. In the third century B.C. a group of Jewish scholars in Alexandria had produced the Septuagint, a translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek. The Septuagint was used by much of the early church, and it was from that version of the Old Testament that many New Testament writers quote.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, it seems reasonable that Joseph used the valuable gifts of the magi (the gold, frankincense, and myrrh) to pay for the trip to Egypt and the stay there, where the Lord instructed Joseph to keep his family **until I tell you**.

Obviously God could have protected His Son in many other ways and in many other places, even in Bethlehem or Jerusalem, under Herod's very nose. He could have blinded Herod's soldiers, destroyed them by an angel, or simply have miraculously hidden the family. But God chose to protect Him by the very ordinary and unmiraculous means of flight to a foreign country. The commands to go to Egypt and then to leave were given supernaturally, but the trip itself and the stay there were, as far as we are told, marked by no special divine intervention or provision. The family

was not instantly transported to Egypt, but had to make the long, tiresome journey on their own, just as hundreds of other Jewish families had done during the previous several centuries. To decrease the chance of being noticed, Joseph took the common precaution of leaving **by night**, probably telling no one of his plans.

We know nothing of the stay in Egypt except the bare fact that Jesus and His family were there. Countless speculations have been made about the sojourn. Some ancient writers, supposing perhaps to enhance and improve on the biblical account, manufactured stories of the baby Jesus healing a demon-possessed child by placing His swaddling clothes on the afflicted child's head, of causing robbers to flee into the desert, and of causing idols to disintegrate as He walked by them. Others, such as the second-century pagan philosopher Celsus, sought to discredit Jesus by claiming that He spent His childhood and early manhood in Egypt learning the occultic practices for which that country had long been famous. Like many Jewish opponents of Christianity during his day, Celsus maintained that Jesus then returned to Palestine to impress the people with miracles and deceive them into thinking He was the Messiah.

It is likely that the stay in Egypt **until the death of Herod** lasted no more than a few months. It is now that we are told the primary reason for the family's going to Egypt: **that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "Out of Egypt did I call My Son."** The Old Testament writers were the Lord's spokesmen. Just as they had no way of knowing, apart from divine revelation, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, they had no other way of knowing that He would live awhile in Egypt. The flight to Egypt was one more piece of divine evidence that Jesus was God's Son, the promised Messiah.

Seven centuries earlier God had told Hosea that "out of Egypt I called My son" (Hos. 11:1). Herod's threat was no surprise to the Lord, who, long before Herod was born, had made plans to foil that wicked king's plans against the true King. The reference to "My son" in the book of Hosea is to the nation Israel. It was a historical statement about what God had done in delivering His people from bondage under Pharaoh, calling them out from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. Why, then, did Matthew interpret as predictive an event that occurred perhaps 700 years before Hosea and an additional 700 years before Matthew quoted Hosea?

The setting of the book of Hosea is failure, decadence, and spiritual tragedy. Through the unfaithfulness of his own wife, Gomer, Hosea vividly portrays the unfaithfulness of Israel to the Lord. Gomer was a physical prostitute, and Israel was a spiritual prostitute. God's chosen people had chased after false gods as unashamedly as Gomer had chased after her lovers. Though Hosea's heart was grieved and broken, he continued to love his wife and sought to win her back. She wound up in a brothel, having lost all sense of decency and shame. The Lord then commanded Hosea to redeem her: "Go again, love a woman who is loved by her husband, yet an adulteress, even as the Lord loves the sons of Israel, though they turn to other gods" (Hos. 3:1). The prophet then bought Gomer's freedom "for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a half of barley" (v. 2). He brought her home, gave her back her place of honor as his wife, and continued to love her as he had before. She was his wife, and he maintained his covenant. Hosea 11:3-4 tells how God taught the Israelites, carried them, healed them, led them, loved them, eased their burdens, and fed them. He called them from Egypt in order to be faithful to them, in spite of their unfaithfulness to Him.

Despite everything, God promised to bring Israel back to Himself. Israel would suffer His rebuke and His judgment, but one day that people would return to their God, because He had called Israel to be His son. Thus God reminded His people of His great and long-lasting love for them. "When Israel was a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son" (Hos. 11:1). He would not go back on that calling. When Matthew quotes the last part of that verse from Hosea, he applies it to Christ. Though Hosea was not knowingly predicting that the Messiah would also one day be brought out of Egypt, Matthew shows that Jesus' return from Egypt was *pictured* by Israel's calling from that same country many centuries earlier. The Exodus, therefore, was a type of Jesus' return from Egypt with Joseph and Mary. As God had once brought the people of Israel out of Egypt to be His chosen nation, He now had brought out His greater Son to be the Messiah.

A type is a nonverbal prediction, an Old Testament person or event that illustrates some aspect of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ in the future but does not specifically describe it; the writer has no way to see the future antitype. God's nonverbal predictions are as true and vivid as His verbal ones. But we cannot legitimately call a person or event

a true Old Testament type except as the Bible itself tells us of it. The only certain Old Testament types are those given as such in the New Testament. No type is in itself visibly a type; such reality awaits the New Testament identification. When the New Testament uses something in the Old as a prefigurement of something that has occurred or will occur later, we can safely refer to the Old Testament something as a type. Ignoring such limits results in the freedom to allegorize, spiritualize, and typify the Old Testament by whimsy. Because types are veiled revelation, divine testimony to their identity must be given by the Holy Spirit in the New Testament text. Therefore, because of the specific association that Matthew gives here, we know that the Exodus of Israel from Egypt is a type of Jesus' return from Egypt as a young child.

In a still deeper sense Jesus came out of Egypt with Israel under Moses. As Matthew has already shown, Jesus descended from Abraham and from the royal line of David. Had Israel perished in Egypt, or in the wilderness, or in any other way, the Messiah could not Himself have come out of Egypt or even have been born.

THE SLAUGHTER AT RAMAH

Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its environs, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the magi. Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying, "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; and she refused to be comforted, because they were no more." (2:16-18)

The third fulfilled prophecy that Matthew mentions in chapter 2 is that of Herod's brutal slaughter in Bethlehem. After Joseph had secretly taken Jesus and His mother to the safety of Egypt, the malevolent Herod,

enraged by the magi's failure to report back to him (see 2:7-8), committed one of the bloodiest acts of his career, and certainly the cruelest.

The Greek word *empaizō* generally carried the idea of mocking, and is so translated in the King James Version of this passage. The root meaning is "to play like a child," especially in the sense of making sport of or jesting. It is used to describe the accusations and taunts of Jesus' enemies against Him (Matt. 20:19; 27:41; Mark 15:20; Luke 22:63; 23:11; etc.). But the idea in Matthew 2:16 is better rendered as **tricked**. Either meaning, however, refers to Herod's perception of the motives of the **magi**, not their true intention. It was not their purpose to trick or mock the king but simply to obey God's command "not to return to Herod" (v. 12). The king, of course, knew nothing of God's warning and saw only that the wise men did not do as he had instructed.

Herod's hatred of the newborn contender to his throne began when he first heard the news of His birth. The purpose of having the magi report back to him was to learn the exact information needed to discover and destroy the Child—not to worship Him, as he had deceitfully told the magi (2:8). The magi's going home by another way, and so avoiding Herod, added infuriation to hatred, so that **he became very enraged**.

Thumoō (to be enraged) is a strong word, made still stronger by *lian* (very, or better, exceedingly). The Greek is in the passive voice, indicating that Herod had lost control of his passion and now was completely controlled by it. His senses, and what little judgment he may have had, were blinded. He did not bother to consider that, because the magi did not return to him, they probably had guessed his wicked intent and that, if so, they would surely have warned the family. The family, in turn, would have long fled Bethlehem and probably the country. In light of Herod's perverted mind, however, he possibly would have taken the same cruel action—out of the same senseless rage and frustration—even had he known that the primary object of his hatred had escaped. If he was not able to guarantee killing Jesus by killing the other babies, he would kill them in place of Jesus.

In any case Herod's rage was vented in the desperate and heartless slaughter of **all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its environs, from two years old and under**. He went up to the age of **two** because of **the time which he had ascertained from the magi**. Jesus was probably no older than six months at this time, but even if that had been

the age Herod determined from the magi's information (2:7), it is likely he would have taken no chances. Killing all the male babies up to age two was a small precaution in his evil thinking, in case the magi had miscalculated or deceived him.

Herod's crime was made even more vile and heinous by the fact that he knew that the Child he sought to destroy was the Messiah, the Christ. He questioned the chief priests and scribes specifically about "where the Christ was to be born" (2:4). He arrogantly and stupidly set himself against God's very Anointed (cf. 1 Cor. 16:22).

It seems as if, from the earliest part of his message, Matthew wanted to portray the rejection of the Messiah by those from among whom He came and in whose behalf He first came (Acts 3:26; Rom. 1:16). The chief priests and the scribes, along with the many other Jews in Jerusalem who must have heard or known about the magi's message of the one "who has been born King of the Jews," showed no interest at all in finding Him, much less in worshiping Him (see Matt. 2:2-5). Though Herod was not himself a Jew and had no right to a Jewish throne, he nevertheless declared himself to be the king of the Jews and made a pretense of concern for Jewish religious and economic interests. In an illegitimate and perverted way, therefore, Herod's rejection of Christ both reflected and represented the Jews' rejection of Him.

The slaughter in Bethlehem was the beginning of the tragedy and bloodshed that would result from Israel's rejection of her Savior and true King. Those innocent and precious babies of Bethlehem were the first casualties in the now-intensified warfare between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God's Christ, God's Anointed. Within two generations from that time (in A.D. 70) Jerusalem would see its Temple destroyed and over a million of its people massacred by the troops of Titus. Yet that destruction will pale in comparison with that of the Antichrist—a ruler immeasurably more wicked and powerful than Herod—when in the Great Tribulation he will shed more of Israel's blood than will ever have been shed before (Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:21-22). All of that bloodshed is over the conflict with the Messiah.

The least of Herod's intentions was to fulfill prophecy, but that is what his slaughter did. **Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled.** Herod's beastly act is recorded only by Matthew, yet it was predicted in a text given to the prophet Jeremiah. The

term **fulfilled** (from *plēroō*, “to fill up”) marks this out as completing an Old Testament prediction. This prophecy, like that of Jesus’ return from Egypt, was in the form of a type, which, as we have seen above, is a nonverbal prediction revealed in the New Testament. In the passage (Jer. 31:15) from which Matthew here quotes, Jeremiah was speaking of the great sorrow that would soon be experienced in Israel when most of her people would be carried captive to Babylon. **Ramah**, a town about five miles north of Jerusalem, was on the border of the northern (Israel) and southern (Judah) kingdoms. It was also the place where Jewish captives were assembled for deportation to Babylon (Jer. 40:1). **Rachel**, the wife of Jacob-Israel, was the mother of Joseph, whose two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, became progenitors of the two half-tribes that bore their names. Ephraim is often used in the Old Testament as a synonym for the northern kingdom. **Rachel** was also the mother of Benjamin, whose tribe became part of the southern kingdom. She had once cried, “Give me children, or else I die” (Gen. 30:1), and now her beloved “children,” her immeasurably multiplied descendants, were being taken captive to a foreign and pagan land.

Rachel weeping for her children therefore represented the lamentation of all Jewish mothers who wept over Israel’s great tragedy in the days of Jeremiah, and most specifically typified and prefigured the mothers of Bethlehem weeping bitterly over the massacre of their children by Herod in His attempt to kill the Messiah. So even while Israel’s Messiah was still a babe, Rachel had cause to weep again, even as the Messiah Himself would later weep over Jerusalem because of His people’s rejection of Him and the afflictions they would suffer as a consequence (Luke 19:41-44).

Though Matthew does not mention it here, because he is emphasizing the tragedy of the massacre, the passage he quotes from Jeremiah continues with a beautiful word of hope and promise: “Thus says the Lord, ‘Restrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded,’ declares the Lord, ‘and they shall return from the land of the enemy’” (Jer. 31:16). Within a few generations, the Lord brought His people back from Babylon, and one day He will bring all His chosen people back from captivity to Satan. “All Israel will be saved; just as it is written, ‘The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob. And this is My covenant with them, when I take

away their sins” (Rom. 11:26-27; cf. Isa. 27:9; 59:20-21). But before that great and wonderful day, disobedience, rejection, and tragedy would continue in Israel. The massacre of the little ones in Bethlehem signaled the start of terrifying conflict.

THE RETURN TO NAZARETH

But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, “Arise and take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child’s life are dead.” And he arose and took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he departed for the regions of Galilee, and came and resided in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He shall be called a Nazarene.” (2:19-23)

The fourth and final prophecy that Matthew mentions in chapter 2 pertains to the journey of Jesus’ family from Egypt to Nazareth.

When Herod was dead, the greatest immediate danger to Jesus was over. In his *Antiquities* Josephus reports that Herod “died of this, ulcerated entrails, putrified and maggot-filled organs, constant convulsions, foul breath, and neither physicians nor warm baths led to recovery.” A rather fitting end, it seems, for such a man. Not nearly so fitting was the elaborate and costly funeral that his eldest son and successor, Archelaus, prepared in his honor—especially in light of the fact that just five days before he died, Herod, by permission from Rome, had executed another son, Antipater, because of his plots against his father.

The angel of the Lord had told Joseph to stay in Egypt “until I tell you” (2:13). Now the angel reappeared to Joseph as promised, telling him, **Arise and take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child’s life are dead.** The fact that the

angel spoke of **those who sought the Child's life** indicates that Herod was not alone in his plans to destroy his supposed rival. But like Herod, the other conspirators seeking the death of **the Child** were themselves now **dead**.

Joseph was not instructed to return to any particular city or region but simply to **take the Child and His mother back into the land of Israel**. When he arrived in southern Israel, however, and **heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there**. The ones who had previously sought to kill the infant Jesus were dead, but **Archelaus** posed another, more general, threat. In one of his numerous acts of brutality shortly before he died, Herod had executed two popular Jewish rabbis, Judas and Matthias, who had stirred up their disciples and other faithful Jews in Jerusalem to tear down the offensive Roman eagle that the king had arrogantly erected over the Temple gate. The following Passover an insurrection broke out, and Archelaus, reflecting his father's senseless cruelty, executed three thousand Jews, many of whom were Passover pilgrims who had no part in the revolt.

Any Jew, therefore, who lived in the territory of Archelaus was in danger. Consequently Joseph was again **warned by God in a dream**, [and] **he departed for the regions of Galilee**. That they **came and resided in a city called Nazareth** was not only because Joseph and Mary were originally from there (Luke 2:4-5) by divine providence, but **that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled**. Matthew focuses on two features through all of this narrative: (1) divine revelation as indicated by angelic instruction for every move, and (2) the fulfillment of a divine plan revealed in the Old Testament.

The specific statement that the Messiah would **be called a Nazarene** does not appear in the Old Testament. Some interpreters have tried to connect **Nazarene** with the Hebrew *nēser* (branch) spoken of in Isaiah 11:1, but that idea is without etymological or other support, as is the idea of trying to tie the prophecy to the "shoot" of Isaiah 53:2. Because Matthew speaks of **the prophets**, plural, it seems that several prophets had made this prediction, though it is not specifically recorded in the Old Testament.

Other sayings and events unrecorded in the Old Testament are nevertheless quoted or referred to in the New. Jude tells us that “Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, ‘Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones, to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way’” (Jude 14-15). Yet no such prophecy is mentioned in Genesis or in any other part of the Old Testament. In a similar way we know of Jesus’ teaching that “It is more blessed to give than to receive” only because of Paul’s later reference to it (Acts 20:35). The saying is not mentioned by any of the gospel writers, including Luke, who reported the account in Acts. John tells us that he did not even attempt to record everything that Jesus said and did during His earthly ministry (John 21:25).

Matthew does not tell us which prophets predicted that the Messiah would be called a **Nazarene**, but only that more than one of them did so. The prophecy is said to be **fulfilled** when Jesus was taken to live in Nazareth, where Joseph and Mary had formerly lived. Matthew’s original readers were largely Jewish, and it was probably common knowledge among them who the specific prophets were that had made the prediction. For later readers, the Holy Spirit obviously felt it was enough that we simply know that the prediction was made and that it was fulfilled as Matthew explains.

Nazareth was about 55 miles north of Jerusalem, in **the regions of Galilee**, where the Lord had directed Joseph to go. The town was in an elevated basin, about one and a half miles across, and was inhabited largely by people noted for their crude and violent ways. The term *Nazarene* had long been a term of derision, used to describe any person who was rough and rude. That is why Nathanael, who was from Cana, a few miles to the south, asked Philip, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46). The question is especially significant coming from Nathanael, who by Jesus’ own word was “an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” (v. 47). Nathanael was not given to maligning his neighbors, but he was shocked that the one “of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote” (v. 45) actually could come from such a disreputable place as Nazareth.

The early Jewish persecutors of the church apparently considered Jesus’ being from Nazareth as evidence that He could *not* be the Messiah,

rather than, as Matthew tells us, a sign that He *was*. Tertullus, acting as attorney for the high priest Ananias and other Jewish leaders, spoke derisively of Paul before the Roman governor Felix as “a real pest and a fellow who stirs up dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5). The church Father Jerome wrote that in synagogue prayers Christians were often cursed as Nazarenes, with the petition that they would be blotted out of the Book of Life (see Ps. 69:28). Jesus’ living in Nazareth not only fulfilled the unnamed prophets’ prediction, but gave Him a name, Jesus the Nazarene, that would be used as a title of reproach, thus fulfilling many other prophecies that depict the Messiah as “despised and forsaken of men” (Isa. 53:3; cf. 49:7; Ps. 22:6-8; 69:20-21). The gospel writers make clear the fact that He was scorned and hated (see Matt. 12:24; 27:21-23, 63; Luke 23:4; John 5:18; 6:66; 9:22, 29).

It was therefore at lowly and despised Nazareth that the royal Son of God, along with the righteous Joseph and Mary, made His home for some thirty years.

[The Greatest Man \(3:1-6\)](#)

Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet, saying, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight!’” Now John himself had a garment of camel’s hair, and a leather belt about his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. (3:1-6)

At a conference one time a young person asked me, “What makes a person great?” I could not think of a good answer right then, but I began thinking about it. In the world’s eyes, such things as being born into a famous, wealthy, or influential family bring a certain measure of greatness simply by heritage. Earning a great deal of money is another mark of the world’s greatness, as are academic degrees, expertise in some field, outstanding athletic ability, artistic talent, high political or military office, and other such things.

By those criteria, however, even Jesus Christ was not great. Though He manifested surpassing wisdom and power, He was born into a quite ordinary family, His father being a simple carpenter. Even after He was grown, Jesus did not own a business, a herd of cattle or sheep, a house, or even a tent. He said, “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (Matt. 8:20). He had little, if any, formal education, no political office, no artistic accomplishments—in short, almost no marks of what the world considers greatness.

John the Baptist had even fewer of the world's marks of greatness than did Jesus. Yet Jesus called John the greatest man who had ever lived until that time: "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist" (Matt. 11:11). John was greater than Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Joseph; greater than Moses, Elijah, David, or any of the other Old Testament men of God. He was greater than any of the kings, emperors, philosophers, or military leaders of history. Yet, like Jesus, he was born into a simple, obscure family. His father, Zacharias, was one of many priests who took turns ministering in the Temple when their course, or division, was scheduled to serve. His mother, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly tribe of Levi and a descendant of the first high priest, Aaron (Luke 1:5). But there were many such descendants, most of whom had no place of special dignity or recognition.

That was John's family heritage. When he was grown, probably starting in his teen years, John the Baptist went to live in the wilderness of Judea, existing much like a hermit and forsaking even what little social and economic status he had. Yet Luke recorded of him, "for he will be great in the sight of the Lord" (1:15).

Reasons for such superlative commendation can be seen in 3:1-6, where Matthew gives a brief picture of the life and work of John the Baptist and also shows that John's ministry was yet another evidence of Jesus' kingship.

In chapter 1 Jesus' kingship is shown by his birth—by His descent from the royal line of David and by His miraculous conception. In chapter 2 His kingship is shown by the circumstances surrounding His birth—by the homage of the magi, the hatred of Herod, and God's miraculous protection of the young Jesus. Now we are shown the evidence through the herald who announced the King's arrival. The greatest man who had yet lived was primarily so because he was herald of the Messiah, the One who was greater still. His greatness was related to his calling.

In ancient times it was common for a herald to precede the arrival of the monarch, to announce his coming and to prepare for his safe and proper travel. With a coterie of servants, the herald would make sure that the roadway was as smooth and uncluttered as possible. Holes would be filled, rocks and debris would be removed, and unsightly litter would be burned or hidden. As the group traveled along and worked, the herald

would proclaim the king's coming to everyone he encountered. His twofold duty was to proclaim and to prepare. That is what John's ministry did for God's great King, Jesus Christ.

In presenting the herald of Christ, Matthew shows us the man, the message, the motive, the mission, the manner, and the ministry.

THE MAN

Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, (3:1)

Now in those days serves as a transition between chapters 2 and 3. It was a common literary phrase, indicating the general time in which the events being described occurred. Nearly thirty years had elapsed between Joseph's taking the young Jesus and His mother to Nazareth and the beginning of John's public ministry. Only Luke (2:39-52) tells us anything of Jesus' life during the intervening years. Apart from that brief account, Scripture is silent.

John was a common Jewish name in New Testament times and is the Greek form of the Hebrew Johanan (see 2 Kings 25:23; Jer. 40:8; etc.), which means "Jehovah, or Yahweh, is gracious." **Baptist**, or Baptizer (*baptistēs*; the Greek ending, *tēs*, signifies one who performs an act), was an epithet given him because baptizing was such an important and obvious part of his ministry.

John's father and mother "were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord." But they had no children and, like Sarah before Isaac was conceived, Elizabeth was beyond normal childbearing years (Luke 1:6-7; cf. Gen. 17:17). One day as John's father was performing his priestly function in the Temple, "an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense" (Luke 1:11). The angel proceeded to tell Zacharias that "Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at

his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord” (vv. 13-15). John was named by God Himself and set apart for greatness even before he was conceived!

John would “be filled with the Holy Spirit, while yet in his mother’s womb. And he [would] turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God” (Luke 1:15-16). Most significantly of all, he would “go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah . . . so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (v. 17). John’s own father, himself “filled with the Holy Spirit,” declared that John “will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you [John] will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways” (vv. 67, 76). “And the child continued to grow, and to become strong in spirit, and he lived in the deserts until the day of his public appearance to Israel” (v. 80).

That was John. His conception was miraculous, he was filled with the Holy Spirit before he was born, he was great in the sight of God, and he was to be the herald of the Messiah, announcing and preparing the people for His coming. It is therefore not strange that Jesus said, “There has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (Matt. 11:11). That great man was a sovereignly designed and chosen herald for the great King.

Came is from *paraginomai*, which often was used to indicate an official arrival, such as that of the magi (Matt. 2:1), or the public appearance of a leader or teacher (Matt. 3:13). For thirty years both John and Jesus had lived in relative obscurity. Now the coming of the herald signified the coming of the King. The beginning of John’s ministry signaled the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (see Acts 10:37-38).

Preaching is from *kērussō*, the primary meaning of which is “to herald.” It was used of the official whose duty it was to proclaim loudly and extensively the coming of the king. Matthew also uses this term with reference to Jesus and the apostles.

John knew his position and his task. He never sought or accepted honor for himself, but only for the One whose coming he proclaimed. As a child John no doubt had been told many times of the angel’s announcement of his birth and his purpose, a purpose from which he never wavered, compromised, or tried to gain personal recognition or advantage. When questioned by the priests and Levites who had been sent from Jerusalem to ask his identity, John replied, “I am not the Christ” (John

1:19-20). He also denied being Elijah and “the Prophet” (v. 21; cf. Deut. 18:15). When they persisted in knowing who he was, he simply said, “I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as Isaiah the prophet said” (v. 23).

The question about his being Elijah introduces some important truth. At every orthodox Passover ceremony even today a cup is reserved at the table for Elijah. At the circumcision of orthodox Jewish baby boys a chair is placed for Elijah. The anticipation is that, if Elijah would ever come and sit in the chair or drink from the cup, the Messiah’s arrival would be imminent. That belief is based on Malachi 4:5-6, in which the prophet predicts, “Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers.”

Yet, as he himself testified, John the Baptist was not the literal, resurrected Elijah most Jews of his day were expecting, or that many Jews of our own day expect. But he was indeed the Elijah that the prophet Malachi predicted would come. Luke 1:17 confirms that when it says that John “will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah.”

That the Elijah who was commonly expected by the Jews was not the Elijah of God’s plan was stated plainly by Jesus Himself after John the Baptist had been imprisoned and killed. “Elijah is coming and will restore all things; but I say to you, that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished.’ . . . Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist” (Matt. 17:11-13).

Because the Jews rejected John the Baptist as the true Elijah who was to come, they prevented the complete fulfillment of the prophecy as God had originally given it through Malachi. “If you care to accept it,” Jesus explained about John, “he himself is Elijah, who was to come” (Matt. 11:14). But John not only was not accepted, he was ridiculed, imprisoned, and beheaded. Because he was not received by the great body of God’s chosen people, he was not able to be the Elijah and there is therefore an Elijah yet to come. Some interpreters believe he will be one of the two witnesses of Revelation 11, but we cannot be certain. In any case, John the Baptist was rejected as the coming Elijah. And just as the

herald was rejected, so was the King he heralded. John was beheaded, and Jesus was crucified. Israel therefore was set aside, and the kingdom was postponed.

Everything about John the Baptist was unique and amazing—his sudden public appearance, his life-style, his message, his baptizing, and his humility. He was born to a mother who was barren. He was a priest by heritage but became a prophet. He forsook his earthly father's ministry for the sake of his heavenly Father's. After spending most of his life in the desert, at the right moment God spoke to his heart, and he began to thunder out the message God had given him in that desert—to announce the coming of the King.

John's primary place of ministry, like his primary place of training, was **in the wilderness of Judea**. By the world's standards and procedures, the coming of a king, or of a great person of any sort, is proclaimed and prepared for with great expense, pomp, and fanfare. Even the announcer dresses in the best suits, stays in the best hotels, contacts only the best people, and makes preparations for the monarch to visit only the best places. But that was not God's plan for the heralding of His Son. John the Baptist was born of obscure parents, dressed strangely even for his day, and carried on his ministry mostly in out-of-the-way and unattractive places.

All of that, however, was not incidental or circumstantial. It was symbolic of John's ministry to call the people away from the corrupt and dead religious system of their day—away from ritualism, worldliness, hypocrisy, and superficiality. John called them away from Jerusalem and Jericho, away from the cities into the **wilderness**—where most people would not bother to go if they were not serious seekers. John brought them away, where they were freer to listen, think, and ponder, without the distractions and the misleading leaders they were so accustomed to following. In such a seemingly desolate place, they could begin to see the greatness of this man of God and the even greater greatness of the One whose coming he announced.

THE MESSAGE

The message John proclaimed was simple, so simple it could easily be summarized in one word: **repent** (3:2a; cf. Acts 13:24; 19:4). The Greek word (*metanoēō*) behind **repent** means more than regret or sorrow (cf. Heb. 12:17); it means to turn around, to change direction, to change the mind and will. It does not denote just any change, but always a change from the wrong to the right, away from sin and to righteousness. In his outstanding commentary on Matthew, John A. Broadus observes that “wherever this Greek word is used in the New Testament the reference is to changing the mind and the purpose from sin to holiness.” Repentance involves sorrow for sin, but sorrow that leads to a change of thinking, desire, and conduct of life. “The sorrow that is according to the will of God,” Paul says, “produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation” (2 Cor. 7:10; cf. v. 9). John’s command to **repent** could therefore be rendered “be converted.”

John’s message of preparation for the coming of the King was repentance, conversion, the demand for a completely different life. That must have been startling news for Jews who thought that, as God’s chosen people—the children of Abraham, the people of the covenant—they deserved and were unconditionally assured of the promised King. Knowing what they must have been thinking, John later told his listeners, “Do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (3:9). God was not interested in His people’s human heritage but in their spiritual life. “What the King wants from you,” John was saying, “is that you make a complete turnaround from the way you are, that you be totally converted, totally changed.” God calls for radical change and transformation that affects the mind, the will, and the emotions—the whole person. John’s point was simple: “You are in the same condition as the Gentiles. You have no right to the kingdom unless you repent and are converted from sin to righteousness.” He called for a true repentance that results in the fruit of a translated life (v. 8) and that includes baptism with water (v. 11a). Failure to repent would result in severe judgment, as Matthew 11:20-24 and 12:38-41 demonstrate.

Repentance was exactly the same message with which Jesus began His preaching and the apostles began theirs. The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand,” Jesus proclaimed; “repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15; cf. Matt. 3:2; 4:17; Luke 5:32). Mark 6:12 says of the

twelve: “And they went out and preached that men should repent.” In his Pentecost sermon, Peter’s concluding words were, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38; cf. Acts 3:19; 20:21; 26:18).

The close connection between repentance and conversion is also indicated in texts that do not specifically use the word repentance, yet convey the same idea (see Matt. 18:3; Luke 14:33). The best summary statement may be that of Paul in Acts 26:20, where he states that the objective of his ministry was that men “should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.”

THE MOTIVE

The motive John gave for repentance was: **the kingdom of heaven is at hand** (3:2*b*). The people should repent and be converted because the King was coming, and He deserves and requires no less. The unrepentant and unconverted cannot give the heavenly King the glory He deserves, do not belong to the heavenly King, and are unfit for His heavenly kingdom.

After four hundred years, the people of Israel again heard God’s prophetic word. Malachi’s prophecy was followed by four centuries of silence, with no new or direct word from the Lord. Now, when His word came to Israel again, proclaiming the coming of the King, it was not the expected word of joy and comfort and celebration but a message of warning and rebuke. **The kingdom of heaven is at hand**, waiting to be ushered in, but Israel was not ready for it.

Despite many similar warnings by the prophets, many of the people and most of the leaders were not prepared for John’s message. What he said was shocking; it was unexpected and unacceptable. It was inconceivable to them that, as God’s people, they had anything to do to inherit God’s kingdom but simply wait for and accept it. The Messiah was *their* Messiah, the King was *their* King, the Savior was *their* Savior, the promise was *their* promise. Every Jew was destined for the kingdom, and every Gentile was excluded, except for a token handful of proselytes. That was the common Jewish thinking of the day, which John totally shattered.

But John's message was God's message, and he would not compromise it or clutter it with the popular misconceptions and delusions of his own day and his own people. He had no word but God's word, and he proclaimed no kingdom but God's kingdom and no preparation but God's preparation. That preparation was repentance. God's standard would not change, even if every Jew were excluded and every Gentile saved. God knew that some Jews would be saved, but none apart from personal repentance and conversion.

Although the precise phrase is not found there, **the kingdom of heaven** is basically an Old Testament concept. David declares that "the Lord is King forever and ever" (Ps. 10:16; cf. 29:10), that His kingdom is everlasting, and that His dominion "endures throughout all generations" (Ps. 145:13). Daniel speaks of "the God of heaven [who] will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed" (Dan. 2:44; cf. Ezek. 37:25), a "kingdom [that] is an everlasting kingdom" (Dan. 4:3). The God of heaven is the King of heaven, and the heavenly kingdom is God's kingdom.

Matthew uses the phrase **kingdom of heaven** thirty-two times, and is the only gospel writer who uses it at all. The other three use "the kingdom of God." It is probable that Matthew used **kingdom of heaven** because it was more understandable to his primarily Jewish readers. Jews would not speak God's name (Yahweh, or Jehovah), and would often substitute *heaven* when referring to Him—much as we do in such expressions as "heaven smiled on me today."

There is no significant difference between "the kingdom of God" and **the kingdom of heaven**. The one phrase emphasizes the sovereign Ruler of the kingdom and the other emphasizes the kingdom itself, but they are the same kingdom. Matthew 19:23-24 confirms the equality of the phrases by using them interchangeably.

The **kingdom** has two aspects, the outer and the inner, both of which are spoken of in the gospels. Those aspects are evident as one moves through Matthew. In the broadest sense, the kingdom includes everyone who professes to acknowledge God. Jesus' parable of the sower represents the kingdom as including both genuine and superficial believers (Matt. 13:3-23), and in His following parable (vv. 24-30) as including both wheat (true believers) and tares (false believers). That is the outer kingdom, the one we can see but cannot accurately evaluate ourselves, because we cannot know people's hearts.

The other kingdom is the inner, the kingdom that includes only true believers, only those who, as John the Baptist proclaimed, repent and are converted. God rules over both aspects of the kingdom, and He will one day finally separate the superficial from the real. Meanwhile He allows the pretenders to identify themselves outwardly with His kingdom.

God's kingly rule over the hearts of men and over the world may be thought of as having a number of phases. The first is the *prophesied* kingdom, such as that foretold by Daniel. The second phase is the *present* kingdom, the one that existed at the time of John the Baptist and that he mentions. It is the kingdom that both John and Jesus spoke of as being **at hand** (cf. 4:17). The third phase may be referred to as the *interim* kingdom, the kingdom that resulted because of Israel's rejection of her King. The King returned to heaven and His kingdom on earth now exists only in a mystery form. Christ is Lord of the earth in the sense of His being its Creator and its ultimate Ruler; but He does not presently exercise His full divine will over the earth. He is, so to speak, in a voluntary exile in heaven until it is time for Him to return again. He reigns only in the hearts of those who know Him as Savior and Lord. For those "the kingdom of God is . . . righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17).

The fourth phase can be described as the *manifest* kingdom, in which Christ will rule, physically, directly, and fully on earth for a thousand years, the Millennium. In that kingdom He will rule both externally and internally—externally over all mankind, and internally in the hearts of those who belong to Him by faith. The fifth, and final, phase is the "*eternal* kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," which "will be abundantly supplied" to all of His own (2 Pet. 1:11).

Had God's people Israel accepted their King when He first came to them, there would be no interim kingdom. The kingdom **at hand** would have become the kingdom of a thousand years, which, in turn, would have ushered in the eternal kingdom. But because they killed the forerunner of the King and then the King Himself, the millennial kingdom, and consequently the eternal kingdom, were sovereignly postponed.

THE MISSION

For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet, saying, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight!’” (3:3)

The mission of John the Baptist had long before been described by **Isaiah the prophet** (see Isa. 40:3-4). Here Matthew again emphasizes fulfilled prophecy in the coming of Jesus Christ as divine King (cf. 1:22; 2:5,15,17). But as herald of the great King, John did not clear the roads and highways of obstacles, but sought to clear men’s hearts of the obstacles that kept them from the King. **The way of the Lord** is the way of repentance, of turning from sin to righteousness, of turning moral and spiritual **paths** that are crooked into ones that are **straight**, ones that are fit for the King. “Let every valley be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low,” Isaiah continues, “and let the rough ground become a plain, and the rugged terrain a broad valley; then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together” (Isa. 40:4-5). The call of John’s **voice** that was **crying** [*bōntos*] **in the wilderness** of Judea was the shouting of urgency commanding people to repent, to confess sin and the need of a Savior. **His paths** (*tribous*) are well known, as the Greek term implies, because they are clearly revealed in Scripture.

THE MANNER

Now John himself had a garment of camel’s hair, and a leather belt about his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. (3:4)

John must have been a startling figure to those who saw him. He claimed to be God’s messenger, but he did not live, dress, or talk like other religious leaders. Those leaders were proper, well-dressed, well-fed, sophisticated, and worldly. John obviously cared for none of those things and even made a point of forsaking them. His **garment of camel’s hair**

and his **leather belt about his waist** were as plain and drab as the wilderness in which he lived and preached. His clothes were practical and long-wearing, but far from being comfortable or fashionable. He was much like the first Elijah in that regard (2 Kings 1:8). His diet of **locusts and wild honey** was as spartan as his clothing. It was nourishing but little else.

John's very dress, food, and life-style were in themselves a rebuke to the self-satisfied and self-indulgent religious leaders of Israel—the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and priests. It was also a rebuke to most of the people, who, though they may not have been able to indulge in the privileges of their leaders, nonetheless admired and longed for the same advantages.

John's purpose was not to turn the people into hermits or ascetics. He called on no one, not even his disciples, to live and dress as he did. But his manner of living was a dramatic reminder of the many loves and pleasures that keep people from exchanging their own way for God's.

THE MINISTRY

Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. (3:5-6)

The immediate effect of John's preaching was dramatic. People were coming from the great city of **Jerusalem**, which was a considerable distance away. They came, in fact, from **all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan**. In other words they were coming from all over southern Palestine, including both sides of the **Jordan River**. As Matthew reports later in his gospel, the people recognized John as a prophet (21:26).

That those Jews submitted to **being baptized** was more than a little significant, because that was not a traditional Jewish ceremony. It was completely different from the Levitical washings, which consisted of

washing the hands, feet, and head. The Essenes, a group of Jewish ascetics who lived on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, practiced a type of ceremonial washing that more nearly resembled baptism. But both the Levitical and the Essene washings were repeated, those of the Essenes as much as several times a day or even hourly. They represented repeated purification for repeated sinning.

John's washing, however, was one-time. The only one-time washing the Jews performed was for Gentiles, signifying their coming as outsiders into the true faith of Judaism. A Jew who submitted to such a rite demonstrated, in effect, that he was an outsider who sought entrance into the people of God—an amazing admission for a Jew. Members of God's chosen race, descendants of Abraham, heirs of the covenant of Moses, came to John to be **baptized** like a Gentile!

That act symbolized before the world that they realized their national and racial descent, or even their calling as God's chosen and covenant people, could not save them. They had to repent, forsake sin, and trust in the Lord for salvation. It is that of which the baptism was a public witness, **as they confessed their sins**. They had to come into the kingdom just like the Gentiles, through repentance and faith—which included a public admission of sins (cf. the same Greek term [*exomologeō*] in Phil. 2:11, where it refers to a verbal confession).

We know from subsequent accounts in the gospels that many of those acts of repentance must have been superficial and hypocritical, because John soon lost much of his following, just as Jesus would eventually lose most of His popularity. But the impact of John's ministry on the Jewish people was profound and unforgettable. The way of the King had been announced to them, and they had no excuse for not being ready for His coming.

Six things demonstrate the true greatness of John. (1) He was filled with and controlled by the Spirit, even from "his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15*b*). (2) He was obedient to God's Word. From childhood he followed God's will, and from it he never wavered. (3) He was self-controlled, drinking neither "wine or liquor" (Luke 1:15*a*). In his food, dress, and lifestyle he was temperate and austere. (4) He was humble. His purpose was to announce the king, not to act kingly or take for himself any of the king's prerogatives. Speaking of Jesus, John said, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of

His sandals” (Mark 1:7), and on a later occasion, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). (5) He courageously and faithfully proclaimed God’s Word, thundering it across the wilderness as long as he was free to preach, to whomever would listen. (6) Finally, he was faithful in winning people to Christ, in turning “back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God” (Luke 1:16). He stands as a pattern for all who seek genuine greatness.

The Fruits of True Repentance (3:7-12)

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” (3:7-12)

Matthew records but this one sample of the preaching of John the Baptist. The parallel account in Luke (3:1-18) gives more details, but the message is the same: a call to repentance and baptism, an inner change of mind and heart, along with an outward act that symbolized that change—and, even more importantly, a manner of living that *demonstrated* the change. The “many other exhortations” that John preached (Luke 3:18) possibly consisted primarily of more examples of the **fruit in keeping with repentance** (v. 8) that he gave in addition to those mentioned in verses 11-14.

John’s preaching was simple and his message was limited to that which was most essential, but he faithfully fulfilled his singular calling as

the herald of God's coming great King. He performed his ministry with a boldness, courage, power, and single-minded devotion that caused that King to say of him, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist" (Matt. 11:11).

In the narrative of 3:7-12 Matthew focuses on four elements: the congregation, the confrontation, the condemnation, and the consolation.

THE CONGREGATION

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, (3:7a)

Among the great number of people who came out to see John in the wilderness (v. 5) were **many of the Pharisees and Sadducees**, whom the Baptist singled out for special warning and rebuke.

By New Testament times three groups, or sects, had developed that were quite distinct from the rest of Judaism. Besides the two mentioned here (and frequently in the gospels and Acts), were the Essenes. Most of the Essenes were unmarried, but they often adopted children from other Jewish families. These secretive and ascetic Jews lived for the most part in isolated, exclusive, and austere communities such as the now-famous Qumran, on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. They spent much of their time copying the Scriptures, and it is to them that we owe the valuable and helpful Dead Sea Scrolls—discovered by accident in 1947 by an Arab shepherd boy. But the Essenes had little contact with or influence on the society of their own day and are nowhere mentioned in the New Testament.

THE PHARISEES

The **Pharisees**, however, were a great contrast to the Essenes. They were equally, if not more, exclusive, but were found for the most part in the larger cities such as Jerusalem. They were an association very much in the mainstream of Jewish life and made a point of being noticed and admired. Jesus exposed them as doing “all their deeds to be noticed by men... and they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi” (Matt. 23:5-7; cf. 6:2, 5).

We have no specific documentation as to exactly how or when the Pharisee sect began, but it is likely that it developed out of a former group called the Hasidim, whose name means “pious ones” or “saints.” The Hasidim came into being in the second century B.C., during the intertestamental period. Palestine had been under the Hellenistic (Greek) rule of the Seleucid Syrian kings for many years. Jewish patriots, under the leadership of Judas Maccabaeus, revolted when Antiochus Epiphanes tried to force his pagan culture and religion on the Jews. That despicable tyrant even profaned the Temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar and forcing the sacrificed meat down the throats of the priests—a double abomination to Jews, because the law of Moses forbade them to eat pork (Lev. 11:4-8; Deut. 14:7-8). The Hasidim were among the strongest supporters of the revolt, until its leaders began to become worldly and politicized.

Many scholars believe that the **Pharisees**, and likely the Essenes also, descended from the Hasidim. The word *Pharisee* means “separated ones,” and members of the sect diligently tried to live up to their name. Admission to the group was strictly controlled by periods of probation lasting up to one year, during which the applicant had to prove his ability to follow ritual law. They separated themselves not only from Gentiles but from tax collectors and any others whom they considered to be base “sinners” (Luke 7:39). They even looked with disdain on the common Jewish people, whom a group of Pharisees in Jerusalem once referred to as “accursed” (John 7:49). After leaving the marketplace or any public gathering, they would as soon as possible perform ceremonial washings to purify themselves of possible contamination from touching some unclean person.

The Pharisees formed a self-righteous, “holy” community within the community; they were legalistic isolationists who had no regard or

respect for those outside their sect. They believed strongly in God's sovereignty and in divine destiny and that they alone were the true Israel. They considered themselves to be superspiritual, but their "spirituality" was entirely external, consisting of the pursuit of meticulous observance of a multitude of religious rituals and taboos, most of which they and various other religious leaders had devised over the previous several centuries as supplements to the law of Moses. These were known collectively as "the tradition of the elders," concerning which Jesus gave the Pharisees one of His strongest rebukes, charging them with "teaching as doctrines the precepts of men" (Matt. 15:2-9).

By the time of Christ, the **Pharisees** had lost most of whatever nationalism they may earlier have had. Another sect, the Zealots, had become the association for those whose primary concern was Jewish independence. The Pharisees' single loyalty was to themselves, to their traditions and to their own influence and prestige. By their strict adherence to those traditions they expected to reap great reward in heaven. But they were the epitome of religious emptiness and hypocrisy, as Jesus often pointed out (Matt. 15:7; 22:18; 23:13, 23, 25; etc.). The Pharisees "outwardly [appeared] righteous to men, but inwardly [were] full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matt. 23:28).

THE SADDUCEES

The **Sadducees** were at the other end of the Jewish religious spectrum—the ultraliberals. The origin of their name is uncertain, but many modern scholars believe it is derived from Zadok (Sadok in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament), the name of a man who was priest under David (2 Sam. 8:17) and chief priest under Solomon (1 Kings 1:32). This sect also arose during the intertestamental period, but from among the priestly aristocracy. They were compromisers, both religiously and politically. They cared little for Greek culture, with its emphasis on philosophy and intellectualism, but were greatly attracted to the pragmatic, practical Romans.

The Sadducees claimed to accept the law of Moses as the supreme and only religious authority, and they scorned the legalistic traditions of

their antagonists, the Pharisees. In New Testament times they were still closely associated with the priestly class (see Acts 5:17), to the extent that the terms *chief priest* and *Sadducee* were used almost synonymously (as were the terms *scribe* and *Pharisee*). But they cared little for religion, especially doctrine, and denied the existence of angels, the resurrection, and most things supernatural (Acts 23:6-8). Consequently they lived only for the present, getting everything they could from whomever they could—Gentiles and fellow Jews alike. They believed in extreme human autonomy and in the unlimited freedom of the will. They considered themselves masters of their own destinies.

The Sadducees were much fewer in number than the Pharisees and were extremely wealthy. Among other things, under the leadership of Annas they ran the Temple franchises—the money exchanging and the sale of sacrificial animals—and charged exorbitantly for those services. It was therefore the Sadducees' business that Jesus damaged when he drove the moneychangers and sacrifice sellers out of the Temple (Matt. 21:12-13).

Because of their great wealth, Temple racketeering, and affiliation with the Romans, the Sadducees were much less popular with their fellow Jews than were the Pharisees, who were strongly religious and had some measure of national loyalty.

Religiously, politically, and socially the **Pharisees and Sadducees** had almost nothing in common. The Pharisees were ritualistic; the Sadducees were rationalistic. The Pharisees were strict separatists; the Sadducees comprising collaborators. The Pharisees were commoners (most of them had a trade), while the Sadducees were aristocrats. Both groups had members among the scribes and were represented in the priesthood and in the Jewish high council, the Sanhedrin; yet they were in almost constant opposition to each other. During New Testament times about the only common ground they exhibited was opposition to Christ and His followers (Matt. 22:15-16, 23, 34-35; Acts 4:1; 23:6).

They had one other common religious and spiritual ground. The Pharisees expected their reward in heaven, while the Sadducees expected theirs in this life, but the trust of both groups was in personal works and self-effort. Both emphasized the superficial and nonessential, and had no concern for the genuine inner spiritual life or for the welfare of their fellow man. That was “the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees,” the

hypocritical, self-serving, dead externalism about which Jesus warned His disciples (Matt. 16:6).

Throughout most of its history the church has had its own brands of Pharisees and Sadducees, its ritualists and its rationalists. The one looks for salvation and blessing through prescribed ceremonies and legalistic practices; the other finds religious meaning and purpose in private, existential beliefs and standards. One is conservative and the other is liberal, but the hope and trust of both groups is in themselves, in what they can perform or accomplish by their own actions and wills.

It is probably because of that deeper spiritual commonness that Matthew speaks of them as one group, emphasized by the use of a single definite article (**the**) rather than two (“*the* Pharisees and *the* Sadducees”). It is clear from John’s response to them that he considered their basic problem and need to be exactly the same.

This group was **coming for baptism**, the Greek preposition *epi* (**for**) being used in a construction that clearly indicates purpose. In light of John’s unorthodox dress and style and his prophetic and authoritative exhortations, it is hard to imagine why the self-righteous and proud Pharisees and Sadducees would ask to be baptized by him. Some of them may simply have been curious. It seems more probable, however, that they suspected that John might indeed be a prophet, as many of the people believed (Matt. 14:5), and that they wanted to check him out as thoroughly as they could. If he were a genuine prophet perhaps they could gain his approval, parade the pretense of repentant spirituality, and capitalize on or even take over the movement—in the way religious opportunists still do today. Whatever their reasons were, they were wrong, wicked reasons. They were not seeking God’s truth or God’s working in their own lives. They were not repentant; they had not confessed their sins; they had not changed at all—as John well knew. They were not genuinely seeking the true righteousness that delivers from judgment. They were the same smug, self-righteous hypocrites they had been when they started out to find John.

THE CONFRONTATION

he said to them, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (3:7b)

John’s awareness of the insincerity and lack of repentance of the Pharisees and Sadducees is evident in those strong words. They intended to carry their hypocrisy even to the extent of submitting to John’s baptism, out of whatever corrupt motives they may have had. *Gennēma* (**brood**) may also be translated “offspring,” signifying descendants or children. Jesus used the same epithet (**brood of vipers**) to describe the Pharisees on several occasions (Matt. 12:34; 23:33). **Vipers** (*echidna*) were small but very poisonous desert snakes, which would have been quite familiar to John the Baptist. They were made even more dangerous by the fact that, when still, they looked like a dead branch and were often picked up unintentionally. That is exactly what Paul did on the island of Malta when he went to gather wood for a fire after the shipwreck. As indicated by the response of the natives who were befriending Paul and the others, the bite of the **viper** was often fatal, though Paul miraculously “suffered no harm” (Acts 28:3-5).

Calling the Pharisees and Sadducees a **brood of vipers** pointed up the danger of their religious hypocrisy—as well as the fact that their wicked work had been passed on to them by the original serpent (Gen. 3:1-13) through their spiritual forefathers, of whom they were the **brood**, or offspring. Like the desert viper, they often appeared to be harmless, but their brand of godliness (cf. 2 Tim. 3:5) was venomous and deadly. In His series of woes against the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus said, “You shut off the kingdom of heaven from men; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in” (Matt. 23:13). They were responsible for keeping countless Jews out of the kingdom, and therefore from salvation and spiritual life.

In Matthew 23:33 Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees “serpents” as well as a “brood of vipers,” suggesting even more directly that their true spiritual father was Satan—as He specifically charges in John 8:44 (cf. Rev. 12:9; 20:2). These religious hypocrites were Satan’s children doing Satan’s deceitful work.

The question **Who warned you to flee** continues the viper figure. A brush fire or a farmer’s burning the stalks in his field after the harvest

would cause vipers and other creatures to **flee** before the flames in order to escape. It was a common sight in many of the Mediterranean and Arab regions, and one that John the Baptist doubtlessly had seen many times. The implication is that the Pharisees and Sadducees were expecting John's baptism to be a kind of spiritual fire insurance, giving protection from the flames of **the wrath to come**. True repentance and conversion *do* protect from God's **wrath** and judgment, but superficial and insincere professions or acts of faith tend only to harden a person against genuine belief, giving a false sense of security. John would not be party to such hypocrisy and sham. It was the deceitfulness of their true master, Satan, and not genuine fear of God's judgment, that led them out to hear John and to seek his baptism as a pretentious formality.

John's indictment must have deeply stung those false religious leaders, who considered themselves to be far above the common man in their relationship to God and His kingdom. John, and Jesus after him, characterized them as deceivers rather than leaders, perpetuators of spiritual darkness rather than spiritual light, children of the devil rather than sons of God.

THE CONDEMNATION

Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (3:8-10)

The marks of a truly repentant heart are **fruit in keeping with repentance**, or as Paul described them to King Agrippa, "deeds appropriate to repentance" (Acts 26:20). In his parallel account Luke mentions several examples of the kind of **fruit** John was talking about. To the general multitude he said, "Let the man who has two tunics share with

him who has none; and let him who has food do likewise” (Luke 3:11). To the tax-gatherers he said, “Collect no more than what you have been ordered to” (v. 13), and to some soldiers he said, “Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages” (v. 14).

As James points out, “Faith, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17). John says in his first epistle, “The one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous” (1 John 3:7); and that “if someone says, I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (4:20). Our actions toward our fellow men are indicators of our true attitude toward God.

Axios (**in keeping with**) has the root idea of having equal weight or worth, and therefore of being appropriate. True **repentance** not only should but *will* have correspondingly genuine works, demonstrated in both attitudes and actions. Right relationship to God brings right relationship to our fellow human beings, at least as far as our part is concerned (cf. Rom. 12:18). Those who claim to know Christ, who claim to be born again, will demonstrate a new way of living that corresponds to the new birth.

The Pharisees and Sadducees knew a great deal about repentance. That God fully and freely remits the sins of a penitent is a basic doctrine of Judaism. The ancient rabbis said, “Great is repentance, for it brings healing upon the world. Great is repentance, for it reaches to the throne of God,” and, “A man can shoot an arrow for a few furlongs, but repentance reaches to the throne of God.” Some rabbis maintained that the law was created two thousand years before the world, but that repentance was created even before the law. The clear meaning of repentance in Judaism has always been a change in man’s attitude toward God that results in a moral and religious reformation of the individual’s conduct. The great medieval Jewish scholar Maimonides said of the traditional Jewish concept of repentance: “What is repentance? Repentance is that the sinner forsakes his sin, puts it out of his thoughts, and fully resolves in his mind that he will never do it again.”

Such understanding of repentance is basically consistent with the teaching of the Old Testament. Repentance always involves a changed life, a renouncing of sin and doing righteousness. The Lord declared through Ezekiel, “When the righteous turns from his righteousness and commits

iniquity, then he shall die in it. But when the wicked turns from his wickedness and practices justice and righteousness, he will live by them” (Ezek. 33:18-19). Hosea pleaded, “Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to Him, ‘Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously’” (Hos. 14:1-2). After Jonah’s reluctant but powerful warning to Nineveh, “God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, [and] then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it” (Jonah 3:10). Nineveh brought **forth fruit in keeping with repentance.**

The idea that repentance is evidenced by renunciation of sin and by righteous living did not originate with John the Baptist, but had long been an integral part of orthodox Judaism. Faithful rabbis had taught that one of the most important passages in Scripture was, “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless; defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isa. 1:16-17).

Theologian Erich Sauer, in *The Triumph of the Crucified* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951, p. 67), speaks of repentance as “a threefold action. In the understanding it means knowledge of sin; in the feelings it means pain and grief; and in the will it means a change of mind.” True repentance first of all involves understanding and insight, intellectual awareness of the need for moral and spiritual cleansing and change. Second, it involves our emotions. We come to *feel* the need that our mind knows. Third, it involves appropriate actions that result from what our mind knows and our heart feels.

Recognition of personal sin is the important first step. But by itself it is useless, even dangerous, because it tends to make a person think that mere recognition is all that is necessary. A hardened pharaoh admitted his sin (Ex. 9:27), a double-minded Balaam admitted his (Num. 22:34), a greedy Achan acknowledged his (Josh. 7:20), and an insincere Saul confessed his (1 Sam. 15:24). The rich young ruler who asked Jesus how to have eternal life went away sorrowful but not repentant (Luke 18:23). Even Judas, despairing over his betrayal of Jesus, said to the chief priests and elders, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood” (Matt. 27:4). All of those men recognized their sin, yet none of them repented. They were experiencing what Paul called “the sorrow of the world” that “produces

death” instead of the “godly sorrow” that “produces a repentance” (2 Cor. 7:10-11).

True repentance will include a deep *feeling* of wrongdoing and of sin against God. David begins his great penitential psalm by crying out, “Be gracious to me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Thy compassion blot out my transgressions” (Ps. 51:1). He not only clearly saw his sin but deeply felt his need to be rid of it. In another psalm he declared, “When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long” (Ps. 32:3).

The sorrow of true repentance is like David’s; it is sorrow for offense against a holy God, not simply regret over the personal consequences of our sin. Sorrow over being found out or over suffering hardship or discipline because of our sin is not godly sorrow, and has nothing to do with repentance. That sort of sorrow is but selfish regret, concern for self rather than for God. It merely adds to the original sin.

Even acknowledgement of sin and feeling of offense against God do not complete repentance. If it is genuine, it will result in a changed life that bears **fruit in keeping with repentance**. David, after confessing and expressing great remorse for his sin against God, determined that, with God’s help, he would forsake his sin and turn to righteousness. “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me,... Then I will teach transgressors Thy ways, and sinners will be converted to Thee” (Ps. 51:10, 13). **Fruit** is always seen in Scripture as manifested behavior (cf. Matt. 7:20).

The great Puritan Thomas Goodwin called for repentance with these striking words:

Fall down upon thy knees afore him, and with a heart broken to water, acknowledge, as Shimei, thy treason and rebellions against him who never did thee hurt; and acknowledge, with a rope ready fitted to thy neck by thy own hands, as they Benhadad’s servants wore; that is, confessing that if he will hang thee up, he may. . . . Tell Him that He may shew his justice on thee, if he will; and present thy naked breast, thy hateful soul, as a butt and mark for him, if He please, to shoot his arrows into and sheathe his sword in. Only desire him to remember that he sheathed his sword first in the bowels of his Son, Zech. 13:7,

when he made his soul an offering for sin. (*The Works of Thomas Goodwin* [Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1863], 7:231)

Another Puritan, William Perkins, wrote, “Godly sorrow causeth grief for sin, because it is sin. It makes any man in whom it is to be of this disposition and mind, that if there were no conscience to accuse, no devil to terrify, no Judge to arraign and condemn, no hell to torment, yet he would be humbled and brought on his knees for his sins, because he hath offended a loving, merciful, and long-suffering God.”

Ultimately, of course, repentance like that is a gift of God. Speaking to the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish council, Peter and some of the other apostles said, “He [Jesus] is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31). Some while later, after he himself had finally been persuaded by God that the Gentiles were eligible for the kingdom (10:1-35), Peter managed to convince skeptical Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, who then “glorified God, saying, ‘Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life’” (11:18). Paul called Timothy to be a gentle bond-servant of the Lord in proclaiming the truth to the lost in the hope that “God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:25-26).

It was clearly not God-given repentance that the Pharisees and Sadducees professed before John. Of all people they should have known the meaning of true repentance, but they did not. They were hypocrites and phonies, as John well knew. He had seen absolutely no evidence of true repentance, and he demanded to see such evidence before he would baptize them. As in the case of all baptisms since John, they are to be outward signs of inward transformation.

John’s words to those religious leaders was at once a rebuke and an invitation: **Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance.** “You have shown no evidence of it,” he was saying, “but now you have opportunity to truly repent if you mean it. Show me that you have turned from your wicked hypocrisy to genuine godliness, and I will be glad to baptize you.” The rabbis taught that the gates of repentance never close, that repentance is like the sea, because a person can bathe in it at any hour.

Rabbi Eleezar said, “It is the way of the world, when a man has insulted his fellow in public, and after a time seeks to be reconciled to him, that the other says, ‘You insult me publicly, and now you would be reconciled to me between us two alone! Go bring the men in whose presence you insulted me, and I will be reconciled to you.’ But God is not so. A man may stand and rail and blaspheme in the market place and the Holy One says, ‘Repent between us two alone, and I will receive you.’” (cited in William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 1:56).

Some years ago a well-known man in public ministry openly and repeatedly ridiculed a fellow minister. After many months of criticism, the first man decided that he was wrong in what he had done and went to the other minister asking his forgiveness. It was reported that the one who had been criticized replied, “You attacked me publicly and you should apologize publicly. When you do I will forgive you.”

There is no reason to believe that John the Baptist intended to humiliate the Pharisees and Sadducees or demand some sort of public demonstration of their sincerity. But he insisted on seeing valid evidence of true repentance and would not be party to their using him to promote their own selfish and ungodly purposes.

Knowing what they were probably thinking, John continued, **and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, “We have Abraham for our father.”** They believed that simply being Abraham’s descendants, members of God’s chosen race, made them spiritually secure. Not so, John said, **for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.** Descent from Abraham was not a passport to heaven. It was a great advantage in knowing and understanding God’s will (Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5), but without faith in Him that advantage becomes a more severe condemnation. If Abraham himself was justified only by his personal faith (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:1-3), how could his descendants expect to be justified in any other way (Rom. 3:21-22)?

Many Jews of New Testament times believed, and many Orthodox Jews of our own day still believe, that simply their Jewishness assures them a place in God’s kingdom. The rabbis taught that “all Israelites have a portion in the world to come.” They spoke of the “delivering merits of the fathers,” who passed on spiritual merit to their descendants. Some even taught that Abraham stood guard at the gates of Gehenna, or hell,

turning back any Israelite who happened that way. They claimed that it was Abraham's merit that enabled Jewish ships to sail safely on the seas, that sent rain on their crops, that enabled Moses to receive the law and to enter heaven, and that caused David's prayers to be heard.

That was the sort of presumption John the Baptist rebuked. No descent from Abraham, no matter how genetically pure, could make a person right with God. Jesus contradicted the similar claims of another group of Pharisees, except in even stronger terms than John's. After they self-righteously asserted, "Abraham is our father," Jesus said, "If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham. But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do" (John 8:39-40). Our Lord went on to say that their deeds proved their father was actually Satan. In Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus, it is overlooked that the rich man in hell addresses Abraham as "Father," and Abraham, speaking from heaven, calls the rich man his "Child." But the rich man was then told by Abraham, "Between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us" (Luke 16:25-26). A child of Abraham in hell was beyond their thinking.

The Jews generally considered Gentiles to be the occupants of hell, spiritually lifeless and hopeless, dead stones as far as a right relationship with God is concerned. It may be that John played on that figure in declaring that **God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham**, that is, true children of Abraham who come to the Lord as Abraham did, by faith. When the Roman centurion asked Jesus to heal his servant simply by saying the word, Jesus replied, "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. And I say to you, that many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom [i.e., Israelites] shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:10-12).

In John's preaching, as in the Old Testament prophets, judgment was closely connected with salvation in the coming of the Messiah. Those men of God saw no gap between His coming to save and His coming to judge. Isaiah wrote of the "shoot" that would "spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots" who would "decide with fairness for

the afflicted of the earth; and He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked” (Isa. 11:1,4). Speaking again of the Messiah, Isaiah wrote, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted;. . . to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God” (Isa. 61:1-2; cf. Joel 3). In his blessing of the infant Jesus in the Temple, Simeon said of Him, “Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel” (Luke 2:34).

Israel experienced a foretaste of God’s judgment in the ravaging of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, only about forty years after John the Baptist preached. Every unbeliever likewise faces a certain judgment when he dies, and even before death people may suffer foretaste judgments from God because of sin and rebellion. As the book of Proverbs repeatedly reminds us (1:32-33; 2:3-22; 3:33-35; etc.), God makes certain that ultimately, and even to a great extent in this life, the good will reap goodness and the evil will reap evil (cf. Rom. 2:5-11).

John apparently believed that God’s ultimate judgment was imminent. Because the Messiah had arrived, **the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.**

At the end of every harvest season the farmer would go through his vineyard or orchard looking for plants that had borne no good fruit. These would be cut down to make room for productive vines and trees and to keep them from taking nutrients from the soil that were needed by the good plants. A fruitless tree was a worthless and useless tree, fit only to be **cut down and thrown into the fire.** Jesus used a similar figure in describing false disciples. “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned” (John 15:6). Fruitless repentance is worthless and useless; it means absolutely nothing to God.

Fire is a frequent biblical symbol of the torment of divine punishment and judgment. Because of their exceptional wickedness, Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by “brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven” (Gen. 19:24). After Korah, his men, and their households were swallowed up by the earth and “went down alive to Sheol . . . fire also came forth from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering the incense” (Num. 16:32-

33,35). In His role as a righteous Judge, God is frequently called “a consuming fire” (Ex. 24:17; Deut. 4:24; 9:3; etc.). In the last chapter in the Old Testament, Malachi speaks of the coming day that will be “burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze” (Mal. 4:1). John’s preaching picked up where Malachi left off, and Jesus Himself often spoke of the fires of hell (Matt. 5:22, 29; Mark 9:43, 47; Luke 3:17; etc.).

John was speaking specifically to the unrepentant Pharisees and Sadducees, but his message of judgment was to every person, **every tree ... that does not bear good fruit**, who refuses to turn to God for forgiveness and salvation and therefore has no evidence, no **good fruit**, of genuine repentance. Salvation is not verified by a past act, but by present fruitfulness.

THE CONSOLATION

As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. (3:11-12)

With the message of judgment John also gives a measure of hope and consolation. Here he speaks specifically of the Messiah, who had come in order that no one need face God’s judgment.

First, John explains how his baptism differed from that of the Messiah: **I baptize you with water for repentance**. John’s baptism reflected a ritual the Jews often used when a Gentile accepted the God of Israel. The ceremony was the mark of an outsider’s becoming a part of the chosen people. In John’s ministry it marked the outward profession of inward **repentance**, which prepared a person for the coming of the King. As the apostle Paul explained many years later, “John baptized with the

baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus” (Acts 19:4).

The second baptism mentioned here is by the Messiah, a baptism by the One John says **is coming after me** and who **is mightier than I**, whose **sandals** John was **not fit to remove**. One of the lowliest tasks of a slave in that day was removing the sandals of his master and any guests and then washing their feet. It was the symbol Jesus Himself used in teaching His disciples to be servants (John 13:5-15). The humility of John, one mark of his spiritual stature, is evident in this description of the One he heralded and is consistent with his expression in John 3:30 that “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Among the ways in which the Messiah would be **mightier** than John would be in His baptism **with the Holy Spirit**. The Holy Spirit was promised by Jesus to His disciples as “another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you” (John 14:16-17). At Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) and during the initial formation of the church (Acts 8:5-17; 10:44-48; 19:1-7), the promised Holy Spirit did come upon the disciples, baptizing them and establishing them in the body of Christ. Though without such dramatic attending signs, every believer since that time is baptized into the church by Christ with God’s Spirit. “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free” (1 Cor. 12:13).

John’s word about the Holy Spirit must have been comforting and thrilling to the faithful Jews among his hearers, those who hoped for the day when God would “pour out [His] Spirit on all mankind” (Joel 2:28), when He would “sprinkle clean water on [them],” and “give [them] a new heart and put a new spirit within [them]” (Ezek. 36:25-26). In that day they would at last be baptized in the very power and person of God Himself.

The third baptism mentioned here is that of **fire**. Many interpreters take this to be a part of the Holy Spirit baptism, which began at Pentecost and which in that instance was accompanied by “tongues of fire” (Acts 2:3). But the Acts account says that those tongues “appeared to them” (that is, the waiting disciples) “*as of fire*.” They were not fire, but looked like licks of fire. In his last promise of the soon-coming baptism with the Holy

Spirit, Jesus said nothing about actual fire being a part of the experience (Acts 1:5). And when, a short time later, Cornelius and his household were baptized with the Holy Spirit, no fire was present (Acts 10:44; 11:16; cf. 8:17; 19:6).

Other interpreters take the **fire** to represent a spiritual cleansing, as described in the quotation above from Ezekiel. But nothing in Ezekiel's text, in the context of John's message here, or in the Pentecost reference to the tongues "as of fire" relates to such cleansing.

Consequently, it seems best to consider fire as representing God's coming judgment, which, as we have seen, is so frequently in Scripture symbolized by fire. In both the preceding and following verses (10, 12) John clearly uses fire to represent judgment and punishment. It is impossible that the middle reference to fire would concern an entirely different subject. Both of the adjoining verses contrast the fates of believers and unbelievers, those who bear good fruit and those who do not (v. 10) and the valuable wheat and the worthless chaff (v. 12). It therefore seems logical and natural to take verse 11 also as a contrast between believers (those baptized **with the Holy Spirit**) and unbelievers (those baptized with the fire of God's judgment).

As in the preceding two verses, John again gives consolation to believers but warning to unbelievers: **And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.** The figure is changed to that of a farmer who has just harvested his grain crop.

In Palestine, as in many other parts of the ancient world, farmers made a **threshing floor** by picking out a slight depression in the ground, or digging one if necessary, usually on a hill where breezes could be caught. The soil would then be wetted and packed down until it was very hard. Around the perimeter of the floor, which was perhaps thirty or forty feet in diameter, rocks would be stacked to keep the grain in place. After the stalks of grain were placed onto the floor, an ox, or a team of oxen, would drag heavy pieces of wood around over the grain, separating the **wheat** kernels from the **chaff**, or straw. Then the farmer would take a **winnowing fork** and throw a pile of grain into the air. The wind would blow the chaff away, while the kernels, being heavier, would fall back to the floor. Eventually, nothing would be left but the good and useful **wheat**.

In a similar way the Messiah will separate out everyone who belongs to Him and, like a farmer, **He will gather His wheat into the barn**, where it will be forever safe and protected. Also in a similar way to the farmer's, **He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire**. The long-awaited Messiah would Himself perform both functions, though not in the time and sequence that John and the prophets before him may have thought. The final separation and the ultimate judgment will be only at Christ's second coming, when the unsaved "will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt. 25:46). That scene is dramatically presented by our Lord in the parable of the tares (Matt. 13:36-43) and the parable of the dragnet (Matt. 13:47-50).

John's introduction to the person and ministry of the Messiah prepared the people for the arrival of their King.

The Coronation of the King (3:13-17)

Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. But John tried to prevent Him, saying, “I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?” But Jesus answering said to him, “Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he permitted Him. And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.” (3:13-17)

Though Matthew does not use the terms, we see in this passage what might be called the divine commissioning, or the coronation, of the King. The gospel writer has given us the King's ancestry (1:1-17), His arrival (1:18-25), His adoration (2:1-12), His attestation (2:13-23), and His announcement (3:1-12). Now we see His anointing, His coronation.

There is something strikingly majestic about this great event that brings all the preceding events into focus. Here, for the first time, the Lord Jesus Christ comes fully onto the stage of the gospel story. Here is where His ministry and work truly begin. Everything before this, even those events which directly involved the young Jesus, were introductory and preparatory. Bethlehem, Egypt, and Nazareth are all behind. From this day on the Son of Man would call no place His earthly home (8:20), but was to move about fulfilling His mission.

After an eternity of glory in heaven and some thirty years of virtual obscurity on earth, the Messiah-King is manifested publicly for the world

to see and know. As “the voice of one crying in the wilderness,” John the Baptist had faithfully prepared the way for the King, even as Isaiah had prophesied (3:3; Isa. 40:3). The herald of the King had announced the coming of the King, and now the King Himself appears for His coronation.

One cannot fail to be aware that in these few verses Matthew reports the three central and absolutely critical aspects of Jesus’ coronation as King of kings: the baptism of the Son, the anointing of the Spirit, and the confirmation of the Father. As clearly as in any passage in Scripture we see here the revelation and the working of the Trinity—the Son, the Spirit, and the Father. Because He is no earthly King and His is no earthly kingdom, no men crowned Him—only God, while men watched.

BAPTISM OF THE SON

Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. But John tried to prevent Him, saying, “I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?” But Jesus answering said to him, “Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he permitted Him. (3:13-15)

We will first look at some of the details of the baptism and then at its significance.

We are not told the exact time to which the **then** refers, and Matthew no doubt uses the term simply to show the general sequence of events. We do not know the precise length of John’s ministry, but according to Luke he began preaching “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee. . . in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas” (3:1-2). The best assumption is that it occurred in the year A.D. 29, quite a few months, perhaps nearly a year, before Jesus’ baptism. John also continued to preach for a while afterward, causing his ministry to be ending as Jesus’ ministry was beginning.

We know that John was about six months older than Jesus (Luke 1:26) and that Jesus began His ministry when He “was about thirty years of age” (Luke 3:23). If John began preaching at the same age, he would have been ministering for about six months when Jesus came to him for baptism. But we have no reason to believe that the two began ministering at the same age. And though we know how old Jesus was when He began, we are given no reason as to why He began at that age.

Some scholars suggest that the age of 30 was the generally accepted age for Jewish religious leaders to begin their ministry. According to Numbers 4:30, priests entered the priesthood at that age. But that provision was temporary, because a short while later the age was lowered to 25 (Num. 8:24) and later to 20 (1 Chron. 23:24)—where it continued to be through the reign of Hezekiah (2 Chron. 31:17) and even through the Captivity (Ezra 3:8). We therefore lack clear insight, either biblical or traditional, as to why either John or Jesus began to minister when they did.

We know from the parallel passage in Luke that when **Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan**, He did not come for a private ceremony. “Now it came about when all the people were baptized, that Jesus also was baptized” (Luke 3:21). Jesus was not to have a private, secret anointing as David first did (1 Sam. 16:13; cf. 2 Sam. 2:4).

Arrived is from *paraginomai*, which, as we saw in relation to the magi (2:1) and John the Baptist (“came,” 3:1), was often used to indicate an official arrival or public appearance. We learn from Mark 1:9 that Jesus not only came from **Galilee**, but specifically from Nazareth, when He came to see **John**. It is clear from all the gospel accounts (cf. Mark 1:9; Luke 3:21; John 1:29) that Jesus came alone. No family members or friends accompanied Him, and He had as yet called no disciples.

We do not know exactly where on **the Jordan** River John was then baptizing, though it seems likely it was toward the southern end, and therefore near Jericho and the Dead Sea. John tells us that it was near “Bethany beyond the Jordan” (John 1:28), but the precise location of that town is uncertain.

We know from John’s greeting to Jesus that he recognized Him immediately, but we have no idea how well they knew each other at this time. They were cousins, and before their births Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months in the hill country of Judah, where the two

women shared with each other their wonderful blessings (Luke 1:39-56). Elizabeth knew before Jesus' birth that Mary's child would be the Messiah, because she addressed Mary as "the mother of my Lord" (Luke 1:43). Surely Elizabeth would often have shared this wonderful news with her son John, the one whom the angel had told her husband would be "the forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17; cf. v. 66). Both boys grew physically and spiritually (Luke 1:80; 2:40), but they did so separately—Jesus in Nazareth and John in the wilderness. It may be, therefore, that they had little, if any, ongoing firsthand acquaintance with one another.

Jesus came **to John** specifically **to be baptized by him**, as indicated by the aorist passive infinitive (*baptisthēnai*), which emphasizes purpose. But the idea of Jesus' being baptized by him was unthinkable to John. He not only knew Jesus' human identity but His divine identity. The apostle John tells us that John the Baptist "saw Jesus coming to him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God!' " (John 1:29). John knew that this was God's own anointed Messiah, come to fulfill God's redemptive purpose. The Baptist's first reaction to Jesus' request for baptism was **I have need to be baptized by You**.

It is not difficult to understand John's concern. His baptism was for confession of sin and repentance (3:2, 6, 11), of which he himself had need; but Jesus had no sins to confess or be forgiven of. John's baptism was for those who turned from their sin and thereby became fit for the arrival of the great King. Why, then, would the sinless King Himself want to be baptized?

An ancient apocryphal book called *The Gospel According to the Hebrews* suggests that Jesus asked for baptism because His mother and brothers wanted Him to: "Behold, the mother of the Lord and His brethren said to Him, 'John the Baptist baptizeth for the remission of sins, let us go and be baptized by him.' But He said to them, 'What sin have I committed that I should go and be baptized by him, except perchance this very thing that I have said in ignorance?'" The writer of that spurious gospel saw the problem, but his solution was purely speculative and is incongruous with the rest of the New Testament.

For others in the early centuries, Jesus' coming for baptism seemed to pose no problem at all. Those who were strongly influenced by Gnostic philosophy believed that until His baptism Jesus was just an ordinary man,

sinful like every other man. At His baptism he was endowed with deity by the divine *logos* (Word), the “Christ Spirit.” His baptism was therefore necessary to purify Him and make Him suitable to receive the divine endowment. Like the rest of the Gnostic views, that idea does not square with Scripture. Jesus was *born* the Son of God (Luke 1:32, 35) and was called “‘Immanuel,’ which translated means ‘God with us,’” even before His birth (Matt. 1:23).

It was because John the Baptist was fully aware of Jesus’ deity and sinlessness that he **tried to prevent Him**. The Greek verb is in the imperfect tense (*diekōluen*) and suggests a continued effort by John—“he kept trying to prevent Him.” The verb is also a compound, whose prepositional prefix (*dia*) intensifies it. The pronouns in John’s statement are all emphatic, giving evidence of his bewilderment. **I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?** He did not directly contradict Jesus, as Peter would do (Matt. 16:22), but he thought that somehow he surely misunderstood what Jesus intended, that He could not possibly mean what He seemed to be saying.

John resisted baptizing Jesus for exactly the opposite reason that he resisted baptizing the Pharisees and Sadducees. They were in great need of repentance but were unwilling to ask for it and gave no evidence of having it. John therefore refused to baptize them, calling them a “brood of vipers” (3:7). Jesus, by contrast, came for baptism, though He alone of all mankind had no need of repentance. John refused to baptize the Pharisees and Sadducees because they were totally unworthy of it. Now he was almost equally reluctant to baptize Jesus, because He was too worthy for it.

John knew that his baptism for repentance from sin was totally inappropriate for Jesus. John acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Why should the One who takes away sin submit Himself to a ceremony that represents confession and repentance of sin?

John’s attempt to **prevent** Jesus from being baptized is therefore a testimony to Jesus’ sinlessness. This prophet, of whom the Lord Himself said there had “not arisen anyone greater” (Matt. 11:11), knew that he himself was not sinless. **I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?** “I am only a prophet of God,” John was saying, “and I am sinful like everyone whom I baptize. But You are the Son of

God and sinless. You are not a sinner. Why, then, do you ask me to baptize You?” Among John’s many God-given insights into who Jesus was, what He was like, and what He had come to do, was his knowledge that the One who now stood before Him was without sin. In a less direct but yet definite way, John declared with the writer of Hebrews that Jesus, though “tempted in all things as we are, [is] yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). So even in his reluctance to baptize Christ, John was fulfilling the role of a herald and the office of a prophet by proclaiming the perfection of the Savior.

Why did Jesus, who was even more aware of His own sinlessness than John was, want to submit Himself to an act that testified to confession and repentance of sin? Some interpreters suggest that He intended His baptism to be a sort of initiatory rite for His high priesthood, reflecting the ceremony which prepared the Old Testament priests for their ministry. Others suggest that Jesus wanted to identify Himself with the Gentiles, who were initiated into Judaism as proselytes by the act of baptism. Still others take Jesus’ baptism to be His recognition and endorsement of John’s authority, His accrediting of John as a true prophet of God and the genuine forerunner of His own ministry. A fourth view is that the Lord intended to be baptized vicariously for the sins of mankind, making His baptism, along with His atoning death on the cross, a part of His sin-bearing, redemptive work.

But none of those views is supported by Scripture, and none fits the context of the present passage. Jesus Himself explains to John His reason for wanting to be baptized. In His first recorded words since the age of twelve, when He told His parents, “Did you not know that I had to be in My Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49), Jesus said, **Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.** These are words of royal dignity and humility.

Jesus did not deny that He was spiritually superior to John or that He was sinless. **Permit it at this time** was an idiom meaning that the act of His baptism, though not seemingly appropriate, was indeed appropriate for this special **time**. Jesus understood John’s reluctance and knew that it came from deep spiritual commitment and sincerity. He gave permission for John to do what, without divine instruction, he would never have been willing to do. He assured the prophet that **in this way it is fitting**, and went on to explain to John that His baptism was important for both of their ministries, **for us to fulfill all righteousness.** For God’s plan to be

perfectly fulfilled, it was necessary for Jesus to be baptized and to be baptized specifically by John.

It seems that one reason Jesus submitted to baptism was to give an example of obedience to His followers. As the King of kings Jesus recognized that He had no ultimate obligation to pay taxes to a human government. When Peter on one occasion asked about the matter, Jesus replied, “ ‘What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?’ And upon his saying, ‘From strangers,’ Jesus said to him, ‘Consequently the sons are exempt. But, lest we give them offense,... give it [a stater coin] to them for you and Me’” (Matt. 17:25-27). As Scripture makes clear in many places, it is proper and right for believers, even though they are sons of God, to honor and pay taxes to human governments (see Rom. 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13-15). In every case, Jesus modeled obedience. In His baptism He acknowledged that John’s standard of righteousness was valid and in action affirmed it as the will of God to which men are to be subject.

Jesus came into the world to identify with men; and to identify with men is to identify with sin. He could not purchase righteousness for mankind if He did not identify with mankind’s sin. Hundreds of years before Christ’s coming, Isaiah had declared that the Messiah “was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors” (Isa. 53:12). Jesus’ baptism also represented the willing identification of the sinless Son of God with the sinful people He came to save.

That was the first act of His ministry, the first step in the redemptive plan that He came to fulfill. He who had no sin took His place among those who had no righteousness. He who was without sin submitted to a baptism for sinners. In this act the Savior of the world took His place among the sinners of the world. The sinless Friend of sinners was sent by the Father “in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom. 8:3); and He “made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21; cf. Isa. 53:11). There was no other way **to fulfill all righteousness.**

Jesus’ baptism not only was a symbol of His identity with sinners but was also a symbol of His death and resurrection, and therefore a prefigurement of Christian baptism. Jesus made only two other references

to personal baptism, and each related to His death. Not long before His final trip to Jerusalem He told His disciples, “I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!” (Luke 12:50). On the other occasion He was responding to the request by James and John that they be given the top positions in His heavenly kingdom. “You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” (Mark 10:38). Jesus’ supreme identification with sinners was His taking their sin upon Himself, which He did at Calvary.

Though John, having been given such a brief explanation, could not possibly have comprehended the full meaning of Jesus’ baptism, he accepted His Lord’s word and obeyed. **Then he permitted Him.**

ANOINTING OF THE SPIRIT

And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him, (3:16)

John’s baptism, and that of Jesus’ disciples during His earthly ministry (John 4:1-2), represented cleansing, or washing, from sin. Christian baptism represents the believer’s identification with Christ’s death and resurrection (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12). In both cases the significance of the act is lost if it does not involve immersion. Sprinkling or pouring does not fit either the symbolism of cleansing or of dying and being raised.

The Greek word itself (*baptizō*) means literally to dip an object into water or other liquid, not to have the liquid put on the object. If all the forms of this word in Scripture had been translated (as “immersed”) instead of being simply transliterated (as “baptized”)—first into Latin and then into modern languages—the confusion we now see regarding the mode of baptism would never have arisen. In relation to other things the same word *is* translated—as we see in Luke 16:24, where the rich man in

Hades asks that Lazarus might “dip [from *baptizō*] the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue,” and John 13:26, where Jesus “dipped [also from *baptizō*] the morsel.” As can be determined from any Greek lexicon, the original word never had a meaning other than dipping or submerging, and no other term is used for baptizing.

The Christian church knew no form of baptism but immersion until the Middle Ages, when the practice of sprinkling or pouring was introduced by the Roman Catholic church—which itself had previously always baptized by immersion. The great Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) said, “In immersion the setting forth of the burial of Christ is more plainly expressed, in which this manner of baptizing is more commendable.” The Catholic church did not recognize other modes until the Council of Ravenna, held in France in 1311. It was from the Catholic church that Lutheran and Reformed churches inherited the form of sprinkling or pouring. The Church of England did not begin the practice of sprinkling until 1645. The Eastern Orthodox church has never permitted any mode but immersion.

That Jesus **went up immediately from the water** indicates that He had been all the way into the water. John was baptizing *in* the Jordan (3:6), and his custom was to baptize where “there was much water” (John 3:23), which would have been pointless if only sprinkling were used (cf. Acts 8:38-39).

At the moment Jesus came out of the river, **behold, the heavens were opened**. When Ezekiel saw the heavens opened and had the vision of God, he saw such things as the four living creatures, the chariot, and the wheels (Ezek. 1:1-19). Just before he died, Stephen saw “the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56), and John the apostle had several heavenly visions (Rev. 4:1; 11:19; 19:11). Paul’s experience of being “caught up to the third heaven” was so wonderful and amazing as to be “inexpressible” (2 Cor. 12:2-4).

As one commentator suggests, “Just as the veil of the Temple was rent in twain to symbolize the perfect access of all men to God, so here the heavens are rent asunder to show how near God is to Jesus, and Jesus is to God.”

When the heavens opened before John the Baptist, **he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him**, just as the Lord had promised (John 1:33). The confirming sign was that of **a dove**,

the only instance in which the Holy Spirit was ever so represented. To the Jewish mind of that day the dove was associated with sacrifice. Bullocks were sacrificed by the rich and lambs by the middle class, but most of the people were poor and could only afford a dove.

Why did the Holy Spirit come upon Jesus? When He became a man, Jesus did not lose His divinity. He was still fully God in every way. In His deity He needed nothing. But in His humanity He was here being anointed for service and granted strength for ministry. The Spirit anointed Him for His kingly service, as Isaiah had predicted: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to prisoners” (Isa. 61:1). Among other things, the Spirit of God came upon Jesus in His humanness in a special way (John 3:34) that empowered Him to cast out demons (Matt. 12:28), to do miraculous signs and wonders (Acts 2:22), and to preach (cf. Acts 10:38). Like every human being, Jesus became tired and hungry and sleepy. His humanness needed strengthening, and that needed strength was given by the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt. 4:1; Luke 4:14).

Jesus’ anointing with the Holy Spirit was unique. It was given to empower Him in His humanness, but it was also given as a visible, confirming sign to John the Baptist and to everyone else watching. Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the great King whose coming the Lord had called John to announce and to prepare men for.

CONFIRMATION BY THE FATHER

and behold, a voice out of the heavens, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.” (3:17)

All the Trinity participated in Jesus’ baptism. The Son had confirmed His own kingship by saying, “It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (v. 15), and the Spirit had confirmed His right of messiahship by resting on Him (v. 16). The final aspect of Jesus’

coronation, or commissioning, was the Father's confirming word. For a sacrifice to be acceptable to God it must be pure, spotless, without blemish (Ex. 12:5; Lev. 1:3; Deut. 17:1; etc.). Of this One who willingly identified Himself with sinners by His baptism and who was marked by the Holy Spirit as the dove of sacrifice, the Father now said, **This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.**

No Old Testament sacrifice, no matter how carefully selected, had ever been truly pleasing to God. It was not possible to find an animal that did not have some blemish, some imperfection. Not only that, but the blood of those animals was at best only symbolic, "for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Heb. 10:4; cf. 9:12). But the sacrifice Jesus would make on the cross would be "with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:19). Thus God could say He was **well-pleased** with the perfection of Jesus Christ (cf. Matt. 17:5; John 12:28, where God repeats this superlative commendation).

Beloved (*agapētos*) connotes a deep, rich, and profound relationship. It is used here of the Father's great love for His **Son**, but it is also used elsewhere of His love for believers (Rom. 1:7) and for what believers' love toward each other should be (1 Cor. 4:14). Jesus is the Father's **beloved** above all those He loves, the beloved apart from whom no other could ever be beloved (cf. Eph. 1:6). Only in His **Son** could the Father ever be fully **well-pleased** (*eudokeō*). God had examined, as it were, His **beloved Son**, who would offer Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of those with whom He was willing to identify Himself. No imperfection could be found in Him, and God was delighted.

As believers, we too are a delight to the Father, because we are now in the Son. Because the Father finds no imperfection in His Son, He now by His grace finds no imperfection in those who trust in Him (cf. Rom. 3:26; 5:17,21; Gal. 2:20; 3:27; Eph. 1:3-6; etc.).

The fact that Jesus Christ is the Son of God is central to the gospel. In no passage is that made more clear than in Hebrews 1:1-8:

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His

glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high; having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they. For to which of the angels did He ever say, “Thou art My Son, today I have begotten Thee”? And again, “I will be a Father to Him, and He shall be a Son to Me”? And when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says, “And let all the angels of God worship Him.” And of the angels He says, “Who makes His angels winds, and His ministers a flame of fire.” But of the Son He says, “Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of His kingdom.”

Jesus Christ is the fullest expression of God, superior to and exalted above everything and everyone else. He is the beginning of all things, Creator; the middle of all things, Sustainer and Purifier; and the end of all things, Heir (see also Rom. 11:36; Col. 1:16).

The Son is the manifestation of God, the radiance of God’s personal glory, the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4). In Him all deity dwells (Col. 1:15-19; 2:9). Because of His deity, He is superior to the angels who worship Him. (For a fuller explanation of Jesus’ sonship, see the author’s *Hebrews* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1983], pp. 27-29.)

Even God’s title as Father is a reference to His essential relationship to Jesus Christ. God is presented in the New Testament more as the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 11:27; John 5:17-18; 10:29-33; 14:6-11; 17:1-5; Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 1:3; Eph. 1:3,17; Phil. 2:9-11; 1 Pet. 1:3; 2 John 3) than as the Father of believers (Matt. 6:9).

When Jesus called God “Father,” He was not emphasizing primarily submission or generation but sameness of essence—that is, deity. John 5:23 sums it up by demanding “that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father.” No one can worship God unless he worships Him as the God who is one with King Jesus—the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The Crisis **of Temptation** (4:1-11)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. And the tempter came and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” But He answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.’” Then the devil took Him into the holy city; and he had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God throw Yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will give His angels charge concerning You’; and ‘On their hands they will bear You up, lest You strike Your foot against a stone.’” Jesus said to him, “On the other hand, it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory; and he said to Him, “All these things will I give You, if You fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Begone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only’” Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to Him. (4:1-11)

Since the Fall in the Garden of Eden, temptation has been a constant, unrelenting part of human life. Men have tried to avoid and resist it with self-inflicted pain to make themselves uncomfortable and presumably humble, or by isolating themselves from other people and from physical comforts. But no person has ever found a place or a circumstance that can make him safe from temptation.

Throughout the history of the church much has been written and spoken about overcoming temptation. A fifth-century Christian wrote,

Fly from all occasions of temptation, and if still tempted, fly further still. If there is no escape possible, then have done with running away and show a bold face and take the two-edged sword of the Spirit. Some temptations must be taken by the throat as David killed the lion; others must be stifled as David hugged the bear to death. Some you had better keep to yourselves and not give air. Shut them up as a scorpion in a bottle. Scorpions in such confinement die soon, but if allowed out for a crawl and then put back into the bottle and corked down, they will live a long while and give you trouble. Keep the cork on your temptations, and they will die of themselves.

Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-543) sought an increase of grace and exemption from temptation by wearing a rough hair shirt and living for three years in a desolate cave, where his scant food was lowered to him on a cord. Once he threw himself into a clump of thorns and briars until his body was covered with bleeding wounds. But he found no escape from temptation. It followed him wherever he went and in whatever he did.

Others have tried to overcome temptation by, in effect, denying it. Jovinian, a heretical fifth-century monk, taught that after a person was baptized he was forever free of the devil's power and from temptation. Jerome, his most outstanding opponent, wisely commented that baptism does not drown the devil.

In Matthew 4:1-11 one of the most monumental and mysterious spiritual battles of all time is recounted—the personal confrontation between Jesus Christ and Satan. The devil's temptations directed at Jesus in the wilderness of Judea were observed by no other human being. He was entirely alone, and it is therefore obvious that we could know nothing of what transpired there unless Jesus Himself had told His disciples of it. Here He reveals the victory secret, as it were, of His momentous struggle with Satan.

The encounter occurred immediately after Jesus' baptism, which, in the terms of His kingship, represented His coronation, His commissioning. Now, after His proclamation as King comes the test of His

kingliness. His baptism in the Jordan declared His royalty; His testing in the wilderness demonstrated it. Here Jesus proved He was worthy to receive and to reign over the kingdom His Father would give Him. The One of whom the Father had just said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased” (3:17), here shows why He was well-pleasing to His Father. He shows that, even in the extreme of temptation, He consistently lived in perfect harmony with the divine plan. Here He first demonstrated His power over hell. His absolute sovereignty forbade Him to bow to the “god of this world,” so He faced the full force of Satan’s wicked deception, yet remained untouched and uncontaminated. Evil at its lowest was overcome by Him, and goodness at its highest commended Him. The combination of both accredited Him as King.

In this struggle of the Son of God with the son of perdition we are given clear and applicable insights into Satan’s strategy against God and His people and also into Christ’s way of victory over the tempter. Side by side we are shown the way of danger and the way of escape, the way that leads to defeat and death and the way that leads to victory and life—in short, the way of Satan and the way of God.

It seems that Matthew had two primary purposes in presenting Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness. First, as mentioned above, Jesus’ victory demonstrated His divine kingship, His royal power to resist the only other great ruler and dominion in the universe, Satan himself. Christ here won His first direct battle with His great enemy, and thereby gave evidence of His glorious right and power as the King of kings and Lord of lords, the supreme Ruler of all creation, the only God. By so doing, He sealed His final victory yet to come. Satan’s purpose in the temptations was, of course, just the opposite: to conquer the newly commissioned King, to overthrow the Messiah, and to claim all His royal rights and prerogatives for himself.

Matthew’s other purpose was to demonstrate the pattern found in Jesus’ human victory over sin, a pattern that He longs to share with all who belong to Him. When we face testing and temptation in the same way our Lord did, we too can be victorious over the adversary’s attempts to corrupt us and to usurp the Lord’s rightful place in our lives.

The momentous encounter that Matthew here describes, and from which believers can gain such help and encouragement, may be divided into three parts for study: the preparation, the temptation, and the triumph.

THE PREPARATION

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. (4:1-2)

We learn from Mark that “immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness” (Mark 1:12). The “immediately,” of course, is sequential to the baptism. As soon as Jesus’ baptism was completed, His forty-day wilderness experience began. Mark’s use of *ekballō* (“impelled”) indicates the necessity of Jesus’ temptation. Although the temptations were given by Satan, they were a part of God’s perfect plan for the redemptive work of His Son.

One of the great truths of life, from which even the Son of God was not exempt on earth, is that after every victory comes temptation. God’s Word warns, “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). When we have just succeeded in something important, we are invariably tempted to think that we made the accomplishment in our own power and that it is rightfully and permanently ours. When we are most exhilarated with success we are also most vulnerable to pride—and to failure.

In one of my high school football games we were ahead by some fifty points in the fourth quarter, and the coach was letting everyone play. We were on about the five-yard line, and a touchdown was certain. The coach decided to let a fourth-string runningback carry the ball, so that he could have at least one touchdown to his credit before he graduated the next spring. He easily ran through the hole the line opened up for him, and he scored. As the crowd cheered he turned to wave, but kept running. He hit the goal post and was knocked cold. He was so carried away with his triumph that he completely lost his perspective and his sense of reality. Consequently his victory was short-lived.

At other times success causes us to feel invincible and to let down our guard, and when testings come we are not prepared for them. In the contest between Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, the

Lord gave dramatic and miraculous evidence that He was the true God and that Elijah was His true prophet. First He sent fire from heaven to consume the sacrifices and wood that Elijah had soaked with water. Then, in answer to the prophet's prayer, He sent rain to drought-stricken Judah (1 Kings 18:16-46). But within less than a day Elijah was in despair and asked the Lord to take his life. After being courageous and immovable before the 450 false prophets, he shriveled before the threats of Jezebel (19:1-4). From the height of exhilarating victory he quickly fell into deep despair.

No sooner had Israel been delivered from Egypt than Pharaoh came pursuing her with his army. No sooner had Hezekiah left the solemn Passover than Sennacherib came against him. No sooner had Paul received an abundance of revelations than he was assaulted with vile temptations.

And no sooner had Jesus experienced the first great testimony to His ministry than He faced the first great test of His ministry. After being anointed by the Holy Spirit and attested by the Father, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led about by the Spirit in the wilderness" (Luke 4:1). Jesus now was in full consciousness of His divine mission, and His sacred humanity was filled through and through with the abiding presence and power of God. As never before, He was deeply satisfied as He contemplated the redemptive work He was sent to accomplish. After thirty years of waiting in obscurity He now was fully commissioned to begin His task. Then the devil tried to turn Him away.

One of Satan's most common scriptural names is **the devil**, from *diabolos*, which means accuser or slanderer. Among the many other names given him are: the ruler of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), the prince of the power of the air (Eph. 2:2), the god of this world (2 Cor. 4:4), the serpent of old and the deceiver of the whole world (Rev. 12:9), Abaddon and Apollyon, both of which mean "destroyer" (Rev. 9:11), and the tempter, as seen in the next verse of our text (Matt. 4:3; cf. 1 Thess. 3:5).

Many people, including some professing Christians, do not believe in a personal devil. But Satan has never made himself more personally manifest than he did to Jesus in the wilderness. The Lord's own account shows unmistakably that the opponent He faced was personal in every sense. Satan was so real even to Martin Luther that it is reported that on one occasion Luther threw an inkwell at his adversary.

Having been cast out of heaven by the Lord, Satan's full fury has ever since been turned against God and His work. During Jesus' incarnation that wrath was specially focused in all its intensity against the Son and against His divine mission of salvation. The devil's single purpose is to frustrate the plan of God and to usurp the place of God. He therefore continually attacks Christ and all who belong to Him. He also pursues every effort to keep others from coming to Christ.

The wilderness of Judea is a hot, barren, and desolate area that extends west from the Dead Sea almost to Jerusalem, and is some thirty-five miles long and fifteen miles wide. George Adam Smith described it as an area of yellow sand and crumbling limestone. It is an area of contorted strata, where the ridges run in all directions as if they were warped and twisted. The hills are like dust heaps, the limestone is blistered and peeling, the rocks are bare and jagged, and often the ground sounds hollow (cited in William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 1:63). Nowhere in Palestine could Jesus have been more isolated or in less comfort.

Satan met Adam in the paradise of Eden, where everything good was provided and nothing harmful existed. Adam lost his battle with Satan while in the perfect situation. The Second Adam met Satan in the desolate, forbidding **wilderness**, where "He was with the wild beasts" (Mark 1:13) and was without food for forty days (Luke 4:2). Yet what the first Adam lost in an ideal environment the Second Adam won back in a terribly imperfect environment. What better proof can there be that spiritual and moral failure are not caused by circumstances but by the character and response of the one who is tempted?

The temptations did not catch God by surprise. Jesus specifically went there **to be tempted by the devil**. The Greek *peirazō* is a morally neutral word that simply means "to test." Whether the testing is for a good or evil purpose depends on the intent of the one giving the test. When the scriptural context clearly indicates the testing is an enticement to evil, the word is most frequently translated by a form of the English *tempt*, which carries that negative connotation. The fact that **the devil** was here doing the testing clearly indicates that Jesus was being **tempted**, enticed to do evil.

Yet God often uses Satan's tempting to evil as His own means of testing for good. What Satan intended to lead the Son into sin and

disobedience, the Father used to demonstrate the Son's holiness and worthiness. That is God's plan for all of His children. Christians cannot be tempted in a way that God cannot use for their good and His glory. James even tells us to "consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials [*peirasmos*], knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4). That is God's plan and purpose—to use Satan's temptations as a means of testing and strengthening our faith in Him and of our growing stronger in righteousness. God allows testings in our lives in order that our spiritual "muscles" may be exercised and strengthened. Whether the testing is by God's initiative or is sent by Satan, God will always use it to produce good in us when we meet the test in His power.

God never tests in the sense of enticing to evil. "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust" (James 1:13). All five of the forms of "to tempt" in those verses are from *peirazō*, and all five indicate the negative side of testing, the inducement to evil. God never has a part in that sort of testing, but He can and will turn even the worst sort of testing into the right sort, when it is surrendered to His will and power. It is God's great desire to turn into victory what Satan intends for failure, to strengthen us at the very point where the adversary wants to find us weak.

Joseph's being sold into slavery by his brothers, along with the false accusations and imprisonment he endured as a slave in Egypt, could easily have driven him to despair and bitterness. Most people, faced with such mistreatment and misfortune, would ask, "Why me, Lord? What have I done to deserve this?" They would seethe over their circumstances and possibly dream of revenge. That, no doubt, was the devil's desire for Joseph, but it was not God's. As Joseph told his brothers many years later, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (Gen. 50:20). What Satan and the brothers had intended for evil, God, through Joseph's obedience, turned to good.

Before the three strong temptation efforts were directed to Jesus, **He had fasted forty days and forty nights.** We are not told what He did

during that period, but He no doubt spent most of the time communing with His heavenly Father. Between His baptism and the temptations perhaps He needed the special preparation of being entirely alone and undisturbed with His Father. Even in His perfect humanity, Jesus needed time for thought and for prayer, as we all do. Moses spent forty years in Midian being prepared to lead Israel from Egypt to Canaan. Between his conversion and the beginning of his ministry, Paul spent three years of preparation in Nabataen Arabia (Gal. 1:17-18).

It seems a great understatement to say that, after Jesus' long period of fasting, **He became hungry**. Yet Matthew's simple and direct words give strong evidence that the story was not manufactured by the disciples or the early church. The writings of virtually every false religion and cult are characterized by exaggeration and overdramatization of events relating to the lives of its founders and key leaders. By contrast, even the most astounding events in Scripture are reported with restraint and simplicity.

Hunger not only makes us physically weak but also tends to weaken our moral and spiritual resistance as well. When we are tired, hungry, or sick we are usually less concerned about other needs and dangers and tend to be vulnerable to anything that might provide relief from our present distress. Satan therefore usually attacks most fiercely in such times of weakness and unpreparedness. Temptations that have been anticipated, guarded against, and prayed about have little power to harm us. Jesus tells us to "keep watching and praying, that you may not come into temptation" (Mark 14:38). Victory over temptation comes from being constantly prepared for it, which, in turn, comes from constantly relying on the Lord.

It is said that a person traveling in tiger country will not be attacked if he sees the tiger before the tiger sees him. Tigers attack from behind in order to surprise their victims, and therefore one of the best defenses against that vicious animal is to face it.

Jesus, though having fasted for over a month, was no less alert to spiritual danger. Because He had spent the time in communion with His Father, even in His weakest physical moments He did not allow Satan to gain any foothold. The accounts in Mark (1:13) and Luke (4:2) seem to indicate that Jesus was in some way tempted throughout His stay in the wilderness. Possibly it was the devil's strategy to gradually wear the Lord down little by little before confronting Him with the three great

temptations that are specifically recorded. But Jesus would not yield to His adversary on even the slightest point.

THE TEMPTATION

And the tempter came and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” But He answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.’” Then the devil took Him into the holy city; and he had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God throw Yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will give His angels charge concerning You’; and ‘On their hands they will bear You up, lest You strike Your foot against a stone.’” Jesus said to him, “On the other hand, it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory; and he said to Him, “All these things will I give You, if You fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Begone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.’” (4:3-10)

Satan is here spoken of as **the tempter**, one of his descriptive names and titles in Scripture. We are not told what form the devil may have taken on this occasion, but his confrontation with Jesus was direct and personal. They spoke to each other and even moved about together, first to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem and then to a high mountain.

Satan’s first great frontal attack on Jesus Christ as He began His earthly ministry was in the form of three temptations, each designed to weaken and destroy the Messiah in an important area of His mission. The temptations became progressively worse. The first was for Jesus to distrust the providential care of His Father and to use His own divine powers to serve Himself. The second was to presume on the Father’s care

by putting Him to the test. The third was for Him to renounce the way of His Father and to substitute the way of Satan.

SERVING SELF

And the tempter came and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” But He answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.’” (4:3-4)

The devil’s first approach to Jesus had also been his first approach to Eve—to cast doubt on God’s Word. He asked Eve, “Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden’?” (Gen. 3:1), causing her to question God’s command. His first word to Jesus was, **If you are the Son of God**—the Greek conditional phrase assumes that Jesus is indeed the divine Son whom the Father had just proclaimed Him to be at His baptism (3:17). Before he gave the direct temptation, Satan gave this one simply to set up the rest. Satan was hoping to persuade Jesus to demonstrate His power to verify that it was real. That would mean violating God’s plan that He set that power aside in humiliation and use it only when the Father willed. Satan wanted Jesus to disobey God. Affirming His deity and rights as the Son of God would have been to act independently of God.

The first direct temptation in the wilderness was for Jesus to act against God’s plan and to **command that these stones become bread**. This temptation involved a great deal more than Jesus’ satisfying His hunger. After forty days and nights of fasting, He certainly was hungry and thirsty, and He had the right to have something to eat and drink. The most obvious part of the temptation was for Jesus to fulfill His legitimate physical needs by miraculous means. But the deeper temptation was Satan’s appeal to Jesus’ supposed rights as the Son of God. “Why,” Satan seemed to say, “should you starve in the wilderness if you are really God’s Son? How could the Father allow His Son to go hungry, when He even provided manna for the rebellious children of Israel in the wilderness of

Sinai? And had not Isaiah written of the righteous that ‘His bread will be given him; his water will be sure’” (Isa. 33:16)? You are a man, and you need food to survive. If God had let His people die in the wilderness, how could His plan of redemption have been fulfilled? If He lets you die in this wilderness, how can you fulfill your divine mission on His behalf?

The purpose of the temptation was not simply for Jesus to satisfy His physical hunger, but to suggest that His being hungry was incompatible with His being the Son of God. He was being tempted to doubt the Father’s Word, the Father’s love, and the Father’s provision. He had every right, Satan suggested, to use His own divine powers to supply what the Father had not. The Son of God certainly was too important and dignified to have to endure such hardship and discomfort. He had been born in a stable, had to flee to Egypt for His life, spent thirty years in an obscure family in a obscure village in Galilee, and forty days and nights unattended, unrecognized, and unpitied in the wilderness. Surely that was more than enough ignominy to allow Him to identify with mankind. But now that the Father Himself had publicly declared Him to be His Son, it was time for Jesus to use some of His divine authority for His own personal benefit.

This first temptation in the wilderness implied essentially the same mocking taunt that the crowds made at the crucifixion: “If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross” (Matt. 27:40; cf. w. 42-43). It also included the wicked attempt to cause the Second Adam to fail where the first Adam had failed—in relation to food. Satan wanted Christ to fail because of bread just as Adam had failed because of fruit. Above all, however, he wanted to solicit the Son’s rebellion against the Father.

But Jesus had come in His incarnation to do the Father’s will and only the Father’s will; indeed His will and the Father’s were exactly the same (John 5:30; cf. 10:30; Heb. 10:9). He testified, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work” (John 4:34), and on another occasion, “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (John 6:38). In the Garden of Gethsemane, just before His betrayal and arrest, He said, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt,” and a short while later, “My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Thy will be done” (Matt. 26:39, 42).

It was that absolute trust and submission that Satan sought to shatter. To have succeeded would have put an irreparable rift in the Trinity. They would no longer have been Three in One, no longer have been of one mind and purpose. In his incalculable pride and wickedness, Satan tried to fracture the very nature of God Himself.

But Jesus, in His incalculable humility and righteousness, **answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.’”** All three of Jesus’ responses to the devil were begun with an appeal to God’s Word: **It is written.** Even more than David, He could say, “Thy word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against Thee” (Ps. 119:11). In quoting Deuteronomy 8:3 to Satan, Jesus declared that we are better off to obey and depend on God, waiting on His provision, than to grab satisfaction for ourselves when and as we think we need it. Moses had originally said those words to Israel as he recounted to her the great love and blessing God had bestowed on her during her own wilderness experience (Deut. 8:1-18).

God’s people are never justified in complaining and worrying about their needs. If we live by faith in Him and in obedience to His Word, we will never lack anything we really need. “And my God shall supply all your needs,” Paul assures us, “according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19). Jesus tells us that God knows what we need even before we ask Him (Matt. 6:8). Later in the same discourse He says, “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you” (6:33). We are *always* better off to obey God and to trust in His gracious sustenance than to impatiently and selfishly provide for ourselves in ways that disobey, or in any way compromise, His Word. Underlying our readiness to justify much of what we do is the common but self-centered and carnal notion that, as God’s children, we deserve the earthly best and that it is inappropriate and even unspiritual to be satisfied with anything less. Grabbing or demanding what we think we deserve may be an act of rebellion against sovereign God.

To try to circumvent or modify God’s revealed will not only is unfaithful and fleshly but is based on the false assumption that our physical well-being is our most crucial need, without which we cannot exist. Jesus contradicts that assumption, which is so natural to fallen man. **Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out**

of the mouth of God. “It is not food,” Jesus says, “that is the most necessary part of life. The creative, energizing, and sustaining power of God is the only real source of man’s existence.”

James reminds us that we do not know what we will be able to do in the future, or even if we will have a future in this life. Every person is “just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away,” he says. When planning what we want to do, we “ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that’” (James 4:14-15). Like Jesus, the purposes and intentions of our lives should only be the purposes and intentions of our heavenly Father. The guiding principle of His life should be the guiding principle of ours. The central motive of our lives should be to please God and to trust Him to supply everything we need—to follow without reservation Jesus’ command to “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness” and to believe without reservation that He will provide everything we need (Matt. 6:33). Before He gave that command, Jesus had asked, “Why are you anxious about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these. But if God so arrays the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith?” (6:28-30).

We can never please God, or even serve our own best interests, by complaining about and demanding what we do not have, or by violating or ignoring His will in order to get something we want. If we persist in disobeying God He may severely discipline us, or even take us off the scene, as John warns in his first letter (1 John 5:16). Ananias and Sapphira lost their lives because they lied to the Holy Spirit by telling the apostles they had received less than they actually did from the sale of some property (Acts 5:1-11). Certain members of the Corinthian church became weak and sick, and several even died, because they profaned the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:27-30).

Even when our disobedience does not reach such extremes, we always suffer when we willfully bypass God’s Word. Following our Lord’s example in the wilderness, no matter how urgent and important a need seems to be, we are to wait for our heavenly Father’s provision, knowing that expedience and self-effort cannot bring good for ourselves, and certainly not glory to God.

TESTING GOD

Then the devil took Him into the holy city; and he had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God throw Yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will give His angels charge concerning You’; and ‘On their hands they will bear You up, lest You strike Your foot against a stone.’” Jesus said to him, “On the other hand, it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” (4:5-7)

Having failed to induce Jesus to use His divine powers to serve His own self-interests and thereby rebel against the will of His Father, Satan proceeded to tempt the Son to put His heavenly Father’s love and power to a test.

By some means **the devil took Him into the holy city; and he had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple.** The location and form of the **pinnacle of the temple** in Jerusalem has not been identified with certainty. It must have been part of the reconstruction ordered by Herod the Great and most likely was on the eastern side of the Temple, overlooking the Kidron Valley. **The pinnacle** may have been the roof that extended out over Herod’s portico. Josephus reports that the drop to the valley floor was some 450 feet. According to early tradition, James, the head of the Jerusalem church, was martyred by being thrown from that portico.

Still hoping to undermine Jesus’ relation to God in His divine sonship, the devil again introduced his temptation with the words **if You are the Son of God.** “Prove to yourself and to the world that you are the Son of God,” Satan taunted, and **throw Yourself down.**

In the first temptation a need (lack of food) already existed; in the second a need was to be created. To make the temptation more persuasive, the devil quoted Scripture, as Jesus had just done. Quoting Psalm 91:11-12, he said, **for it is written, “He will give His angels charge concerning You”; and “On their hands they will bear You up, lest You strike Your foot against a stone.”**

With that subtle and clever twist, the tempter thought He had backed Jesus into a corner. If Jesus lived only by the Word of God, then He would be confronted by something from the Word of God. “You claim to be God’s Son and You claim to trust His Word,” Satan was saying. “If so, why don’t you demonstrate your sonship and prove the truth of God’s Word by putting Him to a test—a scriptural test? If you won’t use your *own* divine power to help yourself, let your Father use *His* divine power to help you. If you won’t act independently of the Father, let the Father act. Give your Father a chance to fulfill the Scripture I just quoted to you.”

For Jesus to have followed Satan’s suggestion would have been, in the eyes of many Jews, sure proof of His messiahship. According to William Barclay, that is exactly the sort of proof many purported messiahs of that day were trying to give. A man named Theudas led a group of people from the Temple to the Jordan River, promising to split the waters. After he failed, no one listened to him anymore. An Egyptian pretender claimed he would lay flat the walls of Jerusalem, which, of course, he was not able to do. Tradition holds that Simon the magician (see Acts 8:9) tried the very feat with which Satan tempted Jesus: jumping off the top of the Temple—for which he lost his life as well as his following (*The Gospel of Matthew* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 1:69).

Sensationalism has always appealed to the flesh, and many people are willing to believe almost anyone or anything as long as the claims are accompanied by fantastic happenings. Jesus warned that “false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:24). But such dramatic signs, even when they are from God, do not produce faith; they only strengthen the faith of those who already believe. The many miracles by which God provided for Israel in the wilderness drove many of the people to presumption and greater disbelief. Jesus’ miracles only hardened the opposition of His enemies. He declared that “an evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign” (Matt. 12:39; cf. 16:4). When Jesus was dedicated in the Temple as an infant, Simeon “said to Mary His mother, ‘Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed’” (Luke 2:34). Jesus Himself was the greatest sign ever given by God to mankind, yet, as Isaiah had predicted hundreds of years earlier, He “was despised and forsaken of men” (Isa. 53:3; Luke 18:31-33).

Those who acclaimed Jesus only because of His miracles and impressive words later turned against Him. When the crowd from Galilee, astounded by Jesus' multiplying the bread and fish, tried to make Him king, He would have nothing of it (John 6:14-15). Those who scattered their garments before Jesus and waved palm branches in His honor as He came into Jerusalem did so because He had raised Lazarus from the dead (John 12:13, 17-18). A short while later Jesus hid Himself from the Jerusalem crowd, about whom John says, "But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him" (John 12:37). Demanding sensational proof is not evidence of faith but of doubt. To long for the visible sign, the big miracle, the dramatic proof is nothing but masked unbelief. It is the farthest thing from faith.

Jesus would have no part of cheap, faithless sensationalism. He therefore replied to Satan, **It is written, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test."** For those who believe in God, it is more than evident that He already has proved Himself. Jesus did not need to prove to Himself that His Father cared and protected, and He knew that the Father's care and protection could not be proved to others by any means but faith.

For at least two reasons Jesus refused to take part in a spectacle such as throwing Himself off the Temple roof. First, any sensationalism inevitably is frustrated by the law of diminishing returns. People are never satisfied. They always want one more sign, one more miracle, one more show. To have maintained His influence over the people by the use of miracles, Jesus would have had to produce greater and greater sensations. Because the natural, carnal heart can never be satisfied, this year's miracle would have become next year's bore. His followers would only have been lovers of sensation, not lovers of God.

Second, and more significant, no matter how noble and important we may think our reasons are, to test God is to doubt God. And to doubt God is not to trust Him, and not to trust Him is sin. That, of course, is what Satan wanted Jesus to do. To induce Jesus to sin, if that were possible, would shatter His perfect holiness, and therefore shatter His divinity and man's hope of salvation. Had Jesus put His Father to such a test, He would have separated Himself from His Father and perverted the divine plan of redemption—the very purpose for which He had come to earth.

Not only that, but to have tested the Father by putting Him under pressure to provide by extraordinary means, especially a means of Jesus'

own choosing, would have been for the Son to put His judgment and will above the Father's—which He would never do (Matt. 26:39,42; John 5:30; 6:30; etc.). It would also have questioned the Father's gracious providence and love. How much more should we, mere creatures who are so imperfect, never place our will or judgment above God's. To live recklessly and carelessly, and then expect God to bail us out when we get into trouble, is to presume upon his grace.

Those who willingly put themselves in the way of danger and temptation often end up blaming God when harm comes from their foolishness. When the Lord confronted Adam about his eating the forbidden fruit, Adam's response was to blame God even more than he blamed his wife. "The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate" (Gen. 3:12). It was true that Eve gave Adam the fruit, but because God gave Eve to Adam, the primary blame was God's—according to Adam's perverted logic. Our need is not to prove God's faithfulness but to demonstrate our own, by trusting Him both to determine and to supply our needs according to His own will.

God expects us to take risks, any risks necessary, in order to obey His will. When we risk our prestige, our money, our lives, our families, or anything else to fulfill the Lord's calling, we can rest confidently in His divine provision for all that we need—if we accept the truth that only He knows what our needs really are. But when we take risks simply to fulfill our own ambitions or to put God to the test, He gives no promise on which we can rest.

WORSHIPING SATAN

Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory; and he said to Him, "All these things will I give You, if You fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Begone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.'" (4:8-10)

Satan now drops his pretense and makes one final, desperate effort to corrupt Jesus. He finally reveals his supreme purpose: to induce Jesus Christ to worship him. He had first suggested what Jesus ought to do for Himself. Next he suggested what the Father ought to do for Jesus. Now he suggests what Satan could do for Jesus—in exchange for what Jesus could do for him.

We are not told what very **high mountain** it was to which **the devil took him**. The significance, however, lies in the fact that this location gave a vast view of the earth. But the view extended far beyond what physical vision could perceive from *any* vantage point, no matter how high. By some supernatural accommodation the devil showed Jesus the glories of Egypt—its pyramids, temples, libraries, and vast treasures. He showed the power and splendor of Rome, with its mighty empire spread over the known world. He showed great Athens, magnificent Corinth, and of course wondrous Jerusalem, the royal city of David, and more—**all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory**.

As God's own proclaimed King of kings, Jesus had a divine right to all kingdoms, and it was to that right that Satan appealed in this last temptation. "Why should you have to wait for what is already rightfully yours?" he suggested to Jesus. "You deserve to have it now. Why do you submit as a Servant when you could reign as a King? I am only offering you what the Father has already promised." Perhaps he reminded Jesus that God had said to the Son, "Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Thine inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Thy possession" (Ps. 2:8).

But Satan was offering the world to Jesus on his own corrupt terms, not God's. That which the Father promised to the Son because of His righteous obedience, Satan offered to the Son in exchange for His unrighteous disobedience. God's plan in testing the Son was to prove the Son's worthiness to inherit and rule the world. Satan's plan was to draw the Son away from that worthiness by enticing Him to grab the kingdom the Father promised to give Him. Instead of enduring the long, bitter, humiliating, and painful road to the cross—and the even longer wait in heaven for God's time to be completed—Jesus could rule the world now!

Satan always comes at us in that way. He suggests that the world of business, the world of politics, the world of fame, or the world of whatever our heart desires can be ours—if only...! We can get what we want; we can

fulfill our lusts and our fantasies; we can *be* somebody. All we must do to get those things of the world is to go after them in the way of the world—which is Satan’s way.

That, in essence, is what the tempter always promises. He promised Eve that by eating the forbidden fruit she would not die as God had warned, but that, in fact, she would become a god herself. “For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (Gen. 3:4-5). He tempts each of us in the same way. “Why set your standards so high? What’s the use? You can get what you want by cutting a corner here and shading the truth there. Why wait for heavenly reward, when you can have what you want now?” When we set our hearts on money, prestige, popularity, power, or selfish happiness, we are doing exactly what Satan wanted Jesus to do—put self first and God last. Self-will is Satan’s will and is therefore by definition the opposite of God’s will, which is for us to “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness” (Matt. 6:33). Abraham sought what God promised in his own self-styled act with Hagar, and tragedy resulted. It always does.

Satan is a counterfeiter. He offers what seems to be the same as what God offers, and his price is much cheaper.” God wants you to prosper, doesn’t He?” Satan asks. “Well, I’ll give you prosperity a lot sooner and for a lot less. Just turn your head a little at questionable practices. Give in when it’s advantageous; don’t be a prude; follow the crowd. That’s the way to success.” The basic argument is always a form of the idea that the end justifies the means.

But Satan is also the father of lies. What he really demanded in the wilderness was Jesus’ own soul: **All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me.** Satan had rebelled against God in the first place because he could not tolerate being second to the Trinity. Here, he thought, was his great opportunity: he would bribe the Son to worship at his feet. Satan’s price is always immeasurably more than he leads us to believe.

And what he gives is always immeasurably less than he promises. For Jesus to have given in to this third temptation would have brought the same ultimate result as His having succumbed to either of the other two. He would have disqualified Himself not only as King but as Savior. The statement of those who mocked at the foot of the cross would have had to have been reversed: “He saved Himself; others He cannot save” (see Matt.

27:42). Instead of redeeming the world He would have joined the world. Instead of inheriting the world, He would have lost the world. The Christ would have played the antichrist, and the Lamb would have become the beast.

As before, Jesus' reply was from Scripture, and is again from Deuteronomy. **Then Jesus said to him, "Begone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only,'"** The tempter's last proposal was so preposterous that Jesus dismissed him with **Begone, Satan!** The devil had stepped beyond all bounds in proposing such unutterable wickedness. Because Satan's present power is only by God's permission, when the Son commanded him to leave, Satan had no choice but to obey. Therein Christ demonstrated the very sovereign power Satan wanted Him to misuse!

If the Son of God would not compromise even the least important truth in the universe, He would surely not compromise the greatest: that God, and God alone, is to be worshiped and served. Jesus had heard enough from the enemy. Though Satan would be back as soon as he had "an opportune time" (Luke 4:13), for now he was forced to leave.

Jesus will inherit the kingdom in God's time, and we will inherit the kingdom with Him (Matt. 5:5; 25:34; Rom. 8:17; James 2:5). In the eternal, heavenly state all the universe will be ours! Who would want to sacrifice that for the deceptive, disappointing, and short-lived imitations Satan offers?

There are many good things that God will give us even in this life. No one desires our happiness more than our heavenly Father. "If you then, being evil," Jesus says, "know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" (Matt. 7:11). We can have the happiness God gives; why should we settle for the cheap substitute Satan proffers? We can have the success of living righteously and pleasing our heavenly Father; why should we settle for the brief and disappointing successes sin produces? By God's grace we can have the peace that passes understanding; why should we settle for the cheap satisfactions that everyone understands but that will soon pass?

THE TRIUMPH

Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to Him. (4:11)

When Jesus said, “Begone,” **the devil left Him**, because he had no choice. The Lord gives all of His children the power to resist Satan. “Resist the devil,” James assures us, “and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). As he did with Jesus, Satan will not long stay away from us; but with *every* temptation God “will provide a way of escape” (1 Cor. 10:13). For every temptation Satan leads us into, a way out is provided by the Father.

Satan’s temptations failed, but God’s testings succeeded. Jesus’ responses to the tempter were, in essence, “I will trust the Father; I will not presume on His Word; and I will not circumvent His will. I will take the Father’s good gifts from the Father’s own hand, in the Father’s own way, and in the Father’s own time.” Thus the King was accredited by the severest test.

After Satan left, **angels came**. How much better is the ministry of angels than the deceptions of Satan. At Jesus’ baptism the Father acknowledged Jesus’ worthiness by proclaiming, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.” Now the Father acknowledges Jesus’ worthiness by sending angels **to minister to Him**. At any time during His wilderness experience Jesus could have asked for and received the aid of “more than twelve legions of angels” (Matt. 26:53). But He waited for His Father to send them in His Father’s time.

We are not told what the ministry of the angels included, but surely they brought Jesus food to satisfy His hunger. We know they could not have been in the presence of the Son of God without offering Him worship. And certainly they could not have come from heaven without bringing strengthening words of assurance and love from His Father.

Satan tempts us in the same basic ways he tempted Jesus in the wilderness. First, he will try to get us to distrust God’s providential care and to try to solve our problems, win our struggles, and meet our needs by our own plans and in our own power. Second, he will try to get us to presume on God’s care and forgiveness by willingly putting ourselves in the way of danger—whether physical, economic, moral, spiritual, or any

other. Third, he will appeal to selfish ambitions and try to get us to use our own schemes to fulfill the promises God has made to us—which amounts to trying to fulfill God’s plan in Satan’s way.

Those three ways are reflected in 1 John 2:16—”For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.” The temptation for Jesus to turn stones into bread was to fulfill “the lust of the flesh” by using His divine powers for selfish means. The temptation to throw Himself off the pinnacle of the Temple was to fulfill “the lust of the eyes” by showing off to the world and seeking fame through sensationalism. The temptation to grab immediate control of the kingdoms of the world was to satisfy the “boastful pride of life” by yielding to Satan’s power and will.

The story is told of a man who was trying to teach his dog obedience. He would take a large piece of meat and put it in the middle of the floor. Each time the dog attempted to take the meat the man would swat the dog and say, “No.” Soon the dog began to associate the swatting with the word *no* and learned to stop simply when the word was said. When meat was placed on the floor the dog would not look at it but rather at his master, waiting for his word of approval or denial.

That is essentially the message God teaches in this passage: “When temptation comes, don’t look at the temptation but at Jesus Christ. Keep your eyes on His example and do what he did. Look at the ways He was tempted and at the way He resisted, and learn from Him.” The writer of Hebrews, perhaps with Jesus’ wilderness temptations particularly in mind, tells us, “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). Even more encouraging is the earlier declaration: “For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted” (Heb. 2:18).

Jesus has been there before us; He has met the worst Satan can give and has been victorious. More than that, He is eager to share that victory with His own people when they are tempted. “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

We can have victory over temptation only by resisting in the way that Jesus resisted—by holding with complete obedience to God and His Word. Jesus endured temptation to the very limit of Satan’s power, and He resisted to that very limit. He did not in the least degree allow temptation to develop into desire, much less into sin (cf. James 1:13-15). He did not think the matter over or give it any consideration. He simply stood firmly in His Father’s will and said no!

We find help against temptation, just as we find help for everything else in the Christian life, by “fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith” (Heb. 12:2). A hurdler soon learns that if he looks at the hurdles as he runs, he will trip and fall. From start to finish he looks only at the goal, and when he does that the hurdles are cleared in stride as each one is encountered. Keeping our eyes on our Lord Jesus Christ is our only hope of conquering temptation and faithfully running “with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1).

The Light Dawns (4:12-17)

Now when He heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet, saying, “The Land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, and to those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned.”

From that time Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (4:12-17)

One of the most beautiful metaphors used to describe Jesus’ nature and character is that of light. It conveys the idea of the illuminating, truth-revealing, and sin-exposing ministry of the Son of God. After first presenting Jesus Christ as the creative Word of God, John tells us, “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it” (John 1:4-5). He then tells us that John the Baptist “came that he might bear witness of the light... the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man” (vv. 8-9). He continues to say that “this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God” (John 3:19-21).

Speaking of Himself, Jesus said, “I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of

life” (John 8:12). Jesus spoke those words “in the treasury, as He taught in the temple” (v. 20). The Temple treasury was the outer court, the court of the women, and Jesus was there at the conclusion of the feast of Tabernacles. At that feast the Jews celebrated what they called the illumination of the Temple. A massive series of candelabra was placed in the middle of the court of the women, and for a week a great stream of light shined out continuously—to commemorate the pillar of fire that led Israel during the wilderness wanderings under Moses. As Jesus entered the court of the women, the light had just been extinguished. The candelabra were still in place, but they now gave no light. Jesus’ declaration that He Himself was the light of the world that would never go out must have struck His hearers with great force.

In the Old Testament, walking in the light was often used as a figure of righteousness and obedience to God, and walking in darkness as a figure of wickedness and disobedience (see Prov. 2:13; 4:18-19; etc.). Now Jesus presents Himself as the embodiment of righteousness and godliness, the very “light of the world.” “While I am in the world,” He said, “I am the light of the world” (John 9:5), and again, “For a little while longer the light is among you. Walk while you have the light, that darkness may not overtake you” (12:35; cf. v. 46). Paul proclaimed, “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). Peter speaks of Christians as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

After the Fall, mankind had two “candles,” as it were, that continued to give light about God and His will—the candle of creation and the candle of conscience. But man paid little attention to either, preferring to walk in the darkness of his own corrupted will (see Rom. 1:18-21). In his sinfulness man continually extinguished the only two lights he had that revealed God’s nature and His will for His creatures.

Modern research has shown that, contrary to what had always been assumed, leprosy, now often called Hansen’s disease, does not itself cause the decay and deformity so often found in the extremities of its victims. The ulceration and decay are caused by abrasion, infection, external heat, and other secondary causes. The disease itself causes certain parts of the

body to become insensitive to pain, and the person therefore has no warning of danger or harm. People with leprosy will therefore often reach into a fire to retrieve something, or will tear their feet to shreds walking on sharp stones they cannot feel.

The disease of sin has a similar effect. It desensitizes man's spiritual and moral nature, destroying even the limited natural protection he has against evil, snuffing out the residual light that remains after the Fall. And Satan endeavors to shut out the light of the saving good news (2 Cor. 4:3-4).

Jesus Christ came not only to make man sensitive again to sin, but to restore the life and health that sin has destroyed. He came not only to reveal the darkness that sin causes, but also to bring the light that overcomes the darkness. That is how Matthew introduces the active ministry of Jesus: He is Himself the great light that has dawned upon mankind. As the aged Simeon said of Jesus as He held the infant Lord in his arms in the Temple, "My eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel" (Luke 2:30-32; cf. Isa. 42:6; 49:6; 52:10).

We learn from the apostle John (1:19—4:42) that about a year elapsed between Jesus' wilderness temptations and the events recorded in Matthew 4:12-17. Probably because it does not relate directly to Jesus' kingship, that period is not mentioned by Matthew.

What Jesus did during that time was nevertheless significant. For some three days Jesus had remained near the Jordan where John was baptizing. During that time John gave progressively greater testimony to Jesus' messiahship. The first day he spoke of Jesus as "He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie" (John 1:27). The second day he proclaimed, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (v. 29) and "This is the Son of God" (v. 34). The third day, when John again declared, "Behold, the Lamb of God," the two disciples of John who were with him left to follow Jesus (v. 35-37). In effect, John said, "The Messiah has come," then, "Behold, the Messiah," and finally, "Follow the Messiah." Those two disciples of John, one of whom was Andrew, now became the disciples of Jesus (vv. 37-40).

John was a bridge between the Old Testament and the New, and that bridge had now almost completed its service. He himself would soon say

of Jesus, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). During that first year of Jesus’ ministry, John continued to preach, and their two ministries overlapped. As John’s work began to phase out, Jesus’ work began to build.

Among the other highlights of that year were Jesus’ first miracle at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11), His cleansing of the Temple (2:12-25), His testimony to Nicodemus (3:1-21), the final public testimony of John the Baptist (3:22-36), and Jesus’ ministry in Samaria at Sychar (4:1-42).

In 4:12-17, Matthew picks up the story of that first year where the apostle John leaves off, giving three features of Jesus’ early ministry that show God’s perfect work through His Son. It was at the right time; it was in the right place; and it was the right proclamation.

THE RIGHT TIME

Now when He heard that John had been taken into custody, (4:12a)

In Matthew’s presentation, Jesus’ official ministry began when the herald of the King went to jail. The Son of God always worked on His Father’s divine timetable. He had, as it were, a divine clock ticking in His mind and heart that regulated everything He said and did. Paul affirms that “when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son” (Gal. 4:4). Jesus spoke of His hour as not having yet come (John 7:30; 8:20) and then of its having arrived (Matt. 26:45; John 12:23; 17:1).

Jesus chose not to use His supernatural powers to accomplish things that could be accomplished by ordinary human means. He submitted Himself to human limitations. Although He knew what was in every man’s heart (John 2:24-25), He learned of John’s imprisonment by common report, just as did everyone else. It was only **when He heard** of John’s arrest that He went back to Galilee.

John had been taken into custody by Herod Antipas and thrown into the dungeon at the palace at Machaerus, on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea. John’s reproof of Herod for his great wickedness, including the

taking of his half-brother Philip's wife, Herodias, for himself (14:3-4; Luke 3:19-20), cost the prophet his freedom and eventually his life. This non-Jewish Idumean was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea and, like his father before him, held office by Rome's appointment. He was one of several sons (by several wives) of Herod the Great who were appointed over parts of the region ruled by their father before his death. Herodias was the woman—vile even by Roman standards—who would induce her daughter, Salome, to trick Herod into serving the head of John the Baptist on a platter before his guests at a royal dinner (14:6-11). The act was so unusually barbaric that even the hardened Herod himself “was distressed” (v. 9, NIV).

It is always dangerous to confront evil, and John's fearless condemnation of moral wickedness in high places led to his being beheaded. With similar bravery John Knox of Scotland stood ground against a corrupt monarchy. Standing before the repressive and corrupt Queen Mary, who had just rebuked him for resisting her authority, he said, “If princes exceed their bounds, madam, they may be resisted and even deposed.”

John the Baptist's imprisonment and death, just as his heralding the King of kings, were in God's divine plan and timetable. The end of the herald's work signaled the beginning of the King's. Herod and Herodias believed they freely controlled their province, and certainly the destiny of the insignificant Jewish preacher who dared condemn them. It is amazing how the proud and arrogant think they act in perfect freedom to accomplish their selfish ends, when in truth their decisions and actions only trigger events that God scheduled before the foundation of the world.

THE RIGHT PLACE

He withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet, saying, “The Land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—The

people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, and to those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned.” (4:12b-16)

Nothing is accidental or circumstantial in the Lord’s work. Jesus did not go from Judea, through Samaria, and into Galilee because He was forced to do so by Herod or by the Jewish leaders or because He had nowhere else to go. He left Judea because His work there was finished for that period of His ministry. He went through Samaria in order to bring light to the half-Jew, half-Gentile Samaritans. He then **withdrew** (*anachō reō*, used often to convey the thought of escaping danger) **into Galilee** because that was the next place where the divine plan scheduled Him to minister. By divine determination Jesus went to the right place at the right time.

When Jesus **withdrew into Galilee** after hearing of John’s arrest, it was not out of fear of Herod. He feared no man, and was surely no less brave than John. Had He wanted to escape possible trouble from Herod, He would not have gone to **Galilee**, because that, too, was under Herod’s control.

We again find additional information in John’s gospel. “When therefore the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John, . . . He left Judea, and departed again into Galilee” (John 4:1,3). Jesus left the lower Jordan region for Galilee because of the Jewish leaders, particularly the Pharisees, and not because of Herod. Though Jesus had not yet begun preaching, His close association with John the Baptist made Him suspect to the Pharisees and Sadducees, whom John had so scathingly rebuked (Matt. 3:7). Those religious leaders had come to hate John, but did not dare take action against him because he was so highly regarded by most of the people. Even several years after John’s death they would not speak ill of him for “fear [of] the multitude” (Matt. 21:26). They were therefore greatly pleased when Herod did to John what they themselves wanted, but were afraid, to do. When they learned that Jesus was gaining a larger following even than John, their hatred would soon turn against Him as well. Jesus had no fear of their hatred, but it was not yet time for that hatred to be unleashed against Him.

Jesus was no more afraid of the Pharisees than was John, but He wanted to avoid a premature confrontation. When the time came, Jesus faced the Jewish religious leaders without a wince, and His denunciations of them were longer-lasting and immeasurably harder than those of John the Baptist had been (see, e.g., Matt. 23:1-36). Jesus knew that He was eternally safe from any danger that men could devise. His life would be forfeited, but by His own divine will, not by the wills or power of His enemies (John 10:17-18). And He would live again!

The Roman region of **Galilee** was primarily to the west, but also extended north and south, of the Sea of Galilee—which was really a lake, sometimes called Tiberias (John 6:1) or Gennesaret (Luke 5:1). The region is some 60 miles long, north to south, and about 30 miles wide. The area around the lake was heavily populated (estimated by some to have had as many as two million people in Jesus' day) and had long been the breadbasket of central Palestine. The soil was extremely fertile, and the lake furnished great quantities of edible fish. The Jewish historian Josephus, who at one time was governor of Galilee, said of the area, "It is throughout rich in soil and pasture, producing every variety of tree, and inviting by its productivity even those who have the least inclination for agriculture. It is everywhere tilled and everywhere productive" (*The Wars of the Jews* 3. 3.2).

The Jews who lived in **Galilee** were less sophisticated and traditional than those in Judea, especially those in the great metropolis of Jerusalem. Josephus observed that Galileans "were fond of innovations and by nature disposed to change, and they delighted in seditions." They even had a distinct accent in their speech (Matt. 26:73). Perhaps Jesus chose His disciples from that area because they would be less bound to Jewish tradition and more open to the newness of the gospel.

It is evident from the text that Jesus was in **Nazareth** for a while. Luke explains that, after Jesus came from Judea through Samaria, He "returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, . . . and He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read" (Luke 4:14,16). At first "all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips; and they were saying, 'Is this not Joseph's son?'" (v. 22). But after Jesus exposed their true spiritual condition, "all in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these

things.” They would have thrown Him over a cliff to His death had He not escaped (vv. 23-30).

After Jesus’ hometown rejected Him, just as He had said they would (Luke 4:23-27), **He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali.**

Capernaum means “village of Nahum” and was possibly named for the prophet Nahum. But Nahum means “compassion,” and it may be that the town simply had been named for its compassionate people. By Jesus’ day it was a flourishing, prosperous city. It was here that Matthew had his tax office (Matt. 9:9), and it was this place that Matthew refers to as “His city,” that is, Jesus’ own city (9:1). Yet a short while later Jesus would say of it, “And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You shall descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you” (Matt. 11:23-24). Today **Capernaum**, though a popular attraction for Christian visitors, is virtually uninhabited.

As we learn from Matthew’s quotation of Isaiah 9:1 in verse 15, **the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan**, had long been known as **Galilee of the Gentiles** (*ethnoi*, heathen, or nations). All of Galilee was cosmopolitan, with the Syrians to the north and east and the descendants of the ancient Phoenicians to the west. It was more of a crossroads than Jerusalem, which was isolated from much trade traffic. A famous trade route was actually known as **the way of the sea**. It went through **Galilee** on its way from Damascus to the Mediterranean coast and then down to Egypt. One ancient writer said that Judea was on the way to nowhere, whereas Galilee was on the way to everywhere. The Galilean Jews’ constant association with Gentiles contributed greatly to their nontraditional character.

The region of Galilee originally had been given by the Lord to the tribes of Asher, **Zebulun and Naphtali** when Israel began to settle in Canaan (see Josh. 19:10-39). But, contrary to God’s command, **Zebulun and Naphtali** failed to expel all of the Canaanites from their territories. From the beginning, therefore, these unfaithful Jews suffered the problem of mixed marriages and the inevitable pagan influence which that practice brought.

In the eighth century B.C. the Assyrians, under Tiglath-pileser, took away a large part of those tribes as captives (2 Kings 15:29) and replaced them with Assyrians and other non-Jews. Until it was temporarily liberated by Judas Maccabaeus in 164 B.C, the region of Galilee was largely under foreign control and was even largely populated by non-Jews. Another Jewish leader, Aristobulus, reconquered Galilee in 104 B.C. and tried unsuccessfully to establish an entirely Jewish nation by forcibly circumcizing all the male inhabitants. Through those disrupting centuries, the Jews that remained in Galilee had been greatly weakened in both biblical and traditional Judaism—giving even greater significance to the name **Galilee of the Gentiles**.

It is not strange, then, that the reaction of many Jews in Jerusalem was, “Surely the Christ is not going to come from Galilee, is He?” (John 7:41). The idea of a Galilean Messiah seemed ludicrous. When Nicodemus tried to convince the Pharisees that Jesus should be given a fair hearing, “They answered and said to him, ‘You are not also from Galilee, are you? Search, and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee’” (vv. 51-52).

Yet, as Matthew here reminds his readers, Isaiah had long before prophesied that in **Galilee of the Gentiles—The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, and to those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned** (cf. Isa. 9:1-2). The fact alone that Jesus so accurately and completely fulfilled Old Testament prophecy should be enough to convince an honest mind of the Bible’s truthfulness and authority. Just as Isaiah had predicted eight centuries earlier, the despised, sin-darkened, and rebellious Galileans were the first to glimpse the Messiah, the first to see the dawning of God’s New Covenant! Not mighty and beautiful Jerusalem, the queen city of the Jews, but **Galilee of the Gentiles** would first hear Messiah’s message. Not the learned, proud, and pure Jews of Jerusalem, but the mongrel, downcast, nontraditional mixed multitude of Samaria and Galilee had that great honor. To those who were neediest, and who were most likely to recognize their need, Jesus went first.

The fact that Jesus began His ministry in Samaria and Galilee, rather than in Jerusalem and Judea, emphasizes the fact that His gospel of salvation was for the whole world. It was the fulfillment of Old Testament truth, which God had chosen to reveal through the Jews (cf. Rom. 3:1-2), but it was in no way an accommodation to the traditional, proud, and

exclusive Judaism that had developed during the intertestamental period and that was so dominant in Jesus' day. The Son of God was sent to be "a light of revelation of the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel" (Luke 2:32; cf. Isa. 42:6; 49:6; 52:10). It was no coincidence of history that "the light of the world" (John 8:12) first proclaimed Himself in **Galilee of the Gentiles**.

It was in and around Galilee that Jesus had spent all but a small part of His childhood and early manhood, and it was there that His ministry first developed and began to spread. As the new day of the gospel dawned, the first rays of light shined in **Galilee**. Into this land of oppression, dispersion, and corrosive moral and spiritual influences—and impending death at the word of divine judgment—Jesus came with words and deeds of mercy, truth, love, and hope: "**To those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned.**"

THE RIGHT PROCLAMATION

From that time Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (4:17)

Preaching was a central part of Jesus' ministry and remains a central part of the ministry of His church. **From that time**, when He went to Galilee, **Jesus began to preach**. *Kērussō (to preach)* means "to proclaim" or "to publish," that is, to publicly make a message known. R. C. H. Lenski comments, "The point to be noted is that to preach is not to argue, reason, dispute, or convince by intellectual proof, against all of which a keen intellect may bring counterargument. We simply state in public or testify to all men the truth which God bids us state. No argument can assail the truth presented in this announcement or testimony. Men either believe the truth, as all sane men should, or refuse to believe it, as only fools venture to do" (*The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964], p. 168).

Jesus preached His message with certainty. He did not come to dispute or to argue, but to proclaim, **to preach**. Preaching is the

proclamation of certainties, not the suggestion of possibilities. Jesus also preached “as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt. 7:29). What He proclaimed not only was certain but was of the utmost authority. The scribes could not teach authoritatively because they had so mingled biblical truth with the interpretations and traditions of various rabbis that all certainty and authority had long vanished. They could no longer distinguish God’s Word from men’s words, and all that remained were opinions and speculations. For God’s people once again to hear someone preach as the prophets had preached was astonishing (cf. Matt. 7:28-29).

Jesus not only preached with certainty and authority but preached only what He was commissioned by His Father to preach. John the Baptist said of Jesus, “For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God” (John 3:34). Jesus Himself said, “I speak the things which I have seen with My Father” (John 8:38). Later he gave the same testimony even more pointedly: “For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me commandment, what to say, and what to speak” (John 12:49).

In His high priestly prayer Jesus spoke to His Father of His disciples, saying, “Now they have come to know that everything Thou hast given Me is from Thee; for the words which Thou gavest Me I have given to them; and they received them” (John 17:7-8). And it is in His own authority that Jesus sends out His ministers to the world: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:18-19). That is God’s commission to everyone who preaches in His name. The faithful preacher and teacher will proclaim God’s certain truth, with God’s delegated authority, and under God’s divine commission.

When the King’s light dawned, the message that His light brought was clear. He began where His herald, John the Baptist, had begun: **Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand** (cf. 3:2).

The darkness in which the people lived was the darkness of sin and evil. Jesus was saying, “The great darkness has been upon you because of the great darkness that is within you. You must be willing to turn from that darkness before the light can shine in you.” To turn from sin is to **repent**, to change one’s orientation, to turn around and seek a new way. *Metanoēō* literally means a change of perception, a change in the way we see something. To **repent**, therefore, is to change the way a person looks at sin

and the way he looks at righteousness. It involves a change of opinion, of direction, of life itself. To repent is to have a radical change of heart and will—and, consequently, of behavior (cf. Matt. 3:8).

That was, and has always continued to be, the first demand of the gospel, the first requirement of salvation, and the first element of the saving work of the Spirit in the soul. The conclusion of Peter's Pentecost sermon was a call to repentance: "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). Many years later Paul reminded Timothy that repentance leads "to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. 2:25).

Israel would not be ready for or worthy of the King until she repented. Repentance, of course, had always been in order and had always been needed, but now that **the kingdom of heaven [was] at hand**, it was all the more imperative. The King had arrived, and the kingdom was near. Messiah's time had come—to usher in the age of righteousness and rest, to subdue Israel's enemies, to bring all of God's people back to their land, and to reign on the throne of David.

Tragically, because most of Israel did not repent and did not recognize and accept the King, the promised earthly kingdom had to be postponed. As Matthew later explains, the literal, physical kingdom was set aside for a period of time. The spiritual kingdom presently exists only in the hearts of those who have trusted in Jesus Christ, the King. He is not ruling the nation Israel and the world as He one day will, but He rules the lives of those who belong to Him by faith. The world does not have peace, but those do who know the Prince of Peace. The external kingdom has not yet come, yet the King Himself indwells those that are His. The Messiah, the Christ, now rules in those who have received Him who is "the light of men."

Fishing **for Men** (4:18-22)

And walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” And they immediately left the nets, and followed Him. And going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and He called them. And they immediately left the boat and their father, and followed Him. (4:18-22)

The following widely told story is a sobering parable of what the church’s concern for evangelism has often been like.

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks were frequent, a crude little life-saving station was built. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted crewmen kept a constant watch over the sea. With no thought for themselves, they went out day or night, tirelessly searching for any who might need help. Many lives were saved by their devoted efforts. After a while the station became famous. Some of those who were saved, as well as others in the surrounding area, wanted to become a part of the work. They gave time and money for its support. New boats were bought, additional crews were trained, and the station grew. Some of the members became unhappy that the building was so crude. They felt a larger, nicer place would be more appropriate as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots with hospital beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Soon the station became a popular gathering place for its members to discuss the work and to visit with each other. They continued to remodel and

decorate until the station more and more took on the look and character of a club. Fewer members were interested in going out on lifesaving missions, so they hired professional crews to do the work on their behalf. The lifesaving motif still prevailed on the club emblems and stationery, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club held its initiations. One day a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in many boatloads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. They were dirty, bruised, and sick; and some had black or yellow skin. The beautiful new club was terribly messed up, and so the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside, where the shipwreck victims could be cleaned up before coming inside. At the next meeting there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities altogether, as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted on keeping lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that, after all, they were still called a lifesaving station. But those members were voted down and told that if they wanted to save lives they could begin their own station down the coast somewhere. As the years went by, the new station gradually faced the same problems the other one had experienced. It, too, became a club, and its lifesaving work became less and less of a priority. The few members who remained dedicated to lifesaving began another station. History continued to repeat itself; and if you visit that coast today you will find a number of exclusive clubs along the shore. Shipwrecks are still frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

What a striking illustration of the history of the church. Yet the work of evangelism, of spiritual lifesaving, is nonetheless the purest, truest, noblest, and most essential work the church will ever do. The work of fishing men and women out of the sea of sin, the work of rescuing people from the breakers of hell, is the greatest work the church is called by God to do.

Rescuing men from sin is God's great concern. Evangelism has been called the sob of God. Concern for the lost caused Jesus to grieve over unbelieving Jerusalem: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matt. 23:37).

God sent His Son to earth—to preach, die, and be raised—for the very purpose of saving men from sin. The Father “so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him” (John 3:16-17). The Son Himself came “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). The Holy Spirit gives to those who believe “the washing of regeneration and renewing” (Titus 3:5). The whole Trinity is at work in the ministry of saving mankind from sin. Evangelism is the great concern of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

God’s concern for redeeming mankind did not, of course, begin when He sent His Son to earth. In the Garden of Eden He promised that one day sin would be destroyed, that Satan’s very head would be bruised (Gen. 3:15). In His covenant with Abraham He promised that in him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). In the covenant at Sinai God called Israel to “be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6), a kingdom of His witnesses to the world to draw all mankind to Himself.

God’s people were to share His concern for the lost. Moses was so desperate for the salvation of his own rebellious people that he cried to God, “But now, if Thou wilt, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me out from Thy book which Thou hast written!” (Ex. 32:32). The writer of Proverbs reminded Israel that “he who is wise wins souls” (Prov. 11:30). The Lord told Daniel, “Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (Dan. 12:3).

Evangelism was the great concern of the New Testament church. Immediately after Pentecost, the new believers were totally dedicated to God and to winning others to Him. As they studied at the apostles’ feet, shared with each other, and praised God, they came to have “favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42-47). When the first great persecution of the church in Jerusalem began under the direction of Saul, “those who had been scattered went about preaching the word” (Acts 8:1-4). They did not despair over their hardship but took it as an opportunity to expand the Lord’s work.

After Saul himself was converted, his own great concern was evangelism—for building up the movement he had formerly tried to destroy. “I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish,” he would one day write. “Thus, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:14-16). Though he was called to be God’s special apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Eph. 3:8), Paul had such an overwhelming desire for the salvation of his fellow Jews that he said, “I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:3). His “heart’s desire and [his] prayer to God for them [was] for their salvation” (10:1). He wanted *everyone* to be saved, and was willing to “become all things to all men, that [he might] by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22).

Evangelism has been the heartthrob of faithful Christians throughout the history of the church. John Knox pleaded with God, “Give me Scotland or I die.” John Wesley considered the whole world his parish.

Like the Christian life in general, soul-winning involves a paradox. Jesus said, “For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it” (Matt. 16:25). In other words, in saving others we lose ourselves; in losing ourselves in the task we will be used to win others. Jesus warned His disciples that the Jewish leaders would soon “make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God” (John 16:2)—just as they hated Jesus Himself “without a cause” (15:25). Those who would reach the world must be willing to be rejected by the world, just as our Lord conquered death by yielding to death.

In a sense, the life of evangelism involves sacrificing the greater for the lesser, the worthy for the unworthy. It is the opposite of the loveless and brutal survival of the fittest—the way of the fallen, sinful world. God’s way, the way of redemption, is that of the strong being willing to die that the weak might live. God’s Word is clear that, if we are committed to the salvation of those without Jesus Christ, we will lose ourselves in order to reach them. Preaching the saving gospel is essential, and so is personal witnessing.

Forms of *evangelize* are used over fifty times in the New Testament. Evangelization is the primary thrust of the Great Commission:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:19). To make disciples is to evangelize, to bring men and women under the Saviorhood and lordship of Jesus Christ. When Jesus called His disciples to Himself, He also called them to call others.

By comparing the gospel accounts we discover that there were at least five different phases of Jesus’ calling of the twelve. Each gospel writer emphasized those phases which best suited his particular purpose. As would be expected, the first call was to salvation, to faith in the Messiah (see John 1:35-51; 2:11). The calling that Matthew mentions here was the second calling, the calling to witness. After neither the first nor the second call did the disciples permanently leave their occupations. At the time of the third call (Luke 5:1-11), Peter, James, and John were again back fishing. Jesus repeated the call to be fishers of men, and the disciples then realized the call was permanent and “they *left everything* and followed Him” (v. 11).

In Luke’s account, Simon and the others are still fishermen, and the Lord is teaching the crowd on shore from Simon’s boat (v. 3). After the teaching, He instructed the disciples to go out to the deep water and let down their nets for a catch. Simon protested that a full night of fishing had yielded nothing, but said that he would obey nonetheless. When the fish came into the net to the point of breaking it, and the catch filled both boats so that they almost sank with the weight of the fish, Simon knew who Jesus was—the presence of the holy God. His reaction, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (v. 8), reveals the same attitude Isaiah had when he saw God (Isa. 6:1-5)—an overwhelming sense of sinfulness. The sinner in the presence of God sees only his sin, and shrinks back in fear of judgment. But instead of consuming fire, Peter received a call to discipleship and evangelism. When the call came he responded with the other three men in total commitment to follow the Lord.

Mark tells us of the fourth level, or phase, of the call. “And He went up to the mountain and summoned those whom He Himself wanted, and they came to Him. And He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach, and to have authority to cast out the demons” (Mark 3:13-15). The fifth phase, anticipated in the previous one, is recorded in Matthew 10:1—“And having summoned His twelve disciples, He gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.”

God calls all believers in a similar way. First He calls us to salvation, apart from which no other call could be effective. He then calls us progressively to more specific and ever-expanding service.

CALLING PETER AND ANDREW

And walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” And they immediately left the nets, and followed Him. (4:18-20)

The Sea of Galilee is an oval-shaped body of water about eight miles wide and thirteen miles long, and is nearly 700 feet below sea level. Luke, who was well traveled, always referred to it more properly as a lake. Yet Josephus reports that in the first century A.D. some 240 boats regularly fished the waters of that lake. Much additional fishing was done along the shore, as **Simon who was called Peter** [see Matt. 16:16-18], **and Andrew his brother** were doing on this occasion, **casting a net into the sea.**

In that day, three methods of fishing were used. One was by hook and line, the second was by a throw net cast from the shallow water along the shore, and the third was by a large dragnet strung between two or more boats in the deep water. **Peter and Andrew** were here obviously using the second method. That **net** was probably about nine feet in diameter, and the two brothers were skilled in its use, **for they were fishermen** by trade. The Greek term for that particular net was *amphiblēstron* (related to our *amphibious*, an adjective describing something related to both land and water)—so named because the person using the net would stand on or near shore and throw the net into the deeper water where the fish were.

When Jesus called those first disciples, He gathered together the first fish-catching crew of His church. They were the first of the original band of evangelists He called to fulfill the Great Commission. They were Jesus' first partners in ministry. He had the power and the right to

accomplish the work of proclaiming the gospel by Himself. But that was not His plan. He could have done it alone, but He never intended to do it alone. From the beginning of His ministry, His plan was to use disciples to win disciples. He would command His disciples to do other things, but His first call to them was, **Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.**

We are given specific details of the callings of only seven of the original twelve. But Jesus individually selected those who would become part of the first marvelous ministry of winning people to Himself. “He called His disciples to Him; and chose twelve of them, whom He also named as apostles” (Luke 6:13). God always chooses His partners. He chose Noah and Abraham, Moses and David. He chose the prophets. He chose Israel herself to be a whole nation of partners, “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). Jesus told His disciples, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit” (John 15:16; cf. 6:70; 13:18). Paul called Epaenetus “the first convert [lit., “firstfruit,” *aparchē*] to Christ from Asia” (Rom. 16:5).

That calling to bear fruit in evangelism is extended to everyone who belongs to Jesus Christ. The called ones are themselves to become callers. Speaking of all Christians, Peter wrote, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). Christ mandates that all of His followers be **fishermen**. The command, **Follow Me** (in the Greek an adverb of place expressing a command), literally means “come here.” The term *after* is used in the original to show the place they are to come: “Your place is following after Me!”

The disciples’ obedience was instant: **And they immediately left the nets, and followed Him.** The sovereign authority of the Lord had spoken. **Followed** is from *akoloutheō*, which conveys the idea of following as a disciple who is committed to imitating the one he follows.

Many years ago an Italian recluse was found dead in his house. He had lived frugally all his life, but when friends were going through his house to sort out the few possessions he had accumulated they discovered 246 expensive violins crammed into his attic. Some even more valuable ones were in a bureau drawer in his bedroom. Virtually all of his money had been spent buying violins. Yet his misdirected devotion to the instruments had robbed the world of their beautiful sounds. Because he

selfishly treasured those violins, the world never heard the music they were meant to play. It is even reported that the first violin the great Stradivarius ever made was not played until it was 147 years old!

Many Christians treat their faith like that man treated his violins. They hide their light; they squirrel away their great treasure. By not sharing their light and their treasure, many to whom they could have witnessed are left in spiritual darkness and poverty.

Some researchers estimate that as many as ninety-five percent of all Christians have never led another person to Jesus Christ. If that is true, ninety-five percent of the world's spiritual violins have never been played! True love of our riches in Christ leads us to shine and share, not to hide and hoard.

When D. L. Moody once visited an art gallery in Chicago he was especially impressed by a painting called "The Rock of Ages." The picture showed a person with both hands clinging to a cross firmly embedded in a rock. While the stormy sea smashed against the rock, he hung tightly to the cross. Years later Mr. Moody saw a similar picture. This one also showed a person in a storm holding to a cross, but with one hand he was reaching out to someone who was about to drown. The great evangelist commented that, though the first painting was beautiful, the second was even lovelier.

CALLING JAMES AND JOHN

And going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and He called them. And they immediately left the boat and their father, and followed Him. (4:21-22)

When Jesus called **James** and **John** they were tough, crusty outdoors-men—uncut jewels. They were **in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets**, a routine but important task in the fishing business. They had already been called to faith in the Savior (see John

1:35-51; 2:11); here **He called them** to the work of evangelism alongside Himself. And they **immediately left the boat and their father, and followed Him.**

These disciples had little education, little spiritual perception, and possibly little religious training of any sort. As their new Master began to teach them, even when He spoke in parables, they often lacked full comprehension of His meaning.

They were often self-centered and inhospitable. When the multitude who had walked a long way around the Sea of Galilee to be with Jesus became hungry, the disciples thought only of sending them away on their own to find food (Matt. 14:15). When some little children were brought to Jesus for blessing, the disciples rebuked those who brought them (19:13). Peter thought he would be extremely generous to forgive someone “up to seven times” (18:21). Even on the night of Jesus’ betrayal, as their Lord agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter, James, and John could not stay awake with Him (26:40, 45). The disciples were selfish, proud, weak, and cowardly. They showed little potential even for dependability, much less for greatness. Yet Jesus chose them for disciples, even to be His inner circle of twelve. They were raw material that He would make into useful instruments.

All the disciples were probably not as rough and unpromising as the first and most dominant four Jesus called, but not one was chosen from among the Jewish religious leaders—the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, or rabbis. It was no doubt partly that fact that caused those leaders to reject Jesus. They could not believe that anyone who Himself was not an official leader, and who chose no official leaders to be His personal students and co-workers, could possibly be the Messiah. It was beyond their comprehension that God’s own Son would bypass the proper leaders of His chosen people when He came to establish His kingdom.

The only apostle who had been a Jewish religious leader was not among the original twelve, and he considered himself “one untimely born.” He knew that his own calling was exceptional and reflected God’s exceeding grace (1 Cor. 15:8-10). He reminded the Corinthian believers, “For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong,

and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God” (1 Cor. 1:26-29).

Jesus did not simply command His disciples to become **fishers of men**, but promised that He would **make** them fishermen for men’s souls. As He later would make clear on more than one occasion, that promise was also a caution. Not only was He willing to make them into disciplers, but they could never be effective disciplers—or effective disciples in any way—without His power. “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

A number of qualities that make a good fisherman can also help make a good evangelist. First, a fisherman needs to be patient, because he knows that it often takes time to find a school of fish. Fishermen learn to wait. Second, a fisherman must have perseverance. It is not simply a matter of waiting patiently in one place, hoping some fish will eventually show up. It is a matter of going from place to place, and sometimes back again, over and over—until the fish are found. Third, fishermen must have good instinct for going to the right place and dropping the net at the right moment. Poor timing has lost many a catch, both of fish and of men. A fourth quality is courage. Commercial fishermen, certainly ones such as those on the Sea of Galilee, frequently face considerable danger from storms and various mishaps.

A good fisherman also keeps himself out of sight as much as possible. It is very easy for ourselves to get in the way of our witnessing, causing people to turn away. A good soul-winner keeps himself out of the picture as much as possible.

When Jesus called the disciples to commit themselves to evangelism, He also committed Himself to train them and empower them. Following the Lord’s example, the church not only must call its members to evangelize, but must continually train and encourage them in that calling. The Lord not only empowers his disciples to witness but empowers them to train others to witness. In other words, He empowers His disciples to disciple, just as He promised in the Great Commission. “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:18-19).

Jesus first sent the disciples out two-by-two on brief missions, instructing them about what they should and should not do and say (Mark 6:7-11). After three years of teaching and training in short-term assignments, He finally left them permanently on their own. Yet they were not on their own, because He would henceforth not only be with them but in them (Matt. 28:20; John 16:13-15).

Both in Jesus' teaching and in His example we can see principles that every soul-winner must emulate. First of all, Jesus was available. It seems incredible that the Son of God, who had so very little time to teach and train the slow-learning disciples, would be so open to those who came to Him for comfort or healing. He never turned down a request for help.

Second, Jesus showed no favoritism. The poor and outcast could approach Him as easily as the wealthy and powerful. The influential Jairus and the powerful Roman centurion had no advantage over the Samaritan woman of Sychar or the woman taken in adultery.

Third, Jesus was totally sensitive to the needs of those around Him. He always recognized an open heart, a repentant sinner. Even when the crowd pressed around Him, He noticed the woman who touched the hem of His garment. "Jesus turning and seeing her said, 'Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well.' And at once the woman was made well" (Matt. 9:20-22). When we are sensitive to Christ's Spirit, He will make us sensitive to others, and will lead us to them or them to us.

Fourth, Jesus usually secured a public profession or testimony. Sometimes He gave specific instruction, as He did to the man He delivered from demons (Mark 5:19), whereas at other times the desire to witness was spontaneous, as with the woman of Sychar (John 4:28-29).

Fifth, Jesus showed love and tenderness to those He sought to win. Again His experience with the woman at Sychar gives a beautiful example. She not only was a religious outcast in the eyes of Jews but was an adulteress. She had had five husbands and was then living with a man to whom she was not married. Yet Jesus firmly but gently led her to the place of faith. Through her, many other Samaritans were led to salvation (John 4:7-42).

Finally, Jesus always took time. In contrast to many of His followers, Jesus always had time for others. Some Christian workers are so busy with "the Lord's work" that they have no time for others—though that was a primary characteristic of Jesus' own ministry. Even while on

His way to heal Jairus' daughter, Jesus took time to heal the woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years (Mark 5:21-34).

The response of Peter, Andrew, James, and John to Jesus' call was the same. **They immediately left** what they were doing **and followed Him**. Their obedience was instant and without hesitation. At this time they had little knowledge of Jesus' teaching or of what following Him would cost. But it was enough for them to know who He was and that His call to them was a divine call.

From many subsequent accounts in the gospels we know that none of the disciples at this time had a passion for souls, or a passion for any part of the Lord's work. In fact, their response to unbelief was to call for instant divine destruction (see Luke 9:51-56). Passion came only after understanding and obedience. They developed compassion, humility, understanding, patience, and love as they learned from and obeyed Jesus. Obedience is the spark that lights the fire of passion. The way to develop a love for souls is to obey Jesus' call to win souls. As we do that, God will kindle that spark of obedience into a great flame of passion. This is the time of gracious evangelism, not of consuming judgment, as our Lord made clear in the parable of the tares (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43).

David Brainerd, the great missionary to the American Indians, who died while still in his twenties, said, "Oh, that I were a flame of fire in my Master's cause." His selfless obedience proved the sincerity of that desire, and God gave him a burning heart for lost souls that has few parallels in the history of the church. Henry Martyn, missionary to India and Persia, prayed that he might "burn out for God," and that is what God graciously allowed him to do.

Such burning desire comes only from the pilot light of obedience. Like David Brainerd, Robert Murray McCheyne died before he was thirty. Of him Courtland Myers wrote: "Everywhere he stepped Scotland shook. Whenever he opened his mouth a spiritual force swept in every direction. Thousands followed him to the feet of Christ." Visitors who came to see the church where McCheyne had preached were shown a table, chair, and open Bible. They were then told how that man of God spent hours with his head buried in the Bible, weeping for those to whom he would preach. Myers then comments, "With such a passion for souls, is it any wonder that the Holy Spirit gave McCheyne a magnetic personality which drew so many to the Savior?"

The hymn “Let the Lower Lights Be Burning” is based on a story told by D. L. Moody. A ship was coming into Cleveland harbor on Lake Erie on a stormy night. The harbor had two sets of lights to guide incoming vessels. One set was high on the bluff above the harbor and could be seen for many miles. The other set was down near the coastline and was used to guide the ships through the rocks as they came nearer to port. On that particular night the wind and rain had extinguished the lower lights, and the pilot suggested they stay out in the lake until daylight. The captain, however, was afraid of the ship’s being destroyed by the storm and decided to risk making the harbor. But without the lower lights to guide it, the ship was wrecked on the rocks, and many of the men drowned. In applying that story to Christian witnessing, Moody said, “The upper lights in heaven are burning as brightly as ever they’ve burned. But what about the lower lights?”

The King's Divine Credentials (4:23-25)

And Jesus was going about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. And the news about Him went out into all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, taken with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them. And great multitudes followed Him from Galilee and Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan. (4:23-25)

One of the ways in which Jesus demonstrated His divine character and power was through miracles of healing, which served as messianic credentials. John was especially concerned with those credentials, and his gospel features them. He makes it clear that “many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:30-31). Matthew also confirms that through His mighty works Jesus presented Himself as the Messiah, the great coming King.

The primary purpose of all four gospel writers was to present Jesus as being more than a man. He was the very Son of God. Apart from that central truth everything else about Him would be of little consequence. It would be of absolutely *no* consequence as far as salvation is concerned. But in light of that truth, *everything* about Him is of supreme significance. What He said was the Word of God, and what He did was the work of God.

He who believes in Me does not believe in Me, but in Him who sent Me. And he who beholds Me beholds the One who sent Me.

I have come as light into the world, that everyone who believes in Me may not remain in darkness. And if anyone hears My sayings, and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. He who rejects Me, and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day. For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me commandment, what to say, and what to speak. And I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me. (John 12:44-50)

Jesus' claims were so astounding that His enemies desperately suggested that He must be demon-possessed or insane. But others were wiser, "saying, 'These are not the sayings of one demon-possessed. A demon cannot open the eyes of the blind, can he?'" (John 10:19-21). The man healed of blindness told the disbelieving Pharisees, "Well, here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where He is from, and yet He opened my eyes. We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing, and does His will, He hears him. Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, He could do nothing" (9:30-33). Jesus' amazing words were backed up by His amazing works.

On another occasion the officers of the chief priests and Pharisees reported, "Never did a man speak the way this man speaks" (John 7:46). At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, "the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matt. 7:28-29). The words Jesus said were also overpowering marks of His messiahship and His majesty.

Matthew focuses both on Jesus' words and His works as, in 4:23-25, he introduces His ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing. He has already demonstrated that Jesus came at the right time and place and with the right message (4:12-17), and that for His work He chose the right partners (vv. 18-22). Now he shows that He came with the right plan—to establish His deity by His words and His works.

TEACHING

And Jesus was going about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues (4:23a)

Was going about (from *periagō*) is in the imperfect tense, indicating repeated and continuous action. This verse summarizes Jesus' entire Galilean ministry. His going **about in all Galilee** is given in detail in chapters 5–9. His words are the subject of chapters 5–7 (the Sermon on the Mount), and His works are the focus of chapters 8–9.

Matthew does not imply that Jesus visited every village in **Galilee**, but emphasizes that He ministered throughout the region. Because the entire region was only some sixty by thirty miles, and Jesus moved about in it, anyone interested in seeing and hearing Him would not have had far to travel. In the time that He had, He ministered to as many people as He possibly could.

Though that vicinity had long been known as “Galilee of the Gentiles” (see 4:15; Isa. 9:1), Jesus' ministry there apparently concentrated in the Jewish **synagogues**. The synagogue is believed to have developed during the Babylonian exile, and its use was greatly expanded during the intertestamental period. By New Testament times it had become the most important institution in Jewish life. Although the Temple remained by far the holiest shrine of Judaism, many Jews lived thousand of miles from Jerusalem and could never expect to visit there. But synagogues could be established anywhere in Israel or beyond, and around them virtually all Jewish religious and social life centered.

The synagogue not only was the primary place of worship but also of study, community fellowship, and of legal activity. The greatest tragedy for most Jews was to be disfellowshipped from the synagogue, to be unsynagogued (*aposunagōgos*, John 12:43). That is what happened to Jews who became Christians. It was such a terrible prospect that, as we assume from the repeated warnings of the book of Hebrews (6:4-6; 10:35-39; etc.), many Jews who recognized the truth of the gospel refused to become

Christians because of the certainty of being ostracized from the Jewish community.

Most synagogues were built on a hill, often on the highest point of a town. Many had a tall pole jutting into the sky, much like a church steeple, making them stand out and be easy to find. Frequently they were built on banks of rivers, sometimes—as the one whose ruins are a popular attraction in modern Capernaum—without a roof.

Worship was held every Sabbath, which began at sundown on Friday and ended at sundown on Saturday. The Jews had special services on the second and fifth days of every week and observed the festivals prescribed in the law as well as numerous others that had developed by tradition. During the Sabbath services, sections of the Torah (law) and the prophets were read. That was followed by various prayers, singing, and responses. Then a text of Scripture would be expounded, possibly following the pattern begun by Ezra after the return from Babylon (see Neh. 8:1-8). Often visiting dignitaries or rabbis would be given the honor of expounding the Scripture, a practice of which both Jesus and Paul took advantage on numerous occasions (see Luke 4:16-17; Acts 13:15-16).

The affairs of the average village synagogue were usually administered by ten elders of the congregation, of whom three were called rulers. The rulers decided whether or not to admit a proselyte into fellowship and settled disputes of all sorts. A fourth ruler, called the angel, served as chairman of the synagogue. Some of the elders functioned as servers, carrying out the decisions of the four rulers. One elder interpreted the ancient Hebrew into the vernacular, one headed the theological school, which every synagogue had, and one served as a popular instructor, teaching on a level that the average member could understand.

During Roman rule the synagogue officials had the power to settle virtually every legal dispute within their congregations and even to inflict punishment, with the one exception of execution. That is why the Jewish leaders needed Pilate's permission to crucify Jesus. Even the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of Jerusalem, had no such right.

The synagogue served as public school for boys, where they studied the Talmud and learned to read, write, and do basic arithmetic. For men, the synagogue was a place of advanced theological study.

The **synagogues of Galilee** provided Jesus with His first platforms for **teaching**. In almost every community of any size He would have found

a synagogue, and in the early part of His ministry He was welcomed in most of them. As a visiting rabbi He was often asked to read and expound Scripture, as He readily did (see Luke 4:16-21).

It was in the synagogues that believing, sincere Israelites would be found. Here, if anywhere, Jesus could expect to find those who would hear and accept His divine message. Here is where God's faithful remnant came to worship God and to be taught His Word.

Teaching is from *didaskō*, from which we get didactic and which refers to the passing on of information—often, but not necessarily, in a formal setting. It focused on content, with the purpose of discovering the truth—contrary to the forums so popular among Greeks, where discussion and the bantering about of various ideas and opinions was the primary concern (see Acts 17:21). Synagogue teaching, as illustrated by that of Jesus, was basically expository. Scripture was read and explained section by section, often verse by verse.

PREACHING

and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom (4:23b)

Proclaiming is from a term (*kērussō*) often translated “to preach.” The root idea is to herald, or cry out. Whereas *didaskō* relates to explaining a message, *kērussō* relates simply to announcing it. While interpreting the Old Testament in His teaching He also was **proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom**, announcing the fact that God's long-promised Messiah and King had come to establish His **kingdom**. He continued and extended the heralding that John the Baptist had begun.

That which is proclaimed is the *kērugma* (Matt. 12:41; Rom. 16:25; Titus 1:3; etc.), and that which is taught is the *didachē* (Matt. 7:28; Rom. 16:17; etc.). The message proclaimed needs to be explained, and vice versa.

Gospel means “good news,” and it was the good news that the **kingdom** was coming that Jesus preached throughout Galilee. That was

the supreme truth, the great good news, around which all of His teaching centered. From His baptism to His ascension Jesus preached the kingdom. “Until the day when He was taken up” Luke tells us, Jesus was “speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:2-3). He never allowed Himself to get sidetracked into economics, social issues, politics, or personal disputes. His teaching and preaching focused entirely on expounding God’s Word and proclaiming God’s kingdom—a sound pattern for every faithful messenger of the gospel.

John the Baptist heralded the kingdom, but not **the gospel of the kingdom**. Good news as such was not the primary feature in his preaching. His preaching called men to repent of their sins and to prepare themselves for the coming of the King (3:1-10). He focused on sin and judgment. His was the bad news that pointed up the graciousness of the good news about to come. When Jesus’ ministry was more and more resisted by the Jewish leaders, His preaching became more and more stern, even sterner than that of John the Baptist. As hypocrisy became more evident and hostility became more vehement, Jesus’ words became more harsh.

But the King’s first proclamation was of good news, God’s marvelous offer to deliver “us from the domain of darkness, and [to transfer] us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13-14). The **gospel** is the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, the good news that God’s **kingdom** (the sphere of God’s rule by the grace of salvation) is open to anyone who puts his trust in the King.

The Jews were then under the rule of Rome, and before that they had been under the Greeks, the Medes and Persians, and the Babylonians. Even when they had their own kingdom and their own kings, their condition was far from ideal. Because they were not satisfied to have the Lord as their King, they insisted on having human kings, like all the other nations (1 Sam. 12:12). But those kings brought little peace, prosperity, or happiness, and much sorrow, tragedy, and corruption.

When Jesus preached and taught, He was announcing that He was the King who had come to bring God’s promised perfect kingdom. Had they accepted the One who now proclaimed the good news of the kingdom to them, the Jews could have had that kingdom established in their midst. Had they accepted Jesus as the Messiah, His kingdom then would have

come on earth. But because they rejected the King and His **gospel**, they rejected the earthly, promised **kingdom**.

Jesus spoke powerful words, eternal words, words like no man before had ever spoken. Even the people in His hometown of Nazareth “were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips” (Luke 4:22). When He went down to Capernaum, “they were amazed at His teaching, for His message was with authority” (v. 32). Jesus’ cleverest enemies could never trap Him in His words, or confuse Him or confound Him or find any error in what He said. His teaching and His preaching about the kingdom were the divine credentials of His words.

HEALING

and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. And the news about Him went out into all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, taken with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them. And great multitudes followed Him from Galilee and Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan. (4:23c-25)

Some people are sick and unhealthy because of their own foolish habits, whereas others suffer as a direct consequence of their sin. God sometimes uses physical affliction to discipline His people. Many of the Corinthian Christians were weak, sick, and had even died because they profaned the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:30). Ananias and Sapphira lost their lives for lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-10). Yet Scripture makes it equally clear that all suffering and disease are not caused by sin, ignorance, errors in judgment, or God’s discipline. Job suffered greatly, though he was blameless, upright, feared God, and turned away from evil (Job 1:1). When Jesus’ disciples assumed that the man who was born blind was being punished either for his own sin or that of his parents, Jesus corrected them. “It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it

was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:1-3).

Jesus’ **healing** was a divine verification. His words should have been sufficient evidence of His messiahship, as they were for those who truly believed. The disciples left everything to follow Jesus before He performed a miracle of any sort. Many heard Him and believed in Him who had no need of healing for themselves or for their family or friends. It is possible that many who heard and believed in Christ never saw Him perform a miracle—just as many believed John the Baptist’s message, although “John performed no sign” (John 10:41).

Yet Jesus’ healing ministry was a powerful addition to the evidence of His teaching and preaching. Alexander Maclaren said, “It may be doubted whether we have an adequate notion of the immense number of Christ’s miracles. Those recorded are but a small portion of those done. Those early ones were illustrations of the nature of His kingdom; they were His first gifts to His kingdom subjects.” The writer of Hebrews says of the gospel of the kingdom that “after it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will” (Heb. 2:3-4). Like Jesus’ words, the miracles were a foretaste of His glorious, earthly kingdom. To get some idea of what the millennial kingdom will be like we need only multiply His words and His miracles ten-thousandfold.

Jesus healed every **kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people**. This universal character of the healings is expanded and illustrated in the following verse: **And the news about Him went out into all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, taken with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them.**

In Jesus’ day **Syria** was a Roman province that took in all of Palestine, including Galilee. In the context of this verse, however, it may refer only to the northern part, of which Damascus was the major city. In any case, the point is that Jesus’ fame spread well beyond the area in which He was ministering. From a wide surrounding area the people **brought to Him all who were ill**, in hope that He would heal them.

Until modern times, with our great advances in sanitary and medical knowledge, disease was frequently rampant. Plagues stopped only

when they had run their natural course, leaving behind countless dead and many others who were disfigured or crippled. Simple infections often became life-threatening. It is not strange, therefore, that news of a healer who could cure any affliction spread like wildfire.

As representative of the **various diseases and pains**, Matthew mentions three specific types that Jesus healed. **Diseases** signifies the many maladies, whereas **pains** refers to the many symptoms.

The first type of malady was that suffered by **demoniacs**, those whose afflictions were caused by demons. It is clear from Scripture, especially the New Testament, that many physical and mental afflictions are caused directly by Satan through the operation of his demons. Chapters 9, 12, and 17 of Matthew, and chapters 9 of Mark and 13 of Luke give abundant evidence of demon-related afflictions. The ability to cast out demons is often referred to as the gift of miracles (literally, “powers”; 1 Cor. 12:10, 28-29), the divine power given specifically to combat the demonic powers of darkness (see Luke 9:1; 10:17-19; Acts 8:6-7; cf. Eph. 6:12).

The second group that Jesus healed were **epileptics**. The King James renders the original (*selēniazō*) as “lunatic,” which, like the Greek, literally means “moonstruck.” In many cultures the mentally ill and those who have convulsions or seizures have been thought to be under the influence of the moon. From other biblical references, such as Matthew 17:15, as well as from descriptions of the affliction in other ancient literature, it is almost certain that the disease was epilepsy, which involves disorder of the central nervous system.

The third group were the **paralytics**, a general term representing a wide range of crippling handicaps. The three terms Matthew uses characterize the three broad areas of man’s afflictions—the spiritual, the mental/nervous, and the physical. Jesus was able to overpower whatever evil afflicted those who came to Him. The earthly aspect of His kingdom will have no place for anything harmful, anything wicked, anything less than perfect wholeness and perfect goodness. “On that day the deaf shall hear, . . . the eyes of the blind shall see. The afflicted also shall increase their gladness in the Lord, and the needy of mankind shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel” (Isa. 29:18-19; cf. 11:6-9). **They brought to Him all who were ill, . . . and He healed them.**

The great reformed theologian B. B. Warfield said, “When our Lord came down to earth He drew heaven with Him. The signs which accompanied His ministry were but the trailing clouds of glory which He brought from heaven, which is His home. The number of the miracles which He wrought may easily be underrated. It has been said that in effect He banished disease and death from Palestine for the three years of His ministry. One touch of the hem of His garment that He wore could heal whole countries of their pain. One touch of His hand could restore life.”

Jesus’ miracles accomplished four things above and beyond the immediate and obvious benefit to those who were healed. First, they proved that He was divine, because no mere human being could do such things. “Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me,” Jesus told Philip; “otherwise believe on account of the works themselves” (John 14:11).

Second, the wondrous healings showed that God is compassionate toward those who suffer.

Third, the miracles showed that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah, because the Old Testament predicted that the Messiah would perform miracles. When John the Baptist was imprisoned and began to have doubts about Jesus’ messiahship, Jesus told John’s disciples, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matt. 11:4-5). That Jesus did these things predicted of the Messiah (see Isaiah 35:5-10; 61:1-3; etc.) proved His messiahship.

Fourth, the miracles proved that the coming kingdom was a reality, the wonders and signs being a foretaste of the marvelous realm God has in store for those who are His. “And Jesus was going about all the cities and the villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of sickness” (Matt. 9:35). A short while later Jesus committed the same message and accompanying powers to His disciples: “And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; freely you received, freely give” (Matt. 10:7-8). A while after that, He pointedly told the disbelieving Pharisees, “If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (12:28).

I am convinced that the only time such miracles will again be performed is just before the millennial kingdom arrives, when the Lord regathers Israel and the tribulation begins. Then, just as at Christ's (Messiah's) first coming, "the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy" (Isa. 35:5-6). When Israel rejected the King at His first coming she also rejected the kingdom. But when the King comes again, the coming of His kingdom will not depend on men's response. He will establish it then. It will be announced "among the nations, 'The Lord reigns; indeed, the world is firmly established, it will not be moved'" (Ps. 96:10).

To demonstrate the absoluteness of His power and authority, Jesus **healed** everyone who came to Him during His earthly ministry, without exception and without limit. He still has power to heal today, with the same absoluteness and completeness; and, as He sovereignly chooses, He does so. But He does not promise to heal everyone who now asks Him, not even those who belong to Him. The healing miracles He performed while on earth, like His other miracles and those of the apostles, were temporary authenticating signs to Israel that her Messiah had come. The Scripture now stands to attest to the promise of a coming earthly kingdom.

Six features of Jesus' healing have never been duplicated since New Testament times. First, Jesus healed directly, with a word or a touch, without prayer and sometimes even without being near the afflicted person. Second, Jesus healed instantaneously. There was no waiting for restoration to come in stages. Third, He healed completely, never partially. Fourth, He healed everyone who came to Him, everyone who was brought to Him, and everyone for whom healing was asked by another. He healed without discrimination as to person or affliction. Fifth, Jesus healed organic and congenital problems, no matter how severe or longstanding. Sixth, He brought people back to life. He healed even after disease had run its full course and taken the life of its victim.

Those six features also characterized the healing ministry of the apostles. At the beginning of the book of Acts we are told of many miracles and signs that the apostles performed. Yet before the end of the book the accounts of miracles cease. The same diminishing is seen in the epistles. In his early ministry Paul performed many miracles of healing, but years later he simply advised Timothy to take some wine for his

stomach ailment (1 Tim. 5:23). At the end of his next letter to Timothy the apostle reports that “Trophimus I left sick at Miletus” (2 Tim. 4:20), apparently beyond the power of Paul to help. There is no scriptural evidence that, by the end of the apostolic age, miracles of any sort were still performed. Once Israel had turned her back on her Messiah, her divine King, the authenticating signs of the kingdom had no more purpose. They faded and then disappeared altogether.

The **great multitudes** who **followed Him** no doubt came for many reasons besides healing for themselves or others. Many came primarily to hear Him teach and preach, and many no doubt came out of mere curiosity. But they came in great numbers and from great distances. **Decapolis** was a region composed of ten major cities (hence the name, which literally means “ten cities”) located east and south of **Galilee**. **Beyond the Jordan** probably referred to areas such as Perea, which was south of **Decapolis** and east of **Jerusalem and Judea**.

Many of that **great multitude** believed in Jesus and were saved, experiencing the kingdom inwardly, the rule of God through the grace of salvation. The vast majority, however, Jew and Gentile alike, did not believe in Him. They listened to what He said, watched what He did, and received temporary blessings. But they did not accept the One who spoke and who healed, whose words and works not only give blessing but eternal life.

The Great Sermon of the Great King, (5:1-2)

And when He saw the multitudes, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. And opening His mouth He began to teach them, saying, (5:1-2)

Until this point in Matthew, Jesus' words have been limited (4:17,19) and reference to His teachings general (4:23). Now, in one powerfully comprehensive yet compact message, the Lord sets forth the foundational truths of the gospel of the kingdom He came to proclaim.

Here begins what has traditionally been called the Sermon on the Mount. Though Jesus repeated many of these truths on other occasions, chapters 5-7 record one continuous message of the Lord, delivered at one specific time. As we will see, these were revolutionary truths to the minds of those Jewish religionists who heard them, and have continued to explode with great impact on the minds of readers for nearly two thousand years.

Here is the manifesto of the new Monarch, who ushers in a new age with a new message.

THE CONTEXT

THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT

The King's new message was closely related to the message of the Old Testament and was, in fact, a reaffirmation of it. Yet the emphasis of the gospel (which means "good news") was radically different from the current understanding of the Old Testament—an astounding clarification of what Moses, David, the prophets, and other inspired writers of God's Word had revealed. In addition to that, Christ's message struck violently against the Jewish tradition of His day.

The last message in the Old Testament is, "And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse" (Mal. 4:6). By contrast, this first great sermon of the New Testament begins with a series of blessings, which we call the Beatitudes (5:3-12). The Old Testament ends with the warning of a curse; the New Testament begins with the promise of blessing. The Old Testament was characterized by Mount Sinai, with its law, its thunder and lightning, and its warnings of judgment and cursing. The New Testament is characterized by Mount Zion, with its grace, its salvation and healing, and its promises of peace and blessing (cf. Heb. 12:18-24).

The Old Testament law demonstrates man's need of salvation, and the New Testament message offers the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord had to begin with a proper presentation of the law, so the people would recognize their sin—then could come the offer of salvation. The Sermon on the Mount clarifies the reasons for the curse and shows that man has no righteousness that can survive the scrutiny of God. The new message offers blessing, and that is the Lord's opening offer.

As will be developed in the next chapter, however, the blessedness Christ offers is not dependent on self-effort or self-righteousness, but on the new nature God gives. In God's Son man comes to share God's very nature, which is characterized by true righteousness and its consequence—blessedness, or happiness. In Christ we partake of the very bliss of God Himself! That is the kind and the extent of the contentment God wants His children to have—His very own peace and happiness. So the Lord begins with the offer of blessedness and then proceeds to demonstrate that human righteousness, such as the Jews sought, cannot produce it. The good news is that of blessing. The bad news is that man cannot achieve it, no matter how self-righteous and religious he is.

The Old Testament is the book of Adam, whose story is tragic. Adam not only was the first man on earth but the first king. He was given dominion over all the earth, to subdue and rule it (Gen. 1:28). But that first monarch fell soon after he began to rule, and his fall brought a curse—the curse with which the Old Testament both begins and ends.

The New Testament begins with the presentation of the new sovereign Man, One who will not fall and One who brings blessing rather than cursing. The second Adam is also the last Adam, and after Him will come no other ruler, no other sovereign. The first king sinned and left a curse; the second King was sinless and leaves a blessing. As one writer has put it, the first Adam was tested in a beautiful garden and failed; the last Adam was tested in a threatening wilderness and succeeded. Because the first Adam was a thief, he was cast out of paradise; but the last Adam turned to a thief on a cross and said, “Today you shall be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). The Old Testament, the book of the generations of Adam, ends with a curse; the New Testament, the book of the generations of Jesus Christ, ends with the promise, “There shall no longer be any curse” (Rev. 22:3). The Old Testament gave the law to show man in his misery, and the New Testament gives life to show man in his bliss.

In Jesus Christ a new reality dawned on history. A new Man and new King of the earth came to reverse the terrible curse of the first king. The Sermon on the Mount is the masterful revelation from the great King, offering blessing instead of cursing to those who come on His terms to true righteousness.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

Most Jews of Jesus’ day expected the Messiah to be, first of all, a military and political leader who would deliver them from the yoke of Rome and establish a prosperous Jewish kingdom that would lead the world. He would be greater than any king, leader, or prophet in their history. After Jesus miraculously fed the multitude on the far side of the Sea of Galilee, the people tried “to come and take Him by force, to make Him king” (John 6:15). They saw Jesus as the anticipated leader of a great welfare state in which even their routine physical needs would be provided. But Jesus would not allow Himself to be mistaken for that sort

of king, and He disappeared from the crowd. Later, when Pilate asked Jesus, “Are You the King of the Jews?” the Lord replied, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm” (John 18:36).

The thrust of the Sermon on the Mount is that the message and work of the King are first and most importantly internal and not external, and spiritual and moral rather than physical and political. Here we find no politics or social reform. His concern is for what men are, because what they are determines what they do.

The ideals and principles in the Sermon on the Mount are utterly contrary to those of human societies and governments. In Christ’s kingdom the most exalted persons are those who are the lowliest in the world’s estimation, and vice versa. Jesus declared that John the Baptist was the greatest man who had ever lived until that time. Yet John had no possessions and no home, lived in the wilderness, dressed in a hair garment, and ate locusts and wild honey. He was not a part of the religious system, and he had no financial, military, or political power. In addition to that, he preached a message that in the world’s eyes was completely irrelevant and absurd. By worldly standards he was a misfit and a failure. Yet he received the Lord’s highest praise.

In Jesus’ kingdom the least are greater even than John the Baptist (Matt. 11:11). They are characterized in this sermon as being humble, compassionate, meek, yearning for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers—and persecuted for the sake of the very righteousness they practice. In the world’s eyes those characteristics are the marks of losers. The world says, “Assert yourself, stand up for yourself, be proud of yourself, elevate yourself, defend yourself, avenge yourself, serve yourself.” Those are the treasured traits of the world’s people and the world’s kingdoms.

THE RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

Jesus lived in a highly complex religious society, one that included many professional religionists. Those professionals were in four primary groups: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Zealots. At this

point, it is only necessary to introduce these groups briefly. Later chapters will unfold more of their distinctives.

The Pharisees believed that right religion consisted in divine laws and religious tradition. Their primary concern was for fastidious observance of the Mosaic law and of every minute detail of the traditions handed down by various rabbis over the centuries. They focused on adhering to the laws of the past.

The Sadducees focused on the present. They were the religious liberals who discounted most things supernatural and who modified both Scripture and tradition to fit their own religious philosophy.

The Essenes were ascetics who believed that right religion meant separation from the rest of society. They led austere lives in remote, barren areas such as Qumran, on the northwest edge of the Dead Sea.

The Zealots were fanatical nationalists who thought that right religion centered in radical political activism. These Jewish revolutionaries looked down on fellow Jews who would not take up arms against Rome.

In essence, the Pharisees said, “Go back”; the Sadducees said, “Go ahead”; the Essenes said, “Go away”; and the Zealots said, “Go against.” The Pharisees were traditionalists; the Sadducees were modernists; the Essenes were separatists; and the Zealots were activists. They represented the same primary types of religious factions that are common today.

But Jesus’ way was not any of those. To the Pharisees He said that true spirituality is internal, not external. To the Sadducees He said that it is God’s way, not man’s way. To the Essenes He said that it is a matter of the heart, not the body. To the Zealots He said that it is a matter of worship, not revolution. The central thrust of His message to every group and every person, of whatever persuasion or inclination, was that the way of His kingdom is first and above all a matter of the inside—the soul. That is the central focus of the Sermon on the Mount. True religion in God’s kingdom is not a question of ritual, of philosophy, of location, or of military might—but of right attitude toward God and toward other people. The Lord summed it up in the words “I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20).

The dominant message of the Sermon on the Mount is that one must not find comfort merely in right theology, much less in contemporary

philosophy, geographical separation, or military and political activism. Right theology is essential; so are being contemporary in the right way, separating ourselves from worldliness, and taking stands on moral issues. But those external things must flow from right internal life and attitudes if they are to serve and please God. That has always been God's way. He told Samuel, "God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). In Proverbs, wisdom says, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life" (4:23).

When the Pharisees with whom Jesus was having lunch were bothered that He did not ceremonially wash His hands before eating, Jesus said, "Now you Pharisees have the habit of cleaning the outside of your cups and dishes, but inside you yourselves are full of greed and wickedness. You fools! Did not the One who made the outside make the inside too? But dedicate once for all your inner self, and at once you will have everything clean" (Luke 11:39-41, Williams). That was His message for every sect of Judaism.

THE IMPORTANCE

In light of the preceding truths we can see at least five reasons why the Sermon on the Mount is important. First, it shows the absolute necessity of the new birth. Its standards are much too high and demanding to be met by human power. Only those who partake of God's own nature through Jesus Christ can fulfill such demands. The standards of the Sermon on the Mount go far beyond those of Moses in the law, demanding not only righteous actions but righteous attitudes—not just that men *do* right but that they *be* right. No part of Scripture more clearly shows man's desperate situation without God.

Second, the sermon intends to drive the listener to Jesus Christ as man's only hope of meeting God's standards. If man cannot live up to the divine standard, he needs a supernatural power to enable him. The proper response to the sermon leads to Christ.

Third, the sermon gives God's pattern for happiness and for true success. It reveals the standards, the objectives, and the motivations that,

with God's help, will fulfill what God has designed man to be. Here we find the way of joy, peace, and contentment.

Fourth, the sermon is perhaps the greatest scriptural resource for witnessing, for reaching others for Christ. A Christian who personifies these principles of Jesus will be a spiritual magnet, attracting others to the Lord who empowers him to live as he does. The life obedient to the principles of the Sermon on the Mount is the church's greatest tool for evangelism.

Fifth, the life obedient to the maxims of this proclamation is the only life that is pleasing to God. That is the believer's highest reason for following Jesus' teaching—it pleases God.

THE SETTING

And when He saw the multitudes, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. (5:1)

Jesus was always concerned for **the multitudes**, for whom He had great compassion—whether they were “distressed and downcast” (Matt. 9:36), sick (14:14; cf. 4:23), hungry (15:32), or in any other need. Whether the people were physically ill or healthy, emotionally stable or demon-possessed, financially poor or rich, politically oppressed or powerful, religiously insignificant or influential, intellectually ignorant or educated, Jesus had compassion on them. Jesus attracted all strata of people because He loved them all.

Everything Jesus said on this occasion was spoken publicly, to **the multitudes** (cf. 7:28-29). His intention was to drive them to a recognition of their sin, and thus to the need of a Savior, which He had come to be. Until they believed in Him, the demands of the sermon could only show them how terribly far they were from meeting God's standards. This masterful evangelistic sermon is designed to confront men with their desperate condition of sinfulness.

THE PREACHER

It was Jesus who **saw the multitudes, ... went up on the mountain; and ... sat down.** God's own Son delivered the sermon. The greatest Preacher who ever lived preached the greatest sermon ever preached. When **He** concluded, "the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (7:28-29). He quoted no sources, no ancient rabbis, no revered tradition. What He spoke, He spoke on His own authority. That was unheard of among the Jews, who always derived their authority from recognized sources.

The Sermon on the Mount is the supreme model of good preaching, a homiletical masterpiece. It beautifully and powerfully flows from the introduction (5:3-12) to the first point (the citizens of the kingdom, 5:13-16), to the second point (the righteousness of the kingdom, 5:17—7:12), to the third point (the exhortation to enter the kingdom, 7:13-27), and to the conclusion (the effect of the sermon on its hearers, 7:28-29). The transitions from point to point are clear and unmistakable.

At the beginning of his ministry Ezekiel was told by the Lord, "I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be dumb, and cannot be a man who rebukes them, for they are a rebellious house" (Ezek. 3:26). Much later the same prophet testified, "Now the hand of the Lord had been upon me in the evening, before the refugees came. And He opened my mouth at the time they came to me in the morning; so my mouth was opened, and I was no longer speechless" (33:22). Like Ezekiel, Jesus did not display His truth, His wisdom, and His power until it was time in God's sovereign will for Him to do so.

THE LOCATION

The sanctuary for the greatest sermon ever preached was **the mountain.** As far as we know, this mountain—really a large hill—had no name until Jesus preached there. Until then it had been but one of many hills that slope up gently from the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. What

had been simply *a* mountain among many other mountains now became **the mountain**, sanctified and set apart by the presence of the Lord. For many centuries the traditional site has been called the Mount of Beatitudes.

THE STYLE

A rabbi commonly **sat down** when he taught. If he spoke while standing or walking, what he said was considered to be informal and unofficial. But when he sat down, what he said was authoritative and official. Even today we speak of professors holding a “chair” in a university, signifying the honored position from which they teach. When the Roman Catholic pope gives an official pronouncement, he is said to speak *ex cathedra*, which literally means to speak from his chair. When Jesus **sat down** and delivered the Sermon on the Mount, He spoke from His divine chair with absolute authority as the sovereign King.

As mentioned above, the multitudes were an important audience for this evangelistic sermon. But the standards of spiritual life that Jesus gave here could not apply to them or be followed by them unless they belonged to Him.

That **His disciples came to Him** indicates they were also His audience. In fact, the twelve were the only ones at that time who, to any real extent, could know the blessedness of which the Lord spoke and follow the perfect way of righteousness which He set forth. They were the only ones who had partaken of the inner divine power and presence that are absolutely necessary for obeying God’s perfect will. So the sermon not only showed the multitude the standard of God’s righteousness that they could not keep, but it also showed the disciples the possible standard they could now keep because of His coming and their faith in Him.

An archbishop of the Church of England once remarked that it would be impossible to conduct the affairs of Britain on the basis of the Sermon on the Mount, because the nation was not loyal to the King. The sermon of the King can be understood and followed only by faithful subjects of the King.

The famous historian Will Durant said that in any given generation only a handful of people make an impression on the world that lasts more than a few years. The person who stands out above all others, he said, is Jesus Christ. Jesus undoubtedly has had the most powerful and permanent influence on the thought of mankind. But, the historian went on to say, His teachings have not had a corresponding effect on man's actions.

Trying to apply Jesus' teachings without receiving Him as Lord and Savior is futile. Those, for example, who promote the social gospel, endeavoring to institute Jesus' teachings apart from His saving and regenerating work, prove only that His principles cannot work for those who do not have a transformed nature and God's indwelling power. One cannot behave like Christ until one becomes like Christ. Those who do not love the King cannot live like the King.

THE CONTENT

And opening His mouth He began to teach them, saying, (5:2)

Matthew's speaking of Jesus' **opening His mouth as He began to teach them** was not a superfluous statement of the obvious, but was a common colloquialism used to introduce a message that was especially solemn and important. It was also used to indicate intimate, heartfelt testimony or sharing. Jesus' sermon was both authoritative and intimate; it was of the utmost importance and was delivered with the utmost concern.

In this sermon our Lord establishes a standard of living counter to everything the world practices and holds dear. To live by the standards He gives here is to live a life of blessed happiness. Here is an utterly new approach to living, one that results in joy instead of despair, in peace instead of conflict—a peace that the world does not understand and cannot have (John 14:27; Phil. 4:7). It is a blessedness not produced by the world or by circumstances, and it cannot be taken away by the world or by circumstances. It is not produced externally and cannot be destroyed externally.

Because of its seemingly impossible demands, many evangelicals maintain that the Sermon on the Mount pertains only to the kingdom age, the Millennium. Otherwise, they argue, how could Jesus command us to be perfect, just as our “heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48)? For several reasons, however, that interpretation cannot be correct. First of all, the text does not indicate or imply that these teachings are for another age. Second, Jesus demanded them of people who were not living in the Millennium. Third, many of the teachings themselves become meaningless if they are applied to the Millennium. For example, there will be no persecution of believers (see 5:10-12, 44) during the kingdom age. Fourth, every principle taught in the Sermon on the Mount is also taught elsewhere in the New Testament in contexts that clearly apply to believers of our present age. Fifth, there are many New Testament passages that command equally impossible standards, which unglorified human strength cannot continually achieve (see Rom. 13:14; 2 Cor. 7:1; Phil. 1:9-10; Col. 3:1-2; Heb. 12:14; 1 Pet. 1:15-16).

The teachings of the Sermon on the Mount are for believers today, marking the distinctive life-style that should characterize the direction, if not the perfection, of the lives of Christians of every age. Unfortunately, those standards do not always characterize Christians. The world’s standards and objectives too often have engulfed believers and conformed them to its own image, squeezed them into its own mold (see Rom. 12:2, Phillips).

Jesus’ new way of living comes from a new way of thinking, and the new way of thinking comes from new life. Here are God’s standards for those created in His own image and recreated into the image of His own dear Son (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:18). Those who do not follow them as a general direction of life have an unacceptable righteousness (Matt. 5:20).

Who knows more about a product than the manufacturer? When you buy a new power tool or appliance the first sensible thing to do is read the owner’s manual. The manufacturer prints those manuals to explain what the item is designed to do and not do, how it is to be cared for, what its limitations are, and so on. God has made every human being, yet few turn to their Maker to find meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in their lives, to learn how they are to live and how they are to take care of themselves—how they can function properly and happily as they were designed to do.

As the Sermon on the Mount itself makes clear, internal changes also bring external changes. When our attitudes and thinking are right, our actions will fall in line. If our inner life does not make our outer life better, our inner life is deficient or nonexistent. “Faith without works is useless “James says (James 2:20). Paul tells us that we are “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

But the true outside life can only be produced from a true inside life. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones compares the Christian life to playing music. A person may play Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata* accurately and without a single mistake—yet not really play what the composer had in mind. Even though the notes are played correctly, they do not produce the sonata. The pianist may mechanically strike the right notes at the right time, yet miss the essence, the soul, of the composition. He may not at all express what Beethoven meant to be expressed. The true artist must play the right notes at the right time. He is not exempt from the rules and principles of music. But accurate playing is not what makes him a great musician. It is his expression of what lies behind the notes that entralls his listeners. In the same way, faithful Christians are concerned about the letter of God’s Word; but beyond that they are also concerned about the spirit, the deeper will and purpose that lie behind the letter. That concern reveals an obedient heart filled with the desire to glorify the Lord.

To claim to follow the spirit without obeying the letter is to be a liar. To follow the letter without following the spirit is to be a hypocrite. To follow the spirit in the right attitude and the letter in the right action is to be a faithful child of God and a loyal subject of the King.

Happy Are the Humble (5:3)

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (5:3)

THE BEATITUDES

The series of conditional blessings promised in Matthew 5:3-12 have long been called the Beatitudes, a name derived from Latin and referring to a state of happiness or bliss. Jesus presents the possibility of people being genuinely happy, and that available happiness is the opening theme of the Sermon on the Mount. Many people, including some Christians, find that hard to believe. How could a message as demanding and impossible as the Sermon on the Mount be intended to make people happy? Yet the first and greatest sermon preached by Jesus Christ begins with the resounding and repeated theme of happiness, a fitting start for the New Testament's "good news."

Far from being the cosmic killjoy that many accuse Him of being, God desires to save men from their tragic lostness, to give them power to obey His will, and to make them happy. In this great sermon, His Son carefully and clearly sets forth the way of blessedness for those who come to Him.

Makarios (**blessed**) means happy, fortunate, blissful. Homer used the word to describe a wealthy man, and Plato used it of one who is successful in business. Both Homer and Hesiod spoke of the Greek gods as being happy (*makarios*) within themselves, because they were unaffected by the world of men—who were subject to poverty, disease, weakness,

misfortune, and death. The fullest meaning of the term, therefore, had to do with an inward contentedness that is not affected by circumstances. That is the kind of happiness God desires for His children, a state of joy and well-being that does not depend on physical, temporary circumstances (cf. Phil. 4:11-13).

The word **blessed** is often used of God Himself, as when David ended one of his psalms with the declaration “Blessed be God!” (Ps. 68:35). His son Solomon sang, “Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone works wonders” (Ps. 72:18). Paul spoke of “the glorious gospel of the blessed God” (1 Tim. 1:11) and of Jesus Christ “who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords” (6:15). Blessedness is a characteristic of God, and it can be a characteristic of men only as they share in the nature of God. There is no blessedness, no perfect contentedness and joy of the sort of which Jesus speaks here, except that which comes from a personal relationship to Him, through whose “magnificent promises” we “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4).

Because blessedness is fundamentally an element of the character of God, when men partake of His nature through Jesus Christ they partake of His blessedness. So it becomes clear at the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus is speaking of a reality that is only for believers. Others can see the kingdom standards and get a glimpse of kingdom blessings, but only those who belong to the kingdom have the promise of personally receiving and experiencing the blessings. To be **blessed** is not a superficial feeling of well-being based on circumstance, but a deep supernatural experience of contentedness based on the fact that one’s life is right with God. Blessedness is based on objective reality, realized in the miracle of transformation to a new and divine nature.

The Beatitudes seem paradoxical. The conditions and their corresponding blessings do not seem to match. By normal human standards such things as humility, mourning, desire for righteousness, mercy, and persecution are not the stuff of which happiness is made. To the natural man, and to the immature or carnal Christian, such happiness sounds like misery with another name. As one commentator has observed, it is much as if Jesus went into the great display window of life and changed all the price tags.

In a way, happiness *is* misery with another name; Jesus *has* changed the price tags. He teaches that misery endured for the right purpose and in the right way *is* the key to happiness. That basic principle summarizes the Beatitudes. The world says, “Happy are the rich, the noble, the successful, the macho, the glamorous, the popular, the famous, the aggressive.” But the message from the King does not fit the world’s standards, because His kingdom is not of this world but of heaven. His way to happiness, which is the *only* way to true happiness, is by a much different route.

Seneca, the first-century Roman philosopher who tutored Nero, wisely wrote, “What is more shameful than to equate the rational soul’s good with that which is irrational?” His point was that you cannot satisfy a rational, personal need with an irrational, impersonal object. External things cannot satisfy internal needs.

Yet that is exactly the philosophy of the world: things satisfy. Acquiring things brings happiness, achieving things brings meaning, doing things brings satisfaction.

Solomon, the wisest and most magnificent of ancient kings, tried the world’s way to happiness for many years. He had the royal blood of his father, David, coursing through his veins. He had vast amounts of gold and jewels and “made silver as common as stones in Jerusalem” (1 Kings 10:27). He had fleets of ships and stables filled with thousands of the finest horses. He had hundreds of wives, gathered from the most beautiful women of many lands. He ate the most sumptuous of foods on the finest of tableware in the most elegant of palaces with the most distinguished people. He was acclaimed throughout the world for his wisdom, power, and wealth. Solomon should have been immeasurably happy. Yet that king, so great and blessed by earthly standards, concluded that his life was purposeless and empty. The theme of Ecclesiastes, Solomon’s personal testimony on the human situation, is “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?” (1:2-3).

Jesus came to announce that the tree of happiness cannot grow in a cursed earth. Earthly things cannot bring even lasting earthly happiness, much less eternal happiness. “Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed,” Jesus warned; “for not even when one has an abundance

does his life consist of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). Physical things simply cannot touch the soul, the inner person.

It should be pointed out that the opposite is also true: spiritual things cannot satisfy physical needs. When someone is hungry he needs food, not a lecture on grace. When he is hurt he needs medical attention, not moral advice. True spiritual concern for such people will express itself first of all in providing for their physical needs. “Whoever has the world’s goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1 John 3:17).

But the more common danger is trying to meet almost *every* need with physical things. That philosophy is as futile as it is unscriptural. When King Saul was distressed, his jewels and his army could give him no help. When King Belshazzar was having a great feast with his nobles, wives, and concubines, he suddenly saw a hand writing on the wall, “MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.” He was so terrified that his “face grew pale, and his thoughts alarmed him; and his hip joints went slack, and his knees began knocking together.” His military power, his influential allies, and his great possessions could give him no solace (Dan. 5:3-6, 25).

The great Puritan saint Thomas Watson wrote, “The things of the world will no more keep out trouble of spirit, than a paper scone will keep out a bullet.... Worldly delights are winged. They may be compared to a flock of birds in the garden, that stay a little while, but when you come near to them they take their flight and are gone. So ‘riches make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven’” (*The Beatitudes* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971], p. 27). The writer of Proverbs said, “Do not weary yourself to gain wealth, cease from your consideration of it. When you set your eyes on it, it is gone” (Prov. 23:4-5).

Tragically, many preachers, teachers, and writers today “who must be silenced” (Titus 1:11) are passing off worldly philosophy in the name of Christianity—claiming that faithfulness to Christ guarantees health, wealth, success, prestige, and prosperity. But Jesus taught no such thing. What He taught was nearer the opposite. He warned that physical, worldly advantages most often limit true happiness. The things of the world become fuel for pride, lust, and self-satisfaction—the enemies not only of righteousness but of happiness. “The worry of the world, and the

deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful,” Jesus said (Matt. 13:22).

To expect happiness from the things of this world is like seeking the living among the dead, just as the women sought Christ at the garden tomb on that first Easter morning. The angels told the women, “He is not here, but He has risen” (Luke 24:6). Paul said, “If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth” (Col. 3:1-2). John said, “Do not love the world, nor the things in the world.... And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:15,17).

True blessedness is on a higher level than anything in the world, and it is to that level that the Sermon on the Mount takes us. Here is a completely new way of life, based on a completely new way of thinking. It is in fact based on a new way of being. The standard of righteousness, and therefore the standard of happiness, is the standard of selflessness—a standard that is completely opposite to man’s fallen impulses and unregenerate nature.

It is impossible to follow Jesus’ new way of living without having His new life within. As someone has suggested, one might as well try in our own day to fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy that in the Millennium the wolf, lamb, leopard, kid, lion, and cow will live together peaceably (Isa. 11:6-7). If we were to go to a zoo and lecture a lion on the new peaceable way he was expected to live, and then placed a lamb in the cage with him, we know exactly what would happen as soon as the lion became hungry. The lion will not lie down peaceably with the lamb until the day when the lion’s nature is changed.

It is important to remember that the Beatitudes are pronouncements, not probabilities. Jesus does not say that if men have the qualities of humility, meekness, and so on that they are more likely to be happy. Nor is happiness simply Jesus’ wish for His disciples. The Beatitudes are divine judgmental pronouncements, just as surely as are the “woes” of chapter 23. *Makarios* is, in fact, the opposite of *ouai* (woe), an interjection that connotes pain or calamity. The opposite of the blessed life is the cursed life. The **blessed life** is represented by the true inner righteousness of those who are humble, **poor in spirit**, whereas the cursed

life is represented by the outward, hypocritical self-righteousness of the proud religionists (5:20).

The Beatitudes are progressive. As will be seen as each one is discussed in detail, they are not in a random or haphazard order. Each leads to the other in logical succession. Being poor in spirit reflects the right attitude we should have to our sinful condition, which then should lead us to mourn, to be meek and gentle, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to be merciful, pure in heart, and have a peacemaking spirit. A Christian who has all those qualities will be so far above the level of the world that his life will rebuke the world—which will bring persecution from the world (5:10-12) and light to the world (vv. 14-16).

THE POOR IN SPIRIT

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (5:3)

Discussion of this first beatitude demands that it be looked at from five perspectives: the meaning of **poor in spirit**, the location of this virtue in the list, the way to achieve that attitude, how to know if we have that attitude, and the result promised for having it.

THE MEANING OF POOR IN SPIRIT

Ptōchos (**poor**) is from a verb meaning “to shrink, cower, or cringe,” as beggars often did in that day. Classical Greek used the word to refer to a person reduced to total destitution, who crouched in a corner begging. As he held out one hand for alms he often hid his face with the other hand, because he was ashamed of being recognized. The term did not mean simply poor, but begging poor. It is used in Luke 16:20 to describe the beggar Lazarus.

The word commonly used for ordinary poverty was *penichros*, and is used of the widow Jesus saw giving an offering in the Temple. She had very little, but she did have “two small copper coins” (Luke 21:2). She was poor but not a beggar. One who is *penichros* poor has at least some meager resources. One who is *ptōchos* poor, however, is completely dependent on others for sustenance. He has absolutely no means of self-support.

Because of a similar statement in Luke 6:20—“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God”—some interpreters have maintained that the beatitude of Matthew 5:3 teaches material poverty. But sound hermeneutics (the interpretation of Scripture) requires that, when two or more passages are similar but not exactly alike, the clearer one explains the others, the more explicit clarifies the less explicit. By comparing Scripture with Scripture we see that the Matthew account is the more explicit. Jesus is speaking of a spiritual poverty that corresponds to the material poverty of one who is *ptōchos*.

If Jesus were here advocating material poverty He would have contradicted many other parts of His Word—including the Sermon on the Mount itself (5:42)—that teach us to give financial help to the poor. If Jesus was teaching the innate blessedness of material poverty, then the task of Christians would be to help make everyone, including themselves, penniless. Jesus did not teach that material poverty is the path to spiritual prosperity.

Those who are materially poor *do* have some advantages in spiritual matters by not having certain distractions and temptations; and the materially rich have some disadvantage by *having* certain distractions and temptations. But material possessions have no necessary relationship to spiritual blessings. Matthew makes clear that Jesus is here talking about the condition of the **spirit**, not of the wallet.

After He began His public ministry, Jesus often had “nowhere to lay His head” (Matt. 8:20), but He and His disciples were not destitute and never begged for bread. Paul was beaten, imprisoned, shipwrecked, stoned, and often economically hard pressed; but neither did he ever beg for bread. It was, in fact, a badge of honor for him that he worked in order to pay his own expenses in the ministry (Acts 20:34; 1 Cor. 9:6-18). The Lord and the apostles were accused of being ignorant, troublemakers, irreligious, and even mad; but they were never charged with being indigent or beggars.

On the other hand, no New Testament believer is condemned for being rich. Nicodemus, the Roman centurion of Luke 7, Joseph of Arimathea, and Philemon were all wealthy and faithful. That “not many mighty, not many noble” are called (1 Cor. 1:26) is not because they are rejected due to their positions or possessions but because so many of them trust only in those things (1 Tim. 6:6-17).

To be **poor in spirit** is to recognize one’s spiritual poverty apart from God. It is to see oneself as one really is: lost, hopeless, helpless. Apart from Jesus Christ every person is spiritually destitute, no matter what his education, wealth, social status, accomplishments, or religious knowledge.

That is the point of the first beatitude. The **poor in spirit** are those who recognize their total spiritual destitution and their complete dependence on God. They perceive that there are no saving resources in themselves and that they can only beg for mercy and grace. They know they have no spiritual merit, and they know they can earn no spiritual reward. Their pride is gone, their self-assurance is gone, and they stand empty-handed before God.

In spirit also conveys the sense that the recognition of poverty is genuine, not an act. It does not refer to outwardly acting like a spiritual beggar, but to recognizing what one really is. It is true humility, not mock humility. It describes the person about whom the Lord speaks in Isaiah 66:2—“To this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.” It describes the person who is “brokenhearted” and “crushed in spirit” (Ps. 34:18), who has “a broken and a contrite heart” before the Lord (Ps. 51:17).

Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-gatherer to “certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt.” As the Pharisee stood praying in the Temple, he proudly recited his virtues and gave thanks that he was not like those who are sinful, especially the tax-gatherer who was nearby. The tax-gatherer, however, “was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me, the sinner!’” The tax-gatherer, Jesus said, “went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted” (Luke 18:9-14). The Pharisee was proud in spirit; the tax-gatherer was **poor in spirit**.

When God called Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt, Moses pleaded his unworthiness, and God was able to use him mightily. Peter was still aggressive, self-assertive, and proud, but when Jesus miraculously provided the great catch of fish, Peter was so overawed that he confessed, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” (Luke 5:8). Even after he became an apostle, Paul recognized that “nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh” (Rom. 7:18), that he was the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15), and that the best things he could do in himself were rubbish (Phil. 3:8).

In his *Confessions* Augustine makes clear that pride was his greatest barrier to receiving the gospel. He was proud of his intellect, his wealth, and his prestige. Until he recognized that those things were less than nothing, Christ could do nothing for him. Until Martin Luther realized that all his sacrifice, rituals, and self-abuse counted for nothing before God, he could find no way to come to God or to please Him.

Even at Sinai, when the law was given, it was evident that God’s own chosen people could not fulfill its demands on their own. As Moses was receiving the law on the mountain, Aaron was leading the people in a pagan orgy in the valley below (Ex. 32:1-6).

Israelites who were spiritually sensitive knew they needed God’s power to keep God’s law. In humility they confessed their helplessness and pleaded for His mercy and strength. David began his great penitential psalm with the plea “Be gracious to me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Thy compassion blot out my transgressions.... For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me” (Ps. 51:1, 3).

Other Israelites, however, took another approach to the law. Knowing they could not fulfill its demands, they simply brought the law down to a level that was more manageable and acceptable. They piled interpretation upon interpretation, creating man-made traditions that were possible to keep in the flesh. Those traditions came to be known as the Talmud, a commentary on the law that leading rabbis developed over many centuries and that eventually superseded the law in the minds of most Jews. They exchanged the Torah (God’s revealed law) for the Talmud (man’s modification of the law). In the name of interpreting and protecting the law they contradicted and weakened it. They brought God’s standards down to men’s standards—which they could keep without God’s help.

They then taught as doctrine those precepts of men (Matt. 15:9). They made the fatal error of thinking that God was less holy than He is and that they were more holy than they were. The result was the illusion that they were sufficiently righteous to please God.

Traditions have to do with what we can see and measure. They involve only the outer man, whereas God's law involved the whole man. The Ten Commandments cannot be fulfilled simply by doing or not doing outward acts. They not only forbid making idols but also require love of God (Ex. 20:4,6). Honoring father and mother is first of all an attitude, a matter of the heart, as is covetousness (vv. 12,17).

Every thoughtful Jew knew that God's law was far above his own human power to obey. The proud and self-satisfied responded by diluting the law. The humble and penitent responded by calling to God for help.

If God's Old Testament standards are impossible for man to meet by himself, how much less attainable by one's own power are the standards of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus here teaches not only that people must love God but that they "are to be perfect, as [their] heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48), and that unless their righteousness exceeds the external, man-originated "righteousness ... of the scribes and Pharisees, [they] shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20).

WHY HUMILITY IS FIRST

Jesus puts this beatitude first because humility is the foundation of all other graces, a basic element in becoming a Christian (Matt. 18:3-4). Pride has no part in Christ's kingdom, and until a person surrenders pride he cannot enter the kingdom. The door into His kingdom is low, and no one who stands tall will ever go through it. We cannot be filled until we are empty; we cannot be made worthy until we recognize our unworthiness; we cannot live until we admit we are dead. We might as well expect fruit to grow without a tree as to expect the other graces of the Christian life to grow without humility. We cannot begin the Christian life without humility, and we cannot live the Christian life with pride.

Yet in the church today there is little emphasis on humility, little mention of self-emptying. We see many Christian books on how to be happy, how to be successful, how to overcome problems, and on and on.

But we see very few books on how to empty ourselves, how to deny ourselves, and how to take up our crosses and follow Jesus—in the way that He tells us to follow Him.

Until a soul is humbled, until the inner person is **poor in spirit**, Christ can never become dear, because He is obscured by self. Until one knows how helpless, worthless, and sinful he is in himself, he can never see how mighty, worthy, and glorious Christ is in Himself. Until one sees how doomed he is, he cannot see what a Redeemer the Lord is. Until one sees his own poverty he cannot see God's riches. Only when one admits to his own deadness can Christ give him His life. "Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord" (Prov. 16:5).

Being **poor in spirit** is the first beatitude because humility must precede everything else. No one can receive the kingdom until he recognizes that he is unworthy of the kingdom. The church in Laodicea said proudly, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," not knowing that she was instead "wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" (Rev. 3:17). Those who refuse to recognize that they are lost and helpless are like the blind Roman slave girl who insisted that she was not blind but that the world was permanently dark.

Where self is exalted, Christ cannot be. Where self is king, Christ cannot be. Until the proud in spirit become **poor in spirit**, they cannot receive the King or inherit His kingdom.

ACHIEVING HUMILITY

How, then, do we become **poor in spirit**? Almost by definition, it cannot start with us, with anything we can do or accomplish in our own power. Nor does it involve putting ourselves down. We are already down; humility simply recognizes the truth. And simply *being* hopeless, helpless, and in need obviously is no virtue. That is not God's will for anyone. His will is to get us out of that condition and into blessing. The fulfillment of that goal depends on His sovereign, gracious work of humbling.

Humility is not a necessary human work to make us worthy, but a necessary divine work to make us see that we *are* unworthy and cannot change our condition without God. That is why monasticism, asceticism,

physical self-denial, mutilation, and other such self-efforts are so foolish and futile. They feed pride rather than subdue it, because they are works of the flesh. They give a person a reason to boast in what he has done or not done. Such self-imposed efforts are enemies of humility.

Yet even though genuine humility is produced by the Lord as an element of the work of salvation, it is also commanded of men. There are numerous divine commands to humble oneself (Matt. 18:4; 23:12; James 4:10; 1 Pet. 5:5), which the Lord perfectly harmonizes with His sovereign work of humbling. Sovereign saving work is never without personal cooperation. Because of that it is helpful to look at some of the steps from the human side of the divine paradox.

The first step in experiencing humility is to turn our eyes off ourselves and to look to God. When we study His Word, seek His face in prayer, and sincerely desire to be near Him and please Him, we move toward being **poor in spirit**. It is the vision of the infinitely Holy God in all His sinless purity and perfection that allows us to see ourselves as sinners by contrast. To seek humility, we do not look at ourselves to find the faults, but at God Almighty to behold His perfection.

Second, we must starve the flesh by removing the things on which it feeds. The essence of the fleshly nature is pride, and to starve the flesh is to remove and avoid those things that promote pride. Rather than looking for praise, compliments, and popularity, we should be wary of them. Yet because our human sinfulness has a way of turning even the best intentions to its advantage, we need to be careful not to make an issue of avoiding praise and recognition. The evil is not in being given praise but in seeking it and glorying in it. When, without having sought it, we are praised or honored, to ungraciously reject the recognition may be an act of pride rather than of humility.

The third and balancing principle in coming to humility is asking God for it. With David we should pray, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Ps. 51:10). Humility, like every other good gift, comes only from God. Also as with every other good thing, He is more willing to give it than we are to ask for it, and He stands ready to give it long before we ask for it.

KNOWING WHEN WE ARE HUMBLE

How can we know if we are genuinely humble, if we are **poor in spirit**? Thomas Watson gives seven principles we may apply in determining humility. *

First, if we are humble we will be weaned from ourselves. We will be able to say with David, “My soul is like a weaned child within me” (Ps. 131:2). One who is poor in spirit loses his self-preoccupation. Self is nothing, and Christ is everything. Paul’s humility is nowhere more beautifully expressed than in his saying, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me” (Gal. 2:20). To the Philippian believers he wrote, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21).

Second, humility will lead us to be lost in the wonder of Christ, “with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, ... being transformed into the same image from glory to glory” (2 Cor. 3:18). Our satisfaction will be in the prospect of one day being fully in the likeness of our Lord.

Third, we will not complain about our situation, no matter how bad it may become. Because we know we deserve worse than anything we can experience in this life, we will consider no circumstance to be unfair. When tragedy comes we will not say, “Why me, Lord?” When our suffering is for Christ’s sake we not only will not complain or feel ashamed but will glorify God for it (1 Pet. 4:16), knowing that we will “also be glorified with Him” and realizing “that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:17-18).

Fourth, we will more clearly see the strengths and virtues of others as well as our own weaknesses and sins. With “humility of mind” we will “regard one another as more important than [ourselves]” (Phil. 2:3) and will “give preference to one another in honor” (Rom. 12:10).

Fifth, we will spend much time in prayer. Just as the physical beggar begs for physical sustenance, the spiritual beggar begs for spiritual. We will knock often at heaven’s gate because we are always in need. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, we will not let go until we are blessed.

Sixth, we will take Christ on His terms, not on ours or any other. We will not try to have Christ while keeping our pride, our pleasures, our covetousness, or our immorality. We will not modify His standards by ecclesiastical traditions or by our own inclinations or persuasions. His Word alone will be our standard.

Watson said, “A castle that has long been besieged and is ready to be taken will deliver up on any terms to save their lives. He whose heart has been a garrison for the devil, and has held out long in opposition against Christ, when once God has brought him to poverty of spirit and he sees himself damned without Christ, let God propound what articles he will, he will readily subscribe to them. Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?” (p. 47).

Seventh, when we are poor in spirit we will praise and thank God for His grace. Nothing more characterizes the humble believer than abounding gratitude to his Lord and Savior. He knows that he has no blessings and no happiness but that which the Father gives in love and grace. He knows that God’s grace is “more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 1:14).

THE RESULT OF BEING POOR IN SPIRIT

Those who come to the King in this humility inherit His kingdom, **for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.** God has gladly chosen to give the kingdom to those who humbly come to Him and trust Him (Luke 12:32).

When the Lord called Gideon to deliver Israel from the Midianites, Gideon replied, “O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father’s house”—to which God answered, “Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian as one man” (Judg. 6:15-16). When Isaiah “saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted,” he cried in despair, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips.” Then an attending seraph touched the prophet’s mouth with a burning coal and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven” (Isa. 6:1, 5-7).

Those who come to the Lord with broken hearts do not leave with broken hearts. “For thus says the high and exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy, ‘I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite’” (Isa. 57:15). God wants us to recognize our poverty so that He can make us rich. He wants us to recognize our lowliness so that He can raise us up. “Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord,” James says, “and He will exalt you” (James 4:10).

In giving up their own kingdom, the poor in spirit inherit God’s.

*(*The Beatitudes* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971], pp. 45-48).

Happy Are the Sad (5:4)

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. (5.4)

In Psalm 55 David cries out, “Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest. Behold, I would wander far away, I would lodge in the wilderness. I would hasten to my place of refuge from the stormy wind and tempest” (vv. 6-8).

Such a cry comes from the lips of almost everyone at some time or another. David echoes the cry of humanity—a cry for release, a cry for freedom, a cry for escape from things that weigh heavy on us. When we face great sorrow, disappointment, tragedy, or failure, we wish that we could escape the trouble like we escape a thunderstorm by running inside. But comfort from the troubles of life is much harder to find than shelter from rain. The deeper the sorrow, the harder the pressure, the worse the despair, the more elusive comfort seems to be.

As pointed out in the previous chapter, all of the Beatitudes are paradoxical, because what they promise for what they demand seems incongruous and upside down in the eyes of the natural man. The paradox of the second beatitude is obvious. What could be more self-contradictory than the idea that the sad are happy, that the path to happiness is sadness, that the way to rejoicing is in mourning?

In the routine of ordinary, day-by-day living, the idea seems absurd. The whole structure of most human living—whether by the primitive or sophisticated, the wealthy or the poor, the educated or the uneducated—is based on the seemingly incontrovertible principle that the way to happiness is having things go your own way. Pleasure brings happiness, money brings happiness, entertainment brings happiness, fame and praise bring happiness, self-expression brings happiness. On the

negative side, avoiding pain, trouble, disappointment, frustration, hardships, and other problems brings happiness. Sidestepping those things is necessary before the other things can bring full happiness. Throughout history a basic axiom of the world has been that favorable things bring happiness, whereas unfavorable things bring unhappiness. The principle seems so self-evident that most people would not bother to debate it.

But Jesus said, “Happy are the sad.” He even went so far as to say, “Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep” (Luke 6:25)—the converse beatitude of Matthew 5:4. Jesus turned the world’s principles exactly upside down. He reversed the path to happiness.

To discover what Jesus meant, and did not mean, in this beatitude we will look at the meaning of mourning as it is used here, the result of mourning, the way to mourn as Jesus teaches, and the way to know if we are truly mourning.

THE MEANING OF MOURNING

Certain kinds of sorrow are common to all mankind, experienced by believer and unbeliever alike. Some of these sorrows are normal and legitimate, sorrows which concern the Lord and for which He knows our need. Others are abnormal and illegitimate, brought about solely because of sinful passions and objectives.

IMPROPER MOURNING

Improper mourning is the sorrow of those who are frustrated in fulfilling evil plans and lusts, or who have misguided loyalties and affection. To those who mourn in that way the Lord offers no help or solace.

David’s son “Amnon was so frustrated because of his sister Tamar that he made himself ill, for she was a virgin, and it seemed hard to Amnon to do anything to her” (2 Sam. 13:2). Amnon’s grief was caused by incestuous, unfulfilled lust.

Others carry legitimate sorrow to illegitimate extremes. When a person grieves so hard and so long over the loss of a loved one that he cannot function normally, his grief becomes sinful and destructive. Such depressing sorrow is usually related to guilt, essentially selfish, and, for a Christian, is a mark of unfaithfulness and lack of trust in God.

David grieved that way, in part to try to atone for his guilt. When the rebellious Absalom, another of David's sons, was killed, his father went into inconsolable mourning (2 Sam. 18:33—19:4). Joab finally rebuked the king, saying, "Today you have covered with shame the faces of all your servants, who today have saved your life and the lives of your sons and daughters, the lives of your wives, and the lives of your concubines, by loving those who hate you, and by hating those who love you. For you have shown today that princes and servants are nothing to you; for I know this day that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased" (19:5-6). The wickedly ambitious Absalom had raised a rebel army, driven the king—his own father—out of Jerusalem, and taken over the palace.

David's love for his son was understandable, but his judgment had been perverted. Probably because of his great feeling of guilt for having been such a poor father, and because he knew that Absalom's tragedy was part of the judgment God sent because of David's adulterous and murderous affair with Bathsheba, the king's mourning over Absalom was abnormal. The judgment that came on Absalom was entirely deserved.

PROPER MOURNING

There are also, of course, other kinds of sorrow, legitimate sorrows that are common to all mankind and for which reasonable mourning is appropriate. To express these sorrows and to cry over them opens an escape valve that keeps our feelings from festering and poisoning our emotions and our whole life. It provides the way for healing, just as washing out a wound helps prevent infection.

An Arab proverb says, "All sunshine makes a desert." The trouble-free life is likely to be a shallow life. We often learn more and mature more from times of sorrow than from times when everything is going well. A familiar poem by Robert Browning Hamilton expresses the truth:

I walked a mile with Pleasure,
She chattered all the way,
But left me none the wiser
For all she had to say.
I walked a mile with Sorrow,
And ne'er a word said she,
But, oh, the things I learned from her
When Sorrow walked with me.

(Cited in William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* [rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 1:94)

Sarah's death caused Abraham to mourn (Gen. 23:2). But the "father of the faithful" did not weep from lack of faith but for the loss his beloved wife, which he had every right to do.

Loneliness for God, from whom he felt separated for a time, caused the psalmist to declare, "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" (Ps. 42:1-3).

Defeat and discouragement caused Timothy to mourn, leading Paul, his spiritual father, to write, "I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did, as I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day, longing to see you, even as I recall your tears, so that I may be filled with joy" (2 Tim. 1:3-4).

Anguished concern about the sins of Israel and God's coming judgment on His people caused Jeremiah to mourn. "Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears," he cried, "that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" (Jer. 9:1).

Concern for the spiritual welfare of the Ephesian believers had caused Paul to mourn. "Night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears," he said (Acts 20:31). Because of their great love for him the elders from the Ephesus church later mourned for Paul as he prayed with them on the beach near Miletus, "grieving

especially over the word which he had spoken, that they should see his face no more” (v. 38).

The earnest love of a father caused him to be grief-stricken over his demon-possessed son, even as he brought him to Jesus for healing. No doubt tears ran down the man’s face as He implored Jesus to help, confessing “I do believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

Repentant, worshipful devotion caused a woman to mourn over her sins as she went into the Pharisee’s house and washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. To the proud host who resented her contaminating his house and interrupting his dinner party, Jesus said, “I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little” (Luke 7:47).

Immeasurable divine love caused our Lord to weep at the death of Lazarus (John 11:35) and over the sinning people of Jerusalem, whom He wanted to gather into His care as a mother hen gathers her chicks (Matt. 23:37).

GODLY MOURNING

The mourning about which Jesus is talking in the second beatitude, however, has nothing to do with the types just discussed, proper or improper. The Lord is concerned about all of the legitimate sorrows of His children, and He promises to console, comfort, and strengthen us when we turn to Him for help. But those are not the kind of sorrow at issue here. Jesus is speaking of godly sorrow, godly mourning, mourning that only those who sincerely desire to belong to Him or who already belong to Him can experience.

Paul speaks of this sorrow in his second letter to Corinth. “For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation; but the sorrow of the world produces death. For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you” (2 Cor. 7:10-11). The only sorrow that brings spiritual life and growth is godly sorrow, sorrow over sin that leads to repentance. Godly sorrow is linked to repentance, and repentance is linked to sin.

As the first beatitude makes clear, entrance into the kingdom of heaven begins with being “poor in spirit,” with recognition of total

spiritual bankruptcy. The only way any person can come to Jesus Christ is empty-handed, totally destitute and pleading for God's mercy and grace. Without a sense of spiritual poverty no one can enter the kingdom. And when we enter the kingdom we should never lose that sense, knowing "that nothing good dwells in [us], that is, in [our] flesh" (Rom. 7:18).

Spiritual poverty leads to godly sorrow; the poor in spirit become **those who mourn**. After his great sin involving Bathsheba and Uriah, David repented and expressed his godly sorrow in Psalm 51: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in Thy sight" (vv. 3-4). Job was a model believer, "blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil" (Job. 1:1). Yet he still had something to learn about God's greatness and his own unworthiness, about God's infinite wisdom and his own very imperfect understanding. Only after God allowed everything dear to Job to be taken away and then lectured His servant on His sovereignty and His majesty, did Job finally come to the place of godly sorrow, of repenting of and mourning over his sin. He confessed, "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees Thee; therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes" (42:5-6). God loves and honors a morally righteous life, but it is no substitute for a humble and contrite heart, which God loves and honors even more (Isa. 66:2).

As seen in the discussion of the first beatitude, *makarios* (**blessed**) means to be happy, blissful. That happiness is a divine pronouncement, the assured benefit of those who meet the conditions God requires.

The condition of the second beatitude is mourning: **blessed are those who mourn**. Nine different Greek words are used in the New Testament to speak of sorrow, reflecting its commonness in man's life. It is woven into the cloth of the human situation. The story of history is the story of tears. And before the earth's situation gets better it will get worse. Jesus tells us that before He comes again, "nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs" (Matt. 24:7-8). Until the Lord returns, history is destined to go from tragedy to greater tragedy, from sorrow to still greater sorrow.

Of the nine terms used for sorrow, the one used here (*pentheō*, **mourn**) is the strongest, the most severe. It represents the deepest, most heart-felt grief, and was generally reserved for grieving over the death of a

loved one. It is used in the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) for Jacob's grief when he thought his son Joseph was killed by a wild animal (Gen. 37:34). It is used of the disciples' mourning for Jesus before they knew He was raised from the dead (Mark 16:10). It is used of the mourning of world business leaders over the death of its commerce because of the destruction of the world system during the Tribulation (Rev. 18:11,15).

The word carries the idea of deep inner agony, which may or may not be expressed by outward weeping, wailing, or lament. When David stopped hiding his sin and began mourning over it and confessing it (Ps. 32:3-5), he could declare, "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit!" (vv. 1-2).

Happiness, or blessedness, does not come in the mourning itself. Happiness comes with what God does in response to it, with the forgiveness that such mourning brings. Godly mourning brings God's forgiveness, which brings God's happiness. Mourning is not merely a psychological or emotional experience that makes people feel better. It is a communion with the living, loving God who responds to the mourner with an objective reality—the reality of divine forgiveness!

David experienced and expressed many kinds of common human sorrow, both proper and improper. He mourned over being lonely, over being rejected, over being discouraged and disappointed, and over losing an infant child. He also mourned inordinately over the death of Absalom, whom God had removed to protect Israel and the messianic throne of David. But nothing broke the heart of David like his own sin. No anguish was as deep as the anguish he felt when he finally saw the awfulness of his offenses against the Lord. That is when David became happy, when he became truly sad over his transgressions.

The world says, "Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag, and smile, smile, smile." Hide your problems and pretend to be happy. The same philosophy is applied to sin. But Jesus says, "Confess your sins, and mourn, mourn, mourn." When we do that, our smiles can be genuine, because our happiness will be genuine. Godly mourning brings godly happiness, which no amount of human effort or optimistic pretense, no amount of positive thinking or possibility thinking, can produce.

Only mourners over sin are happy because only mourners over sin have their sins forgiven. Sin and happiness are totally incompatible.

Where one exists, the other cannot. Until sin is forgiven and removed, happiness is locked out. Mourning over sin brings forgiveness of sin, and forgiveness of sin brings a freedom and a joy that cannot be experienced in any other way.

“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you,” James tells us. “Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you” (James 4:8-10).

There is great need in the church today to cry instead of laugh. The frivolity, silliness, and foolishness that go on in the name of Christianity should themselves make us mourn. God’s counsel to the frivolous happy, the self-satisfied happy, the indulgent happy is: “Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy into gloom.”

The faithful child of God is constantly broken over his sinfulness, and the longer he lives and the more mature he becomes in the Lord, the harder it is for him to be frivolous. He sees more of God’s love and mercy, but he also sees more of his own and the world’s sinfulness. To grow in grace is also to grow in awareness of sin. Speaking to Israel, the prophet Isaiah said, “In that day the Lord God of hosts called you to weeping, to wailing, to shaving the head, and to wearing sackcloth. Instead, there is gaiety and gladness, killing of cattle and slaughtering of sheep, eating of meat and drinking of wine.” Following the world’s philosophy, which still prevails today, God’s ancient people said, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we may die” (Isa. 22:12-13).

We follow that philosophy vicariously, if not actually, when we laugh at the world’s crude and immoral jokes even though we do not retell them, when we are entertained by a sin even though we do not indulge in it, when we smile at ungodly talk even though we do not repeat the words. To joke about divorce, to make light of brutality, to be intrigued by sexual immorality is to rejoice when we should be mourning, to be laughing when we should be crying. To “rejoice in the perversity of evil” is placed alongside “delight in doing evil” (Prov. 2:14). To take “pleasure in wickedness” (2 Thess. 2:12) is to be a part of the wickedness, whether or not we commit the specific sin.

Much of the church today has a defective sense of sin, which is reflected in this defective sense of humor. When even its own members make the church the butt of jokes, make light of its beliefs and ordinances, caricature its leaders as inept and clownish, and make its high standards of purity and righteousness the subject of humorous commentary, the church has great need to turn its laughter into mourning.

The Bible recognizes a proper sense of humor, humor that is not at the expense of God's name, God's Word, God's church, or any person, except perhaps ourselves. God knows that "a joyful heart is good medicine" (Prov. 17:22), but a heart that rejoices in sin is taking poison, not medicine. The way to happiness is not in ignoring sin, much less in making light of it, but rather in sorrow over it that cries to God.

We can react to our spiritual bankruptcy in one of several ways. Like the Pharisees we can deny our spiritual destitution and pretend we are spiritually rich. Or, like monastics and advocates of moral rearmament, we can admit our condition and try to change it in our own power and by our own efforts. Or we can admit our condition and then despair over it to such a degree that we try to drown it in drink, escape it by drugs or by activity, or give up completely and commit suicide, as Judas did. Because they can find no answer in themselves or in the world, these people conclude that there *is* no answer. Or, like the prodigal son, we can admit our condition, mourn over it, and turn to the heavenly Father to remedy our poverty (see Luke 15:11-32).

Mourning over sin is not being engulfed in despair. Even the person who has been severely disciplined by the church should be forgiven, comforted, and loved, "lest somehow such a one be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow" (2 Cor. 2:7-8). Nor is godly mourning wallowing in self-pity and false humility, which are really badges of pride.

True mourning over sin does not focus on ourselves, not even on our sin. It focuses on God, who alone can forgive and remove our sin. It is an attitude that begins when we enter the kingdom and lasts as long as we are on earth. It is the attitude of Romans 7. Contrary to some popular interpretation, Paul is not here speaking simply about his former condition. The problems of chapter 7 were not one-time experiences that were completely replaced by the victories of chapter 8. The apostle clearly says, "For that which I am doing I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate"

(7:15). Here he uses the present tense, as he does throughout the rest of the chapter: “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh;... for the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish” (vv. 18-19); “I find then the principle that evil is present in me” (v. 21); “Wretched man that I am! ... So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin” (vv. 24-25).

Paul wrote those words at the height of his ministry. Yet righteousness and sin were still fighting a battle in his life. As he acknowledges in verse 25, the way of victory is “through Jesus Christ our Lord,” but the rest of the verse makes clear that, at that time, the victory was not yet complete. He knew where the victory was, and he had tasted the victory many times. But he knew that, in this life, it is never a permanent victory. The presence of the flesh sees to that. Permanent victory is assured to us now, but it is not given to us now.

Paul not only spoke of the creation anxiously longing for restoration, but of his own longing for complete restoration. “And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body” (Rom. 8:19, 22-23). Paul was tired of sin, tired of fighting it in himself, as well as in the church and in the world. He longed for relief. “For indeed in this house we groan,” he said, “longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven.” He greatly preferred “rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:2, 8).

The mark of the mature life is not sinlessness, which is reserved for heaven, but growing awareness of sinfulness. “If we say that we have no sin,” John warns, “we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9). The subjects of God’s kingdom—the forgiven ones, the children of God and joint heirs with the Son—are characterized by continual confession of sin.

Several years ago a college student said to me, “I’ve been liberated. Someone explained to me the true meaning of 1 John 1:9, and now I realize that I no longer have to confess my sins.” I asked him, “Well, do you still confess your sins?” “I just told you that I don’t have to anymore,” he replied. “I know you did,” I said, “but do you still confess your sins?” When he replied, “Yes, that’s what bothers me,” I stopped

being bothered. I said, “I’m very glad to hear that,” and then told him that I knew that, despite the false teaching to which he had been exposed, he was a genuine Christian. His redeemed nature refused to go along with the false teaching his mind had temporarily accepted.

Penthountes (**mourn**) is a present participle, indicating continuous action. In other words, those who are continually mourning are those who will be continually comforted. In his ninety-five theses Martin Luther said that the Christian’s entire life is a continuous act of repentance and contrition. In his psalms David cried out, “For my iniquities are gone over my head; as a heavy burden they weigh too much for me” (38:4) and, “I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me” (51:3).

There is no record in the New Testament of Jesus laughing. We are told of His weeping, His anger, His hunger and thirst, and many other human emotions and characteristics. But if He laughed, we do not know of it. We do know that, as Isaiah predicted, He was “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3). Yet today we often hear of another Jesus, who laughs and cajoles and draws people into the kingdom by His nonjudgmental spirit and His winsome way. The fun-loving, escapist world of comedians is found plying its trade even in the church—and finding ready acceptance.

THE RESULT OF MOURNING

The result of godly mourning is comfort: **they shall be comforted**. That is why they are **blessed**. It is not the mourning that blesses, but the comfort God gives to those who mourn in a godly way.

The emphatic pronoun *autos* (**they**) indicates that *only* those who mourn over sin will be comforted. The blessing of God’s comfort is reserved exclusively for the contrite of heart. It is only those who mourn for sin who will have their tears wiped away by the loving hand of Jesus Christ.

Comforted is from *parakaleō*, the same word that, as a noun, is rendered Comforter, or Helper, in John 14:16, where we are told that Jesus was the first Helper, and the Holy Spirit is “another Helper.”

The Old Testament also speaks of God comforting those who mourn. Isaiah tells of the Messiah's coming, among other things, "to comfort all who mourn, to grant those who mourn in Zion, giving them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning" (Isa. 61:2-3). David was comforted by the rod and staff of his divine Shepherd (Ps. 23:4).

As our mourning rises to the throne of God, His unsurpassed and matchless comfort descends from Him by Christ to us. Ours is the "God of all comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3), who is always ready to meet our need, admonishing, sympathizing, encouraging, and strengthening. God is a God of comfort, Christ is a Christ of comfort, and the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of comfort. As believers we have the comfort of the entire Trinity!

Shall be does not refer to the end of our lives or the end of the age. Like all other blessings of God, it will be completed only when we see our Lord face-to-face. In the eternal heavenly state God "shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain" (Rev. 21:4).

But the comfort of Matthew 5:4 is future only in the sense that the blessing comes after the obedience; the comfort comes after the mourning. As we continually mourn over our sin, we **shall be** continually comforted—now, in this present life. God is not only the God of future comfort but of present comfort. "God our Father" already has "given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace" (2 Thess. 2:16).

Even God's written Word is a present comforter, given for our encouragement and hope (Rom. 15:4). And as God Himself gives us comfort and His Word gives us comfort, we are called to comfort each other with the promises of His Word (1 Thess. 4:18; cf. 2 Cor. 1:6; 7:13; 13:11; etc.).

Happiness comes to sad people because their godly sadness leads to God's comfort. "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden," Jesus says, "and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). He will lift the burden from those who mourn over sin, and He will give rest to those who are weary of sin. As often as we confess our sin, He is faithful to forgive, and for as long as we mourn over sin He is faithful to comfort.

How TO MOURN

What does true mourning over sin involve? How can we become godly mourners?

ELIMINATE HINDRANCES

The first step requires removing the hindrances that keep us from mourning, the things that make us content with ourselves, that make us resist God's Spirit and question His Word, and that harden our hearts. A stony heart does not mourn. It is insensitive to God, and His plow of grace cannot break it up. It only stores up wrath till the day of wrath.

Love of sin is the primary hindrance to mourning. Holding on to sin will freeze and petrify a heart. *Despair* hinders mourning because despair is giving up on God, refusing to believe that He can save and help. Despair is putting ourselves outside God's grace. Of such people Jeremiah writes, "They will say, 'It's hopeless! For we are going to follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart'" (Jer. 18:12). The one who despairs believes he is destined to sin. Because he believes God has given up on him, he gives up on God. Despair excuses sin by choosing to believe that there is no choice. Despair hides God's mercy behind a self-made cloud of doubt.

Another hindrance is *conceit*, which tries to hide the sin itself, choosing to believe that there is nothing over which to mourn. It is the spiritual counterpart of a doctor treating a cancer as if it were a cold. If it was necessary for Jesus Christ to shed His blood on the cross to save us from our sin, our sin must be great indeed!

Presumption hinders mourning because it is really a form of pride. It recognizes the need for grace, but not much grace. It is satisfied with cheap grace, expecting God to forgive little because it sees little to be forgiven. Sins are bad, but not bad enough to be confessed, repented of, and forsaken. Yet the Lord declared through Isaiah, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon" (Isa. 55:7). No pardon is offered to the unrepentant, presumptuous person who refuses to forsake his sin. The

gospel that teaches otherwise has always been popular, as it clearly is in our own day; but it is a false gospel, “a different gospel” (Gal. 1:6), a distortion and contradiction of the gospel of Scripture.

Procrastination hinders godly mourning simply by putting it off. It says, “One of these days, when things are just right, I’ll take a hard look at my sins, confess them, and ask God’s forgiveness and cleansing.” But procrastination is foolish and dangerous, because we “do not know what [our] life will be like tomorrow. [We] are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away” (James 4:14). The sooner the disease of sin is dealt with the sooner comfort will come. If it is not dealt with, we have no assurance that comfort will ever come, because we have no assurance we will have time to confess it later.

The most important step we can take in getting rid of hindrances to mourning, whatever they are, is to look at the holiness of God and the great sacrifice of sin-bearing at the cross. If seeing Christ die for our sins does not thaw a cold heart or break up a hardened heart, it is beyond melting or breaking. In her poem “Good Friday,” Christina Rossetti gives these moving lines:

Am I a stone and not a sheep,
That I can stand, O Christ, beneath Thy cross,
To number drop by drop Thy Blood’s slow loss
And yet not weep?

Not so those women loved
Who with exceeding grief lamented Thee;
Not so fallen Peter weeping bitterly;
Not so the thief was moved;

Not so the Sun and Moon
Which hid their faces in a starless sky.
A horror of great darkness at broad noon—
I, only I.

Yet give not oer
But seek Thy sheep, true Shepherd of the flock;

Greater than Moses, turn and look once more
And smite a rock.

STUDY GOD'S WORD

The second step toward godly mourning is to study sin in Scripture, to learn what an evil and repulsive thing it is to God and what a destructive and damning thing it is to us. We should learn from David to keep our sin ever before us (Ps. 51:3) and from Isaiah to say, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5). We should learn from Peter to say, "I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8) and from Paul to confess that we are the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). As we hear those great men of God talking about their sin, we are forced to face the reality and the depth of our own.

Sin tramples on God's laws, makes light of His love, grieves His Spirit, spurns His forgiveness and blessing, and in every way resists His grace. Sin makes us weak and makes us impure. It robs us of comfort and, much more importantly, robs God of glory.

PRAY

The third step toward godly mourning is to pray for contriteness of heart, which only God can give and which He never refuses to give those who ask. It must always be recognized that humility depends on the working of the Lord. The way to godly mourning lies not in pre-salvation human works, but in God's saving grace.

How TO KNOW IF WE ARE MOURNING AS CHRIST COMMANDS

Knowing whether or not we have godly mourning is not difficult. First, we need to ask ourselves if we are sensitive to sin. If we laugh at it,

take it lightly, or enjoy it, we can be sure we are not mourning over it and are outside the sphere of God's blessing.

The mock righteousness of hypocrites who make every effort to appear holy on the outside (see Matt. 6:1-18) has no sensitivity to sin, only sensitivity to personal prestige and reputation. Nor does the mock gratitude of those who thank God they are better than other people (Luke 18:11). Saul regretted that he had disobeyed God by not slaying King Agag and by sparing the best of the Amalekite animals. But he was not repentant; he did not mourn over his sin. He instead tried to excuse his actions by claiming that the animals were spared so that they could be sacrificed to God and that the people made him do what he did. He twice admitted that he had sinned, and even asked Samuel for pardon. But his real concern was not for the Lord's honor but for his own. "I have sinned; but please honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel" (1 Sam. 15:30). Saul had ungodly regret, not godly mourning.

The godly mourner will have true sorrow for his sins. His first concern is for the harm his sin does to God's glory, not the harm its exposure might bring to his own reputation or welfare.

If our mourning is godly we will grieve for the sins of fellow believers and for the sins of the world. We will cry with the psalmist, "My eyes shed streams of water, because they do not keep Thy law" (Ps. 119:136). We will wish with Jeremiah that our heads were fountains of water that we could have enough tears for weeping (Jer. 9:1; cf. Lam. 1:16). With Ezekiel we will search out faithful believers "who sigh and groan over all the abominations which are being committed" around us (Ezek. 9:4; cf. Ps. 69:9). We will look out over the community where we live and weep, as Jesus looked out over Jerusalem and wept (Luke 19:41).

The second way to determine if we have genuine mourning over sin is to check our sense of God's forgiveness. Have we experienced the release and freedom of knowing our sins are forgiven? Do we have His peace and joy in our life? Can we point to true happiness He has given in response to our mourning? Do we have the divine comfort He promises to those who have forgiven, cleansed, and purified lives?

The godly mourners "who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting. He who goes to and fro weeping, carrying his bag of seed, shall indeed come again with a shout of joy, bringing his sheaves with him" (Ps. 126:5-6).

Happy Are the Meek (5:5)

Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. (5:5)

Like the first two beatitudes, this one must have been shocking and perplexing to Jesus' hearers. He taught principles that were totally foreign to their thinking.

Jesus' audience knew how to act spiritually proud and spiritually self-sufficient. They were proficient in erecting a pious facade. They actually believed that the Messiah was coming soon and would commend them for their goodness. He would, at last, give the Jewish people their rightful place in the world—a position above all other people, because they were the chosen of God.

They eagerly anticipated that the Messiah would deal gently with them and harshly with their oppressors, who for nearly a hundred years had been the Romans. After the Maccabean revolution that freed them from Greece, the Jews had a brief time of independence. But Rome's rule, though not as cruel and destructive, was much more powerful than that of Greece. Since 63 B.C., when Pompey annexed Palestine to Rome, the region had been ruled primarily by puppet kings of the Herodian family and by Roman governors, or procurators, the best known of which to us was Pilate.

The Jews so despised Roman oppression that sometimes they even refused to admit it existed. One day as He taught on the Mount of Olives, Jesus had one of His strongest exchanges with the Pharisees. When He said "to those Jews who had believed Him, 'If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free,'" the Pharisees' response was strange. "We are Abraham's offspring," they said, "and have never yet been enslaved to

anyone; how is it that You say, ‘You shall become free?’” (John 8:31-33). The fact was, of course, that Israel’s history was one of repeated conquest and oppression—by Egypt, Assyria, the Medes and Persians, the Greeks, and, at that very time, Rome. Apparently pride would not allow those Pharisees to acknowledge one of the most obvious facts of their nation’s history and of their present situation.

All Jews hoped for deliverance of some sort, by some means. Many were expecting deliverance to come through the Messiah. God had directly promised the godly Simeon “that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ,” that is, the Messiah (Luke 2:26). Simeon’s expectation was fulfilled when he was given the privilege of seeing the true Messiah as an infant. Others, however, such as the Pharisees, expected the Messiah to come with great fanfare and a mighty show of supernatural power. They assumed He would miraculously throw off the yoke of Rome and establish a Jewish state, a revived theocracy and holy commonwealth that would rule the world. Others, such as the materialistic Sadducees, hoped for change through political compromise, for which they were despised by many fellow Jews. The monastic Essenes, isolated both physically and philosophically from the rest of Judaism, lived largely as if Rome and the rest of the world did not exist.

The Zealots, as their name implies, were the most vocal and active proponents of deliverance. Many of them expected the Messiah to come as a powerful, irresistible military leader who would conquer Rome in the same way that Rome had conquered them. They were not, however, waiting passively for their Deliverer, but were determined that, whenever and however He might come, they would do their part to make His job easier. Their numbers, influence, and power continued to grow until Rome brutally attempted to crush Jewish resistance. In A.D. 70 Titus totally destroyed Jerusalem and massacred over a million Jews. Three years later Flavius Silva finally succeeded in his long siege against the stronghold at Masada. When Jewish rebelliousness continued to frustrate Rome, Hadrian swept through Palestine during the years 132-35 and systematically destroyed most of the cities and slaughtered the Jews living there.

In Jesus’ day the aggressive, rebellious Zealots were not many in number, but they had the sympathy and moral support of many of the people, who wanted Rome to be overthrown, however it was done.

Consequently, in whatever way various groups of people expected the Messiah to come, they did not anticipate His coming humbly and meekly. Yet those were the very attitudes that Jesus, the one whom John the Baptist had announced as the Messiah, was both teaching and practicing. The idea of a meek Messiah leading meek people was far from any of their concepts of the messianic kingdom. The Jews understood military power and miracle power. They even understood the power of compromise, unpopular as it was. But they did not understand the power of meekness.

The people as a whole eventually rejected Jesus because He did not fulfill their messianic expectations. He even preached *against* the means in which they had put their hope. They first rejected, then hated, and finally killed Him because, instead of approving their religion He condemned it, and instead of leading them to independence from Rome He disdained revolutionary acts and offered a way of even greater subservience.

In their minds Jesus could not possibly be the Messiah, and the final evidence was His crucifixion. The Old Testament taught that anyone hanged on a tree was “accursed of God” (Deut. 21:23), yet that is exactly where Jesus’ life ended—ignominiously on a cross, and a Roman cross at that. As He hung dying, some of the Jewish leaders could not resist a last taunt against His claim to be Savior and Messiah: “He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we shall believe in Him. He trusts in God; let Him deliver Him now, if He takes pleasure in Him; for He said, ‘I am the Son of God’” (Matt. 27:42-43).

In the early days of apostolic preaching, the death and resurrection of Christ were the greatest hindrances to belief in the gospel. The ideas were foolishness to Gentiles and a stumbling block to Jews (1 Cor. 1:23). The gospel was foolishness to those Gentiles who considered the body to be inherently evil and thought it absurd that the Savior of the world not only would allow Himself to be killed but would come back from the dead in bodily form. To the Jews the gospel was a stumbling block because the idea of the Messiah dying at all, much less on a cross, was unthinkable. How could a Messiah who taught for a few years, accomplished absolutely nothing as far as anyone could see, and then was rejected by the religious teachers and put to death be worth believing in? (cf. Acts 3:17-18).

But rejection of Jesus started long before His crucifixion. When He began the Sermon on the Mount by teaching humility, mourning, and meekness, the people sensed something was wrong. This strange preacher could hardly be the deliverer they were looking for. Great causes are fought by the proud, not the humble. You cannot win victories while mourning, and you certainly could never conquer Rome with meekness. In spite of all the miracles of His ministry, the people never really believed in Him as the Messiah, because He failed to act in military or miracle power against Rome.

The Jews were not looking for the Messiah that God had told them was coming. They disregarded such parts of His Word as Isaiah 40-60, which so clearly and vividly portrays the Messiah as the Suffering Servant as well as the conquering Lord. They could not accept the idea that such descriptions as, “He has no stately form or majesty... He was despised and forsaken of men... He was oppressed and He was afflicted... like a lamb that is led to slaughter ... that He was cut off out of the land of the living,” and “His grave was assigned with wicked men” (Isa. 53:2-3, 7-9) could apply to the Messiah, to the coming great deliverer of the Jews.

Jesus’ teaching seemed new and unacceptable to most of His hearers simply because the Old Testament was so greatly neglected and misinterpreted. They did not recognize the humble and self-denying Jesus as the Messiah because they did not recognize God’s predicted Suffering Servant as the Messiah. That was not the kind of Messiah they wanted.

THE MEANING OF MEEKNESS

Gentle is from *praos*, which basically means mild or soft. The term sometimes was used to describe a soothing medicine or a soft breeze. It was used of colts and other animals whose naturally wild spirits were broken by a trainer so that they could do useful work. As a human attitude it meant being gentle of spirit, meek, submissive, quiet, tenderhearted. During His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus was hailed as the coming King, though He was “gentle, and mounted on a donkey” (Matt. 21:5). Paul lovingly referred to the “meekness and gentleness of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:1) as the pattern for his own attitude.

The essential difference between being poor in spirit and being meek, or **gentle**, may be that poverty in spirit focuses on our sinfulness, whereas meekness focuses on God's holiness. The basic attitude of humility underlies both virtues. When we look honestly at ourselves, we are made humble by seeing how sinful and unworthy we are; when we look at God, we are made humble by seeing how righteous and worthy He is.

We again can see logical sequence and progression in the Beatitudes. Poverty of spirit (the first) is negative, and results in mourning (the second). Meekness (the third) is positive, and results in seeking righteousness (the fourth). Being poor in spirit causes us to turn away from ourselves in mourning, and meekness causes us to turn toward God in seeking His righteousness.

The blessings of the Beatitudes are for those who are realistic about their sinfulness, who are repentant of their sins, and who are responsive to God in His righteousness. Those who are unblessed, unhappy, and shut out of the kingdom are the proud, the arrogant, the unrepentant—the self-sufficient and self-righteous who see in themselves no unworthiness and feel no need for God's help and God's righteousness.

Most of Jesus' hearers, like fallen men throughout history, were concerned about justifying their own ways, defending their own rights, and serving their own ends. The way of meekness was not their way, and therefore the true kingdom was not their kingdom. The proud Pharisees wanted a miraculous kingdom, the proud Sadducees wanted a materialistic kingdom, the proud Essenes wanted a monastic kingdom, and the proud Zealots wanted a military kingdom. The humble Jesus offered a meek kingdom.

Meekness has always been God's way for man. It is the way of the Old Testament. In the book of Job we are told that God "sets on high those who are lowly, and those who mourn are lifted to safety" (5:11). Moses, the Jews' great deliverer and law-giver, "was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). The Jews' great King David, their supreme military hero, wrote, "He [the Lord] leads the humble in justice, and He teaches the humble His way" (Ps. 25:9).

Meekness is the way of the New Testament. It is taught by Jesus in the Beatitudes as well as elsewhere and is continued to be taught by the apostles. Paul entreated the Ephesians to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness,

with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love” (Eph. 4:1-2). He told the Colossians to “put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Col. 3:12). He told Titus to remind those under his leadership “to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be uncontentious, gentle, showing every consideration for all men” (Titus 3:1-2).

Meekness does not connote weakness. The word was used in much extrabiblical literature to refer to the breaking of an animal. Meekness means power put under control. A person without meekness is “like a city that is broken into and without walls” (Prov. 25:28). “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city” (Prov. 16:32). An unbroken colt is useless; medicine that is too strong will harm rather than cure; a wind out of control destroys. Emotion out of control also destroys, and has no place in God’s kingdom. Meekness uses its resources appropriately.

Meekness is the opposite of violence and vengeance. The meek person, for example, accepts joyfully the seizing of his property, knowing that he has infinitely better and more permanent possessions awaiting him in heaven (Heb. 10:34). The meek person has died to self, and he therefore does not worry about injury to himself, or about loss, insult, or abuse. The meek person does not defend himself, first of all because that is His Lord’s command and example, and second because he knows that he does not deserve defending. Being poor in spirit and having mourned over his great sinfulness, the **gentle** person stands humbly before God, knowing he has nothing to commend himself.

Meekness is not cowardice or emotional flabbiness. It is not lack of conviction nor mere human niceness. But its courage, its strength, its conviction, and its pleasantness come from God, not from self. The spirit of meekness is the spirit of Christ, who defended the glory of His Father, but gave Himself in sacrifice for others. Leaving an example for us to follow, He “committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Pet. 2:21-23).

Though He was sinless, and therefore never deserved criticism or abuse, Jesus did not resist slander or repay injustice or threaten His

tormentors. The only human being who did no wrong, the One who always had a perfect defense, never defended Himself.

When His Father's house was profaned by moneychangers and sacrifice sellers, "He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the moneychangers, and overturned their tables" (John 2:14-15). Jesus scathingly and repeatedly denounced the hypocritical and wicked religious leaders; He twice cleansed the Temple by force; and He fearlessly uttered divine judgment on those who forsook and corrupted God's Word.

But Jesus did not once raise a finger or give a single retort in His own defense. Though at any time He could have called legions of angels to His side (Matt. 26:53), He refused to use either natural or supernatural power for His own welfare. Meekness is not weakness, but meekness does not use its power for its own defense or selfish purposes. Meekness is power completely surrendered to God's control.

THE MANIFESTATION OF MEEKNESS

The best way to describe meekness is to illustrate it, to see it in action. Scripture abounds with instructive accounts of meekness.

After God had called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldeans to the Promised Land and had made the marvelous unconditional covenant with him, a dispute about grazing lands arose between the servants of Abraham and those of his nephew Lot. All the land of Canaan had been promised to Abraham. He was God's chosen man and the Father of God's chosen people. Lot, on the other hand, was essentially a hanger-on, an in-law who was largely dependent on Abraham for his welfare and safety. Besides that, Abraham was Lot's uncle and his elder. Yet Abraham willingly let Lot take whatever land he wanted, thus giving up his rights and prerogatives for the sake of his nephew, for the sake of harmony between their households, and for the sake of their testimony before "the Canaanite and the Perizzite [who] were dwelling then in the land" (Gen. 13:5-9). Those things were much more important to Abraham than standing up for his own rights. He had both the right and the power to do as he pleased in the matter, but in meekness he gladly waived his rights and laid aside his power.

Joseph was abused by his jealous brothers and eventually sold into slavery. When, by God's gracious plan, he came to be second only to Pharaoh in Egypt, he was in a position to take severe vengeance on his brothers. When they came to Egypt asking for grain for their starving families, Joseph could easily have refused and, in fact, could have put his brothers into more severe slavery than that into which they had sold him. Yet he had only forgiveness and love for them. When he finally revealed to them who he was, "he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard of it" (Gen. 45:2). Then he said to them, "Do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.... Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God" (vv. 5,8). Later he told them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (50:19-20). In meekness Joseph understood that it was God's place to judge and his to forgive and help.

Moses killed an Egyptian who was beating some Hebrew slaves; faced up to Pharaoh to demand the release of his people; and was so angry at the orgy that Aaron and the people were having around the golden calf that he smashed the first set of tablets of the Ten Commandments. Yet he was called "very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). Moses vented his anger against those who harmed and enslaved his people and who rebelled against God, but he did not vent his anger against those who abused him or demand personal rights and privileges.

When God called him to lead Israel out of Egypt, Moses felt completely inadequate, and pleaded, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" (Ex. 3:11). After God explained His plan for Moses to confront Pharaoh, Moses again pleaded, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since Thou hast spoken to Thy servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue" (4:10). Moses would defend God before anyone, but he did not defend himself before God.

David was chosen by God and anointed by Samuel to replace Saul as Israel's king. But when, in the cave of Engedi, he had the opportunity to take Saul's life, as Saul often had tried to take his, David refused to do so. He had such great respect for the king's office, despite that particular

king's wickedness and abuse of him, that "David's conscience bothered him because he had cut off the edge of Saul's robe. So he said to his men, 'Far be it from me because of the Lord that I should do this thing to my lord, the Lord's anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, since he is the Lord's anointed'" (1 Sam. 24:5-6).

Many years later, after David's rebellious son Absalom had routed his father from Jerusalem, a member of Saul's family named Shimei cursed David and threw stones at him. When one of David's soldiers wanted to cut off Shimei's head, David prevented him, saying, "Behold, my son who came out from me seeks my life; how much more now this Benjamite? Let him alone and let him curse, for the Lord has told him. Perhaps the Lord will look on my affliction and return good to me instead of his cursing this day" (2 Sam. 16:5-12).

By contrast, King Uzziah, who began to reign at the age of sixteen and who "did right in the sight of the Lord," and "continued to seek God" (2 Chron. 26:4-5), became self-confident after the Lord gave him great victories over the Philistines, Ammonites, and other enemies. "When he became strong, his heart was so proud that he acted corruptly, and he was unfaithful to the Lord his God, for he entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense" (v. 16). Uzziah thought he could do no wrong, and arrogantly performed a rite that he knew was restricted to the priests. He was so concerned with exalting himself and glorying in his greatness, that he disobeyed the God who had made him great and even profaned His Temple. As a consequence "King Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death; and he lived in a separate house, being a leper, for he was cut off from the house of the Lord" (v. 21).

Of the many examples of meekness in the New Testament, the greatest other than Jesus Himself was Paul. He was by far the most educated of the apostles and the one, as far as we can tell, that God used most widely and effectively. Yet he refused to put any confidence in himself, "in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3). He knew that he could do all things, but only "through Him who strengthens me" (4:13).

THE RESULT OF MEEKNESS

As with the other beatitudes, the general result of meekness is being **blessed**, being made divinely happy. God gives the meek His own joy and gladness.

More specifically, however, the **gentle ... shall inherit the earth**. After creating man in His own image, God gave man dominion over the whole earth (Gen. 1:28). The subjects of His kingdom are going to come someday into that promised inheritance, largely lost and perverted after the Fall. Theirs will be paradise regained.

One day God will completely reclaim His earthly domain, and those who have become His children through faith in His Son will rule that domain with Him. And the only ones who become His children and the subjects of His divine kingdom are those who are **gentle**, those who are meek, because they understand their unworthiness and sinfulness and cast themselves on the mercy of God. The emphatic pronoun *autos* (**they**) is again used (see vv. 3, 4), indicating that only those who are meek **shall inherit the earth**.

Most Jews thought that the coming great kingdom of the Messiah would belong to the strong, of whom the Jews would be the strongest. But the Messiah Himself said that it would belong to the meek, and to Jew and Gentile alike.

Klēronomeō (to **inherit**) refers to the receiving of one's allotted portion, one's rightful inheritance. This beatitude is almost a direct quotation of Psalm 37:11—"But the humble will inherit the land." For many generations faithful Jews had wondered, as God's people today sometimes wonder, why the wicked and godless seem to prosper and the righteous and godly seem to suffer. Through David, God assured His people, "Yet a little while and the wicked man will be no more; and you will look carefully for his place, and he will not be there" (v. 10). The wicked person's time of judgment was coming, as was the righteous person's time of blessing.

Our responsibility is to trust the Lord and obey His will. The settling of accounts, whether in judgment or blessing, is in His hands and will be accomplished exactly in the right time and in the right way. In the meanwhile, God's children live in faith and hope based on the certain promise, the divine pronouncement, that **they shall inherit the earth**.

Paul both warns and assures the Corinthians, saying, "So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos

or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God” (1 Cor. 3:21-23). Because we belong to Christ, our place in the kingdom is as secure as His.

It is also certain “that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9). One day the Lord will take the earth from the hands of the wicked and give it to His righteous people, whom He will use “to execute vengeance on the nations, and punishment on the peoples; to bind their kings with chains, and their nobles with fetters of iron; to execute on them the judgment written” (Ps. 149:7-9).

Our inheritance of the earth is not entirely future, however. The promise of the future inheritance itself gives us hope and happiness now. And we are able to appreciate many things, even earthly things, in ways that only those who know and love the Creator can experience”.

In the beautiful words of Wade Robinson,

Heav’n above is softer blue,
Earth around is sweeter green;
Something lives in ev’ry hue
Christless eyes have never seen!
Birds with gladder songs o’erflow,
Flow’rs with deeper beauties shine,
Since I know, as now I know,
I am His and He is mine.

Nearly a century ago George MacDonald wrote, “We cannot see the world as God means it in the future, save as our souls are characterized by meekness. In meekness we are its only inheritors. Meekness alone makes the spiritual retina pure to receive God’s things as they are, mingling with them neither imperfection nor impurity.”

THE NECESSITY FOR MEEKNESS

Meekness is necessary first of all because it is required for salvation. Only the meek will inherit the earth, because only the meek belong to the King who will rule the future kingdom of the earth. “For the Lord takes delight in His people,” says the psalmist; “he crowns the humble with salvation” (Ps. 149:4, NIV). When the disciples asked Jesus who was the greatest in the kingdom, “He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, ‘Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’” (Matt. 18:2-4).

Meekness is also necessary because it is commanded. “Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth who have carried out His ordinances; seek righteousness, seek humility” (Zeph. 2:3). James commands believers, “Therefore putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls” (James 1:21). Those who do not have a humble spirit are not able even to listen rightly to God’s Word, much less understand and receive it.

Meekness is necessary because we cannot witness effectively without it. Peter says, “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pet. 3:15). Pride will always stand between our testimony and those to whom we testify. They will see us instead of the Lord, no matter how orthodox our theology or how refined our technique.

Meekness is necessary because only meekness gives glory to God. Pride seeks its own glory, but meekness seeks God’s. Meekness is reflected in our attitude toward other children of God. Humility in relation to fellow Christians gives God glory. “Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God” (Rom. 15:5-7).

Happy Are the Hungry_(5:6)

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. (5:6)

This beatitude speaks of strong desire, of driving pursuit, of a passionate force inside the soul. It has to do with ambition—ambition of the right sort—whose object is to honor, obey, and glorify God by partaking of His righteousness. This holy ambition is in great contrast to the common ambitions of men to gratify their own lusts, accomplish their own goals, and satisfy their own egos.

As no other creature, Lucifer basked in the splendor and radiance of God's glory. The name Lucifer means "star of the morning" or, more literally, "the bright one." But he was not satisfied with living in God's glory, and he said in his heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High" (Isa. 14:13-14). His ambition was not to reflect God's glory but to usurp God's sovereign power—while forsaking righteousness. Therefore when Satan declared his intention to make himself like the Most High, the Most High responded by declaring to His adversary, "You will be thrust down to Sheol, to the recesses of the pit" (v. 15).

As king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar ruled over the greatest of all world empires. One day as he walked on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, "the king reflected and said, 'Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?'" (Dan. 4:29-30). Nebuchadnezzar lusted after praise just as Lucifer lusted after power. God's reaction was immediate:

“While the word was in the king’s mouth, a voice came from heaven, saying, ‘King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: sovereignty has been removed from you, and you will be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place will be with the beasts of the field. You will be given grass to eat like cattle, and seven periods of time will pass over you, until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whomever He wishes’” (vv. 31-32).

Jesus told a parable about a rich farmer whose crops were so abundant that he did not have enough space to store them. After planning to tear down his old barns and build bigger ones, he said, “I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.’” But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?’ So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:16-21).

Lucifer hungered for power; Nebuchadnezzar hungered for praise; and the rich fool hungered for pleasure. Because they hungered for wrong things and rejected God’s good things, they forfeited both.

Jesus declares that the deepest desire of every person ought to be to **hunger and thirst for righteousness**. That is the Spirit-prompted desire that will lead a person to salvation and keep him strong and faithful once he is in the kingdom. It is also the only ambition that, when fulfilled, brings enduring happiness.

The American Declaration of Independence asserts that citizens have the right to the pursuit of happiness. The founding fathers did not presume to guarantee that all who pursue it would find it, because that is beyond the power of any government to provide. Each person is free to seek whatever kind of happiness he wants in the way he wants within the law. Sadly, most US citizens, like most people throughout all of history, have chosen to pursue the wrong kind of happiness in ways that provide *no* kind of happiness.

Jesus says that the way to happiness, the way to being truly **blessed**, is the way of spiritual hunger and thirst.

THE NECESSITY FOR SPIRITUAL HUNGER

Hunger and thirst represent the necessities of physical life. Jesus' analogy demonstrates that **righteousness** is required for spiritual life just as food and water are required for physical life. **Righteousness** is not an optional spiritual supplement but a spiritual necessity. We can no more live spiritually without righteousness than we can live physically without food and water.

Since the great famine in Egypt during the time of Joseph, and probably long before then, the world has been periodically plagued by famines. Rome experienced a famine in 436 B.C., which was so severe that thousands of people threw themselves into the Tiber River to drown rather than starve to death. Famine struck England in A.D. 1005, and all of Europe suffered great famines in 879, 1016, and 1162. In our own century, despite the advances in agriculture, many parts of the world still experience periodic famines. In recent years Africa has seen some of the most devastating famines in the world's history. In the last 100 years tens of millions throughout the world have died from starvation or from the many diseases that accompany severe malnutrition.

A starving person has a single, all-consuming passion for food and water. Nothing else has the slightest attraction or appeal; nothing else can even get his attention.

Those who are without God's righteousness are starved for spiritual life. But tragically they do not have the natural desire for spiritual life that they do for physical. The tendency of fallen mankind is to turn to itself and to the world for meaning and life, just as " 'a dog returns to its own vomit,' and 'a sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire'" (2 Pet. 2:22; cf. Prov. 26:11).

The heart of every person in the world was created with a sense of inner emptiness and need. Yet apart from God's revelation men do not recognize what the need is or know what will satisfy it. Like the prodigal son, they will eat pigs' food, because they have nothing else. "Why," God asks, "do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy?" (Isa. 55:2). The reason is that men have forsaken God, "the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jer. 2:13). Though God has created men with a need for Himself, they try to satisfy that need through lifeless gods of their own making.

Again like the prodigal son, men are prone to take good things God has given—such as possessions, health, freedom, opportunities, and knowledge—and spend them on pleasure, power, popularity, fame, and every other form of self-satisfaction. But unlike the prodigal, they are often content to stay in the far country, away from God and away from His blessings.

People are warned not to “love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:15-17).

Seeking satisfaction only in God and in His provision is a mark of those who come into His kingdom. Those who belong to the King **hunger and thirst for the King’s righteousness**. They desire sin to be replaced with virtue and disobedience to be replaced by obedience. They are eager to serve the Word and will of God.

Jesus’ call to spiritual hunger and thirst also follows logically in the progression of the Beatitudes. The first three are essentially negative, commands to forsake evil things that are barriers to the kingdom. In poverty of spirit we turn away from self-seeking; in mourning we turn away from self-satisfaction; and in meekness we turn away from self-serving.

The first three beatitudes are also costly and painful. Becoming poor in spirit involves death to self. Mourning over sin involves facing up to our sinfulness. Becoming meek involves surrendering our power to God’s control.

The fourth beatitude is more positive and is a consequence of the other three. When we put aside self, sins, and power and turn to the Lord, we are given a great desire for righteousness. The more we put aside what we have, the more we long for what God has.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, “This Beatitude again follows logically from the previous ones; it is a statement to which all the others lead. It is the logical conclusion to which they come, and it is something for which we should all be profoundly thankful and grateful to God. I do not know of a better test that anyone can apply to himself or herself in this whole matter of the Christian profession than a verse like this. If this verse is to

you one of the most blessed statements of the whole of Scripture, you can be quite certain you are a Christian. If it is not, then you had better examine the foundations again” (*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971], 1:73-74).

The person who has no hunger and thirst for righteousness has no part in God’s kingdom. To *have* God’s life within us through the new birth in Jesus Christ is to *desire* more of His likeness within us by growing in righteousness. This is readily clear from David’s confession in Psalm 119:97, “O how I love Thy law.” Paul echoes David’s passion for righteousness in Romans 7:22, where he testifies, “I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man.” The true believer desires to obey, even though he struggles with unredeemed flesh (cf. Rom. 8:23).

THE MEANING OF SPIRITUAL HUNGER

Most of us have never faced life-threatening hunger and thirst. We think of hunger as missing a meal or two in a row, and of thirst as having to wait an hour on a hot day to get a cold drink. But the **hunger and thirst** of which Jesus speaks here is of a much more intense sort.

During the liberation of Palestine in World War I, a combined force of British, Australian, and New Zealand soldiers was closely pursuing the Turks as they retreated from the desert. As the allied troops moved northward past Beersheba they began to outdistance their water-carrying camel train. When the water ran out, their mouths got dry, their heads ached, and they became dizzy and faint. Eyes became bloodshot, lips swelled and turned purple, and mirages became common. They knew that if they did not make the wells of Sheriah by nightfall, thousands of them would die—as hundreds already had done. Literally fighting for their lives, they managed to drive the Turks from Sheriah.

As water was distributed from the great stone cisterns, the more able-bodied were required to stand at attention and wait for the wounded and those who would take guard duty to drink first. It was four hours before the last man had his drink. During that time the men stood no more than twenty feet from thousands of gallons of water, to drink of which had been their consuming passion for many agonizing days. It is said that one

of the officers who was present reported, “I believe that we all learned our first real Bible lesson on the march from Beersheba to Sheriah Wells. If such were our thirst for God, for righteousness and for His will in our lives, a consuming, all-embracing, preoccupying desire, how rich in the fruit of the Spirit would we be?” (E.M. Blaiklock, “Water” *Eternity* (August 1966), p. 27).

That is the kind of hunger and thirst of which Jesus speaks in this beatitude. The strongest and deepest impulses in the natural realm are used to represent the depth of desire the called of God and redeemed have for righteousness. The present participle is used in each case and signifies continuous longing, continuous seeking. Those who truly come to Jesus Christ come hungering and thirsting for righteousness, and those who are in Him continue to know that deep longing for holiness.

The parallel passage in Luke says, “Blessed are you who hunger now” (6:21). Desire for righteousness is to characterize our life *now* and in the rest of our earthly existence.

When Moses was in the wilderness, God appeared to him in a burning bush. When he went back to Egypt to deliver his people, he saw God’s might and power in the miracles and the ten plagues. He saw God part the Dead Sea and swallow up their Egyptian pursuers. He saw God’s glory in the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire which led Israel in the wilderness. He built a Tabernacle for God and saw the Lord’s glory shining over the Holy of Holies. Over and over Moses had sought and had seen God’s glory. “Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend” (Ex. 33:11). But Moses was never satisfied and always wanted to see more. He continued to plead, “I pray Thee, show Thy glory” (v. 18).

Moses never had enough of the Lord. Yet from that dissatisfaction came satisfaction. Because of his continual longing for God, Moses found favor in His sight (v. 17), and God promised him, “I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the Lord before you” (v. 19).

David declared, “O God, Thou art my God,” but continued, “I shall seek Thee earnestly; my soul thirsts for Thee, my flesh yearns for Thee, in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Ps. 63:1).

Paul had great visions of God and great revelations from God, yet he was not satisfied. He had given up his own righteousness “derived from

the law” and was growing in “the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.” But still he longed to “know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Phil. 3:9-10). Peter expressed his own great desire and hunger when he counseled those to whom he wrote to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18).

John Darby wrote, “To be hungry is not enough; I must be really starving to know what is in God’s heart toward me. When the prodigal son was hungry, he went to feed on the husks, but when he was starving, he turned to his father.” That is the hunger of which the fourth beatitude speaks, the hunger for righteousness that only the Father can satisfy.

Several years ago someone told me of a friend who had begun coming to a Bible study but soon gave it up, explaining that she wanted to be religious but did not want to make the commitment that Scripture demands. She had little hunger for the things of God. She wanted to pick and choose, to nibble at whatever suited her fancy—because basically she was satisfied with the way she was. In her own eyes she had enough, and thereby became one of the self-adjudged rich whom the Lord sends away empty-handed. It is only the hungry that He fills with good things (Luke 1:53).

THE OBJECT OF SPIRITUAL HUNGER

As with the other beatitudes, the goal of hungering and thirsting for righteousness is twofold. For the unbeliever the goal is salvation; for the believer it is sanctification.

FOR SALVATION

When a person initially hungers and thirsts for righteousness he seeks salvation, the righteousness that comes when one turns from sin to submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ. In poverty of spirit he sees his sin; in mourning he laments and turns from his sin; in meekness he submits his

own sinful way and power to God; and in hunger and thirst he seeks God's righteousness in Christ to replace his sin.

In many Old Testament passages righteousness is used as a synonym for salvation. "My righteousness is near, My salvation has gone forth," the Lord said through Isaiah (51:5). Daniel wrote of the time when "those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever" (Dan. 12:3).

When a person abandons all hope of saving himself, all confidence in self-righteousness, and begins to hunger for the salvation that brings God's righteousness and the obedience that God requires, he will be **blessed**, be made divinely happy.

The Jews' greatest obstacle to receiving the gospel was their self-righteousness, their confidence in their own purity and holiness, which they imagined was created by good works. Because they were God's chosen race, and as keepers of the law—or, more often, keepers of men's interpretations of the law—they felt heaven was assured.

The Messiah told them, however, that the only way to salvation was by hungering and thirsting for God's righteousness to replace their own self-righteousness, which was really unrighteousness.

FOR SANCTIFICATION

For believers, the object of hungering and thirsting is to grow in the righteousness received from trusting in Christ. That growth is sanctification, which more than anything else is the mark of a Christian.

No believer "arrives" in his spiritual life until he reaches heaven, and to claim perfection of any sort before then is the ultimate presumption. Children of the kingdom never stop needing or hungering for more of God's righteousness and holiness to be manifest in them through their obedience. Paul prayed for believers in Philippi that their love might "abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ" (Phil. 1:9-10).

In the Greek language, verbs such as hunger and thirst normally have objects that are in the partitive genitive, a case that indicates incompleteness, or partialness. A literal English rendering would be: “I hunger for of food” or “I thirst for of water.” The idea is that a person only hungers for *some* food and *some* water, not for all the food and water in the world.

But Jesus does not here use the partitive genitive but the accusative, and **righteousness** is therefore the unqualified and unlimited object of **hunger and thirst**. The Lord identifies those who desire all the righteousness there is (cf. Matt. 5:48; 1 Pet. 1:15-16).

Jesus also uses the definite article (*tēn*), indicating that He is not speaking of just any righteousness, but *the* righteousness, the only true righteousness—that which comes from God and, in fact, is God’s very own righteousness which He has in Himself.

It becomes obvious, then, that we cannot possibly have our longing for godliness satisfied in this life, so we are left to continually hunger and thirst until the day we are clothed entirely in Christ’s righteousness.

THE RESULT OF SPIRITUAL HUNGER

The result of hungering and thirsting for righteousness is being **satisfied**. *Chortazō* was frequently used of the feeding of animals until they wanted nothing more. They were allowed to eat until they were completely satisfied.

Jesus’ divine pronouncement is that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be given total satisfaction. The giving of satisfaction is God’s work, as the future passive tense indicates: **they shall be satisfied**. Our part is to seek; His part is to satisfy.

Again there is a marvelous paradox, because though saints continually seek God’s righteousness, always wanting more and never getting all, they nevertheless will be satisfied. We may eat steak or our favorite pie until we can eat no more, yet our taste for those things continues and even increases. It is the very satisfaction that makes us want more. We want to eat more of those things because they are so satisfying.

The person who genuinely hungers and thirsts for God's righteousness finds it so satisfying that he wants more and more.

God's satisfying those who seek and love Him is a repeated theme in the Psalms. "For He has satisfied the thirsty soul, and the hungry soul He has filled with what is good" (Ps. 107:9). "The young lions do lack and suffer hunger; but they who seek the Lord shall not be in want of any good thing" (34:10). The best-loved of all psalms begins, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," and later declares, "Thou dost prepare a table before me ... my cup overflows" (23:1, 5).

Predicting the great blessings of Christ's millennial kingdom, Jeremiah assured Israel that in that day, "'My people shall be satisfied with My goodness,' declares the Lord" (Jer. 31:14). Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well in Sychar that "whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). To the crowds near Capernaum, many of whom had been among the five thousand He fed with the five barley loaves and the two fish, Jesus said, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (John 6:35).

THE TESTING OF SPIRITUAL HUNGER

There are several marks of genuine hunger and thirst for God's righteousness. First is dissatisfaction with self. The person who is pleased with his own righteousness will see no need for God's. The great Puritan Thomas Watson wrote, "He has most need of righteousness that least wants it." No matter how rich his spiritual experience or how advanced his spiritual maturity, the hungering Christian will always say, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24).

Second is freedom from dependence on external things for satisfaction. A hungry man cannot be satisfied by an arrangement of lovely flowers, or beautiful music, or pleasant conversation. All of those things are good, but they have no ability to satisfy hunger. Neither can anything but God's own righteousness satisfy the person who has true spiritual hunger and thirst.

Third is craving for the Word of God, the basic spiritual food He provides His children. A hungry man does not have to be begged to eat. Jeremiah rejoiced, “Thy words were found and I ate them, and Thy words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart” (Jer. 15:16). The more we seek God’s righteousness, the more we will want to devour Scripture. Feeding on God’s Word increases our appetite for it.

Fourth is the pleasantness of the things of God. “To a famished man any bitter thing is sweet” (Prov. 27:7). The believer who seeks God’s righteousness above all other things will find fulfillment and satisfaction even in those things that humanly are disastrous. Thomas Watson comments that “the one who hungers and thirsts after righteousness can feed on the myrrh of the gospel as well as the honey.” Even the Lord’s reproofs and discipline bring satisfaction, because they are signs of our Father’s love. “For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives” (Heb. 12:6).

A final mark of true spiritual hunger is unconditionality. When our spiritual hunger and thirst are genuine they will make no conditions; they will seek and accept God’s righteousness in whatever way He chooses to provide it and will obey His commands no matter how demanding they may be. The least of God’s righteousness is more valuable than the greatest of anything we possess in ourselves or that the world can offer. The rich young ruler wanted only the part of God’s kingdom that fit his own plans and desires, and he was therefore unfit for the kingdom. He thirsted more for other things than for the things of God. His conditions for God’s blessings barred him from them.

The spiritually hungry do not ask for Christ and economic success, Christ and personal satisfaction, Christ and popularity, or Christ and anything else. They want *only* Christ and what God in His wisdom and love sovereignly provides through Christ—whatever that may or may not be.

The spiritually hungry cry, “My soul is crushed with longing after Thine ordinances at all times” (Ps. 119:20), and they confess, “At night my soul longs for Thee, indeed, my spirit within me seeks Thee diligently” (Isa. 26:9).

Happy Are the Merciful (5:7)

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. (5:7)

The first four beatitudes deal entirely with inner principles, principles of the heart and mind. They are concerned with the way we see ourselves before God. The last four are outward manifestations of those attitudes. Those who in poverty of spirit recognize their need of mercy are led to show mercy to others (v. 7). Those who mourn over their sin are led to purity of heart (v. 8). Those who are meek always seek to make peace (v. 9). And those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are never unwilling to pay the price of being persecuted for righteousness' sake (v. 10).

The concept of mercy is seen throughout Scripture, from the Fall to the consummation of history at the return of Christ. Mercy is a desperately needed gift of God's providential and redemptive work on behalf of sinners—and the Lord requires His people to follow His example by extending mercy to others.

To discover its essence we will look at three basic aspects of mercy: its meaning, its source, and its practice.

THE MEANING OF MERCY

For the most part, the days in which Jesus lived and taught were not characterized by mercy. The Jewish religionists themselves were not inclined to show mercy, because mercy is not characteristic of those who are proud, self-righteous, and judgmental. To many—perhaps most—of Jesus' hearers, showing mercy was considered one of the least of virtues,

if it was thought to be a virtue at all. It was in the same category as love—reserved for those who had shown the virtue to you. You loved those who loved you, and you showed mercy to those who showed mercy to you. That attitude was condemned by Jesus later in the Sermon on the Mount. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy’” (Matt. 5:43). But such a shallow, selfish kind of love that even the outcast tax-gatherers practiced (v. 46) was not acceptable to the Savior. He said, “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.... For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? ... And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” (vv. 44-47).

Yet many people have interpreted this beatitude in another way that is just as selfish and humanistic: they maintain that our being merciful causes those around us, especially those to whom we show mercy, to be merciful to us. Mercy given will mean mercy received. For such people, mercy is shown to others purely in an effort toward self-seeking.

The ancient rabbi Gamaliel is quoted in the Talmud as saying, “Whenever thou hast mercy, God will have mercy upon thee, and if thou hast not mercy, neither will God have mercy on thee.” Gamaliel’s idea is right. When God is involved there will be mercy for mercy. “If you forgive men for their transgressions,” Jesus said, “your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions” (Matt. 6:14-15).

But as a platitude applied among men, the principle does not work. One writer sentimentally says, “This is the great truth of life: if people see us care, they will care.” Yet neither Scripture nor experience bears out that idea. God works that way, but the world does not. With God there is always proper reciprocation, and with interest. If we honor God, He will honor us; if we show mercy to others, especially to His children, He will show even more abundant mercy to us. But that is not the world’s way.

A popular Roman philosopher called mercy “the disease of the soul.” It was the supreme sign of weakness. Mercy was a sign that you did not have what it takes to be a real man and especially a real Roman. The Romans glorified manly courage, strict justice, firm discipline, and, above all, absolute power. They looked down on mercy, because mercy to them

was weakness, and weakness was despised above all other human limitations.

During much of Roman history, a father had the right of *patria opitestas*, of deciding whether or not his newborn child would live or die. As the infant was held up for him to see, the father would turn his thumb up if he wanted the child to live, down if he wanted it to die. If his thumb turned down the child was immediately drowned. Citizens had the same life-or-death power over slaves. At any time and for any reason they could kill and bury a slave, with no fear of arrest or reprisal. Husbands could even have their wives put to death on the least provocation. Today abortion reflects the same merciless attitude. A society that despises mercy is a society that glorifies brutality.

The underlying motive of self-concern has characterized men in general and societies in general since the Fall. We see it expressed today in such sayings as, "If you don't look out for yourself, no one else will." Such popular proverbs are generally true, because they reflect the basic selfish nature of fallen man. Men are not naturally inclined to repay mercy for mercy.

The best illustration of that fact is the Lord Himself. Jesus Christ was the most merciful human being who ever lived. He reached out to heal the sick, restore the crippled, give sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and even life to the dead. He found prostitutes, tax collectors, the debauched and the drunken, and drew them into His circle of love and forgiveness. When the scribes and Pharisees brought the adulteress to Him to see if He would agree to her stoning, He confronted them with their merciless hypocrisy: "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." When no one stepped forward to condemn her, Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go your way. From now on sin no more" (John 8:7-11). Jesus wept with the sorrowing and gave companionship to the lonely. He took little children into His arms and blessed them. He was merciful to everyone. He was mercy incarnate, just as He was love incarnate.

Yet what was the response to Jesus' mercy? He shamed the woman's accusers into inaction, but they did not become merciful. By the time the accounts of John 8 ended, Jesus' opponents "picked up stones to throw at Him" (v. 59). When the scribes and Pharisees saw Jesus "eating

with the sinners and tax-gatherers,” they asked His disciples why their Master associated with such unworthy people (Mark 2:16).

The more Jesus showed mercy, the more He showed up the unmercifulness of the Jewish religious leaders. The more He showed mercy, the more they were determined to put Him out of the way. The ultimate outcome of His mercy was the cross. In Jesus’ crucifixion, two merciless systems—merciless government and merciless religion—united to kill Him. Totalitarian Rome joined intolerant Judaism to destroy the Prince of mercy.

The fifth beatitude does not teach that mercy to men brings mercy from men, but that mercy to men brings mercy from God. If we are merciful to others, God will be merciful to us, whether men are or not. God is the subject of the second clause, just as in the other beatitudes. It is God who gives the kingdom of heaven to the poor in spirit, comfort to those who mourn, the earth to the meek, and satisfaction to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Those who are **merciful ... shall receive mercy** from God. God gives the divine blessings to those who obey His divine standards.

Merciful is from *eleēmōn*, from which we also get eleemosynary, meaning beneficial or charitable. Hebrews 2:17 speaks of Jesus as our “merciful and faithful high priest.” Christ is the supreme example of mercy and the supreme dispenser of mercy. It is from Jesus Christ that both redeeming and sustaining mercy come.

In the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament) the same term is used to translate the Hebrew *hesed*, one of the most commonly used words to describe God’s character. It is usually translated as mercy, love, lovingkindness, or steadfast love (Ps. 17:7; 51:1; Isa. 63:7; Jer. 9:24; etc.). The basic meaning is to give help to the afflicted and to rescue the helpless. It is compassion in action.

Jesus is not speaking of detached or powerless sentiment that is unwilling or unable to help those for whom there is sympathy. Nor is He speaking of the false mercy, the feigned pity, that gives help only to salve a guilty conscience or to impress others with its appearance of virtue. And it is not passive, silent concern which, though genuine, is unable to give tangible help. It is genuine compassion expressed in genuine help, selfless concern expressed in selfless deeds.

Jesus says in effect, “The people in My kingdom are not takers but givers, not pretending helpers but practical helpers. They are not condemners but mercy givers.” The selfish, self-satisfied, and self-righteous do not bother to help anyone—unless they think something is in it for them. Sometimes they even justify their lack of love and mercy under the guise of religious duty. Once when the Pharisees and scribes questioned why His disciples did not observe the traditions of the elders, Jesus replied, “Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death’; but you say, ‘If a man says to his father or his mother, anything of mine you might have been helped by is Corban (that is to say, given to God),’ you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down” (Mark 7:10-13). In the name of hypocritical religious tradition, compassion toward parents in such a case was actually forbidden.

Mercy is meeting people’s needs. It is not simply feeling compassion but showing compassion, not only sympathizing but giving a helping hand. Mercy is giving food to the hungry, comfort to the bereaved, love to the rejected, forgiveness to the offender, companionship to the lonely. It is therefore one of the loveliest and noblest of all virtues.

In Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (4.1.180-85) Portia says,

The quality of mercy is not strain’d;
It droppeth, as the gentle rain from heaven,
Upon the place beneath: it is twice bless’d.
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes:
‘Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown:

MERCY AND FORGIVENESS

A clearer understanding of mercy can be gained by working through some comparisons. Mercy has much in common with forgiveness but is distinct from it. Paul tells us that Jesus “saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy,

by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). God’s forgiveness of our sins flows from His mercy. But mercy is bigger than forgiveness, because God is merciful to us even when we do not sin, just as we can be merciful to those who have never done anything against us. God’s mercy does not just forgive our transgressions, but reaches to all our weakness and need.

“The Lord’s lovingkindnesses [mercies, KJV] indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness” (Lam. 3:22). God’s mercy to His children never ceases.

MERCY AND LOVE

Forgiveness flows out of mercy, and mercy flows out of love. “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:4-5). Just as mercy is more than forgiveness, love is more than mercy. Love manifests itself in many ways that do not involve either forgiveness or mercy. Love loves even when there is no wrong to forgive or need to meet. The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father, although they both are without sin and without need. They both love the holy angels, although the angels are without sin and need. When we enter heaven we, too, will be without sin or need, yet God’s love for us will, in comparison to eternity, only be just beginning.

Mercy is the physician; love is the friend. Mercy acts because of need; love acts because of affection, whether there is need or not. Mercy is reserved for times of trouble; love is constant. There can be no true mercy apart from love, but there can be true love apart from mercy.

MERCY AND GRACE

Mercy is also related to grace, which flows out of love just as forgiveness flows out of mercy. In each of his three pastoral epistles Paul includes the words “grace, mercy and peace” in his salutations (1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4, KJV). Grace and mercy have the closest

possible relationship; yet they are different. Mercy and its related terms all have to do with pain, misery, and distress—with the consequences of sin. Whether because of our individual sins or because of the sinful world in which we live, all of our problems, in the last analysis, are sin problems. It is with those problems that mercy gives help. Grace, on the other hand, deals with sin itself. Mercy deals with the symptoms, grace with the cause. Mercy offers relief from punishment; grace offers pardon for the crime. Mercy eliminates the pain; grace cures the disease.

When the good Samaritan bound up the wounds of the man who had been beaten and robbed, he showed mercy. When he took him to the nearest inn and paid for his lodging until he was well, he showed grace. His mercy relieved the pain; his grace provided for healing.

Mercy relates to the negative; grace relates to the positive. In relation to salvation, mercy says, “No hell,” whereas grace says, “Heaven.” Mercy says, “I pity you”; grace says, “I pardon you.”

MERCY AND JUSTICE

Mercy is also related to justice, although, on the surface, they seem to be incompatible. Justice gives exactly what is deserved; whereas mercy gives less punishment and more help than is deserved. It is difficult, therefore, for some people to understand how God can be both just and merciful at the same time to the same person. If God is completely just, how could He ever not punish sin totally? For Him to be merciful would seem to negate His justice. The truth is that God does *not* show mercy without punishing sin; and for Him to offer mercy without punishment *would* negate His justice.

Mercy that ignores sin is false mercy and is no more merciful than it is just. It is that sort of false mercy that Saul showed to King Agag after God had clearly instructed Saul to kill every Amalekite (1 Sam. 15:3,9). It is that sort of false mercy that David showed to his rebellious and wicked son Absalom when he was young. Because David did not deal with Absalom’s sin, his attitude toward his son was unrighteous sentimentality, neither justice nor mercy—and it served to confirm Absalom in his wickedness.

That sort of false mercy is common in our day. It is thought to be unloving and unkind to hold people responsible for their sins. But that is a cheap grace that is not just and is not merciful, that offers neither punishment nor pardon for sin. And because it merely overlooks sin, it leaves sin; and the one who relies on that sort of mercy is left in his sin. To cancel justice is to cancel mercy. To ignore sin is to deny the truth; and mercy and truth are inseparable, they “are met together” (Ps. 85:10, KJV). In every true act of mercy, someone pays the price. God did, the Good Samaritan did, and so do we. To be merciful is to bear the load for someone else.

To expect to enter the sphere of God’s mercy without repenting from our sin is but wishful thinking. And for the church to offer hope of God’s mercy apart from repentance from sin is to offer false hope through a false gospel. God offers nothing but merciless judgment to those who will not turn from their sin to the Savior. Neither relying on good works nor relying on God’s overlooking sin will bring salvation. Neither trusting in personal goodness nor presuming on God’s goodness will bring entrance into the kingdom. Those who do not come to God on His terms have no claim on His mercy.

God’s mercy is grounded not only in His love but in His justice. It is not grounded in sentiment but in Christ’s atoning blood, which paid the penalty for and cleanses from sin those who believe in Him. Without being punished and removed, even the least of our sin would eternally separate us from God.

The good news of the gospel is that Christ paid the penalty for all sins in order that God might be merciful to all sinners. On the cross Jesus satisfied God’s justice, and when a person trusts in that satisfying sacrifice God opens the floodgates of His mercy. The good news of the gospel is not that God winked at justice, glossed over sin, and compromised righteousness. The good news is that in the shedding of Christ’s blood justice was satisfied, sin was forgiven, righteousness was fulfilled, and mercy was made available. There is never an excuse for sin, but always a remedy.

Mercy, therefore, is more than forgiveness and less than love. It is different from grace and is one with justice. And what is true of God’s mercy should be true of ours.

Mercy led Abraham to rescue his selfish nephew Lot from Chedorlaomer and his allies. Mercy led Joseph to forgive his brothers and to provide them food for their families. Mercy led Moses to plead with the Lord to remove the leprosy with which his sister Miriam had been punished. Mercy led David to spare the life of Saul.

Those who are unmerciful will not receive mercy from God. In one of his imprecatory psalms David says of an unnamed wicked man, “Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the Lord, and do not let the sin of his mother be blotted out. Let them be before the Lord continually, that He may cut off their memory from the earth.” David’s anger was not vengeful or retaliatory. That man and his family did not deserve mercy because they were not themselves merciful. “He did not remember to show lovingkindness, but persecuted the afflicted and needy man, and the despondent in heart, to put them to death” (Ps. 109:14-16).

Paul characterizes godless men as unrighteous, wicked, greedy, evil, envious, murderous, deceitful, malicious, gossiping, slanderous, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, and unloving. The climaxing evil of that long list, however, is being unmerciful (Rom. 1:29-31). Mercilessness is the capstone marking those who reject God’s mercy.

“The merciful man does himself good, but the cruel man does himself harm” (Prov. 11:17). The way to happiness is through mercy; the way to misery is through cruelty. The truly merciful person is even kind to animals, whereas the merciless person is cruel to everything. “A righteous man has regard for the life of his beast, but the compassion of the wicked is cruel” (Prov. 12:10).

In His Olivet discourse Jesus warned that those who claim to belong to Him but who have not served and shown compassion on the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned will not be allowed to enter His kingdom. He will say to them, “Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.” When they say, “Lord, when did we see You hungry, ... He will answer them, saying, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent

that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me” (Matt. 25:41-45).

James writes, “Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. For He who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not commit murder.’ Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act, as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy” (James 2:10-13*a*).

In the midst of our corrupt, ego-centered, and selfish society that tells us to grab everything we can get, the voice of God tells us to give everything we can give. The true character of mercy is in giving—giving compassion, giving help, giving time, giving forgiveness, giving money, giving ourselves. The children of the King are merciful. Those who are merciless face judgment; but “mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13*b*).

THE SOURCE OF MERCY

Pure mercy is a gift of God. It is not a natural attribute of man but is a gift that comes with the new birth. We can be merciful in its full sense and with a righteous motive only when we have experienced God’s mercy. Mercy is only for those who through grace and divine power have met the requirements of the first four beatitudes. It is only for those who by the work of the Holy Spirit bow humbly before God in poverty of spirit, who mourn over and turn from their sin, who are meek and submissive to His control, and who hunger and thirst above all else for His righteousness. The way of mercy is the way of humility, repentance, surrender, and holiness.

Balaam continually prostituted his ministry, trying to keep within the letter of God’s will while conspiring with a pagan king against God’s people. He presumptuously prayed, “Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his!” (Num. 23:10). As one Puritan commentator observed, Balaam wanted to die like the righteous, but he did not want to

live like the righteous. Many people want God's mercy but not on God's terms.

God has both absolute and relative attributes. His absolute attributes—such as love, truth, and holiness—have characterized Him from all eternity. They were characteristic of Him before He created angels, or the world, or man. But His relative attributes—such as mercy, justice, and grace—were not expressed until His creatures came into being. In fact they were not manifest until man, the creature made in His own image, sinned and became separated from his Creator. Apart from sin and evil, mercy, justice, and grace have no meaning.

When man fell, God's love was extended to His fallen creatures in mercy. And only when they receive His mercy can they reflect His mercy. God is the source of mercy. "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness [mercy] toward those who fear Him" (Ps. 103:11). It is because we have the resource of God's mercy that Jesus commanded, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

Donald Barnhouse writes,

When Jesus Christ died on the cross, all the work of God for man's salvation passed out of the realm of prophecy and became historical fact. God has now had mercy upon us. For anyone to pray, "God have mercy on me" is the equivalent of asking Him to repeat the sacrifice of Christ. All the mercy that God ever will have on man He has already had, when Christ died. That is the totality of mercy. There could not be any more... The fountain is now opened, and it is flowing, and it continues to flow freely. (*Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983], 4:4)

We cannot have the blessing apart from the Blessor. We cannot even meet the condition apart from the One who has set the condition. We are **blessed** by God when we are **merciful** to others, and we are able to be merciful to others because we have already received salvation's mercy. And when we share the mercy received, we **shall receive mercy** even beyond what we already have.

We never sing more truthfully than when we sing, "Mercy there was great and grace was free; pardon there was multiplied to me; there my

burdened soul found liberty, at Calvary.”

THE PRACTICE OF MERCY

The most obvious way we can show mercy is through physical acts, as did the good Samaritan. As Jesus specifically commands, we are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, and give any other practical help that is needed. In serving others in need, we demonstrate a heart of mercy.

It is helpful to note that the way of mercy did not begin with the New Testament. God has always intended for mercy to characterize His people. The Old Testament law taught, “You shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks” (Deut. 15:7-8). Even in the year of release, when all debts were canceled, Israelites were to give their poor countrymen whatever they needed. They were warned, “Beware, lest there is a base thought in your heart, saying ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,’ and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing” (v. 9).

Mercy is also to be shown in our attitudes. Mercy does not hold a grudge, harbor resentment, capitalize on another’s failure or weakness, or publicize another’s sin. On a great table at which he fed countless hundreds of people, Augustine inscribed,

Whoever thinks that he is able,
To nibble at the life of absent friends,
Must know that he’s unworthy of this table.

The vindictive, heartless, indifferent are not subjects of Christ’s kingdom. When they pass need by on the other side, as the priest and the Levite did in the story of the good Samaritan, they show they have passed Christ by.

Mercy is also to be shown spiritually. First, it is shown through pity. Augustine said, “If I weep for the body from which the soul is departed, should I not weep for the soul from which God is departed?” The sensitive Christian will grieve more for lost souls than for lost bodies. Because we have experienced God’s mercy, we are to have great concern for those who have not.

Jesus’ last words from the cross were words of mercy. For His executioners He prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). To the penitent thief hanging beside Him He said, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise” (v. 43). To His mother He said, “Woman, behold your son!” Then He said to the disciple [John], “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own household” (John 19:26-27). Like his Master, Stephen prayed for those who were taking his life, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” (Acts 7:60).

Second, we are to show spiritual mercy by confrontation. Paul says that, as Christ’s servants, we should gently correct “those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 2:25). We are to be willing to confront others about their sin in order that they might come to God for salvation. When certain teachers were “upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach, for the sake of sordid gain,” Paul told Titus to “reprove them severely that they may be sound in the faith” (Titus 1:11, 13). Love and mercy will be severe when that is necessary for the sake of an erring brother and for the sake of Christ’s church. In such cases it is cruel to say nothing and let the harm continue.

As Jude closed his letter with the encouragement to “keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life,” he also admonished, “And have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh” (Jude 21-23). Extreme situations require extreme care, but we are to show mercy even to those trapped in the worst systems of apostasy.

Third, we are to show spiritual mercy by praying. The sacrifice of prayer for those without God is an act of mercy. Our mercy can be measured by our prayer for the unsaved and for Christians who are walking in disobedience.

Fourth, we are to show spiritual mercy by proclaiming the saving gospel of Jesus Christ—the most merciful thing we can do.

THE RESULT OF MERCY

Reflecting on the fact that when we are **merciful** we **receive mercy**, we see God's cycle of mercy. God is merciful to us by saving us through Christ; in obedience we are merciful to others; and God in faithfulness gives us even more mercy, pouring out blessing for our needs and withholding severe chastening for our sin.

As in the other beatitudes, the emphatic pronoun *autos* (**they**) indicates that *only* those who are merciful qualify to **receive mercy**. David sang of the Lord, “With the kind Thou dost show Thyself kind” (2 Sam. 22:26). Speaking of the opposite side of the same truth, James says, “For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy” (James 2:13). At the end of the disciples' prayer Jesus explained, “For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions” (Matt. 6:14-15). Again the emphatic truth is that God will respond with chastening for an unforgiving disciple.

Neither in that passage nor in this beatitude is Jesus speaking of our mercy gaining us salvation. We do not earn salvation by being merciful. We must be saved by God's mercy before we can truly *be* merciful. We cannot work our way into heaven even by a lifetime of merciful deeds, any more than by good works of any sort. God does not give mercy for merit; He gives mercy in grace, because it is needed, not because it is earned.

To illustrate the working of God's mercy Jesus told the parable of a slave who had been graciously forgiven a great debt by the king. The man then went to a fellow slave who owed him a pittance by comparison and demanded that every cent be repaid and had him thrown into prison. When the king heard of the incident, he called the first man to him and said, “‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?’ And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the

torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart” (Matt. 18:23-35).

In that parable Jesus gives a picture of God’s saving mercy in relation to forgiving others (vv. 21-22). The first man pleaded with God for mercy and received it. The fact that he, in turn, was unmerciful was so inconsistent with his own salvation that he was chastened until he repented. The Lord will chasten, if need be, to produce repentance in a stubborn child. Mercy to others is a mark of salvation. When we do not show it, we may be disciplined until we do. When we hold back mercy, God restricts His flow of mercy to us, and we forfeit blessing. The presence of chastening and the absence of blessing attend an unmerciful believer.

If we have received from a holy God unlimited mercy that cancels our unpayable debt of sin—we who had no righteousness but were poor in spirit, mourning over our load of sin in beggarly, helpless condition, wretched and doomed, meek before almighty God, hungry and thirsty for a righteousness we did not have and could not attain—it surely follows that we should be merciful to others.

Happy Are the Holy (5:8)

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. (5:8)

Here is one of those passages of Scripture whose depths are immeasurable and whose breadth is impossible to encompass. This incredible statement of Jesus is among the greatest utterances in all of the Bible.

The subject of holiness, of purity of heart, can be traced from Genesis to Revelation. The theme is infinitely vast and touches on virtually every other biblical truth. It is impossible to exhaust its meaning or significance, and the discussion in this chapter is nothing more than introductory.

THE CONTEXT

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As discussed in some detail in earlier chapters, when Jesus began His earthly ministry, Israel was in desperate condition—politically, economically, and spiritually. For hundreds of years, with only brief respites, she had been under the oppression of foreign conquerors. The country had limited freedom to develop its economy, and a large part of income and profit was paid to Rome in taxes. Those were problems that every person saw and felt.

The less obvious problem, however, was by far the worst. For longer than she had suffered political and economic oppression, Israel had suffered spiritual weakness and faithlessness. Yet that problem was not recognized by many Jews. Jewish leaders thought their religion was in fine shape, and believed the Messiah would soon solve the political and economic problems. But when He came, His only concern was for the spiritual problem, the problem of their hearts.

At the time of Christ the most influential religious force in Judaism was the Pharisees. They were the chief managers and promoters of the pervasive legalistic and ritualistic system that dominated Jewish society. Over the centuries various rabbis had interpreted and reinterpreted the Jewish Scriptures, especially the law, until those interpretations—known as the traditions of the elders—became more authoritative than Scripture itself. The essence of the traditions was a system of dos and don'ts that gradually expanded to cover almost every aspect of Jewish life.

To conscientious and honest Jews it had become obvious that total observance of all the religious requirements was impossible. Because they could not keep all of the law, they doubtlessly developed terrible feelings of guilt, frustration, and anxiety. Their religion was their life, but they could not fulfill everything their religion demanded. Consequently, some of the religious leaders devised the idea that, if a person could perfectly keep just a few of the laws, God would understand. When even that proved impossible, some narrowed the requirement to one law perfectly kept.

That idea may have been in the mind of the lawyer who tested Jesus with the question, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" (Matt. 22:36). Perhaps he wanted to see which of the many hundreds of laws Jesus believed was the single most important one to keep—the one that would satisfy God even if a person failed to keep the others.

This oppressive and confusing religious system probably contributed to the initial popularity of John the Baptist. He was radically different from the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and priests, and it was obvious that he did not bother to observe most of the religious traditions. He was a breath of fresh air in a stifling, never-ending system of demands and prohibitions. Perhaps in this prophet's teaching they would find some relief. They did not want another rabbi with another law, but someone who could show them how to be forgiven for those laws they had already broken. They wanted to know the real way of salvation, the real way to

please God, the true way of peace and relief from sin. They knew that the Scriptures taught of One who would come not simply to demand but to redeem, not to add to their burdens but to help carry them, not to increase their guilt but to remove it. No doubt it was such expectations as those that caused many people to think John the Baptist might be the Messiah.

The people knew from Ezekiel that someday God was going to come and sprinkle their souls with water, cleanse them from their sin, and replace their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh (Ezek. 36:25-26). They knew the testimony of David, who cried out, “How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit!” (Ps. 32:1-2). They knew of those truths, and they longed to experience the reality of them.

Nicodemus was one such person. He was a Pharisee and “a ruler of the Jews,” that is, a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court. We are not told specifically what his intentions were in coming to Jesus, because his first words were not a question but a testimony. The fact that he came at night suggests he was ashamed of being seen with Jesus. But there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his words, which showed unusual spiritual insight: “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him” (John 3:2). Nicodemus knew that, whatever else Jesus might be, He was a teacher truly sent from God.

Though he does not state it, the question that was on his mind is implied both from his testimony and from Jesus’ reply. The Lord knew Nicodemus’s mind, and He said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3). Nicodemus wanted to know how to please God, to be forgiven. “How can I be made righteous?” he wondered. “How can I be redeemed and become a child of God? How can I become part of God’s kingdom?” Had he not had a deep, compelling desire to know God’s will, he would not have risked coming to Jesus even at night. Nicodemus was honest enough to admit his sinfulness. He was a Pharisee, a teacher of the law, and a ruler in the Sanhedrin; but he knew in his heart that all of that did not make him right with God.

After Jesus had fed the great multitude near the Sea of Galilee, some of the people who had seen the miracle asked Jesus, “What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?” (John 6:28). The same question

troubled them that had troubled Nicodemus: “How can a person get right with God? What must we do to truly please Him?” Like Nicodemus, they had been through all the ceremonies and rituals. They had attended the feasts and offered the required sacrifices. They had tried to keep the law and the traditions. But they knew that something was missing—something crucial that they did not know of, much less had experienced.

Luke tells of another lawyer who asked Jesus, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). He asked the question to test Jesus (v. 25a), and after Jesus gave an answer the man tried “to justify himself” (v. 29). But despite his insincerity, he had asked the right question, the question that was on the minds of many Jews who *were* sincere.

A rich ruler asked Jesus the same question: “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 18:18). This man apparently asked sincerely, but he was unwilling to pay the cost. He wanted to keep the wealth of this life more than he wanted to gain the wealth of eternal life, and he went away “very sad” (v. 23). He knew he needed something more than outward obedience to the law, at which he had been diligent since childhood (v. 21). He knew that, with all his devotion and effort to please God, he had no assurance of possessing eternal life. He was seeking the kingdom, but he was not seeking it first (Matt. 6:33).

Others were asking, “What must I be to belong to the kingdom of God? What is the standard for eternal life?” All of those people, at various levels of understanding and sincerity, knew that they had not found what they sought. Many knew that they had not kept even a single law perfectly. If honest, they became more and more convinced that they *could* not keep even a single law perfectly, and that they were powerless to please God.

It was to answer that need that Jesus came to earth. It was to answer that need that He gave the Beatitudes. He shows simply and directly how sinful man can be made right with holy God.

THE LITERARY CONTEXT

At first glance this beatitude seems out of place, inserted indiscriminately into an otherwise orderly development of truths. Because

of its supreme importance, a more strategic place—either at the beginning as the foundation, or at the end as the culmination—might seem more appropriate.

But the sixth beatitude, like every part of God’s Word, is in the right place. It is part of the beautiful and marvelous sequence of truths that are here laid out according to the mind of God. It is the climax of the Beatitudes, the central truth to which the previous five lead and from which the following two flow.

THE MEANING

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. (5:8)

The word **blessed** implies the condition of well-being that results from salvation, the status of one who has a right relation to God. Being accepted by Him is a matter of internal transformation.

Heart translates *kardia*, from which we get cardiac and similar terms. Throughout Scripture, as well as in many languages and cultures throughout the world, the heart is used metaphorically to represent the inner person, the seat of motives and attitudes, the center of personality. But in Scripture it represents much more than emotion, feelings. It also includes the thinking process and particularly the will. In Proverbs we are told, “As [a man] thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Prov. 23:7, KJV). Jesus asked a group of scribes, “Why are you thinking evil in your hearts?” (Matt. 9:4; cf. Mark 2:8; 7:21). The heart is the control center of mind and will as well as emotion.

In total contrast to the outward, superficial, and hypocritical religion of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus said that it is in the inner man, in the core of his very being, that God requires purity. That was not a new truth, but an old one long forgotten amidst ceremony and tradition. “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life,” the writer of Proverbs had counseled (Prov. 4:23). The problem that caused God to destroy the earth in the Flood was a heart problem. “Then the Lord

saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5).

David acknowledged before the Lord, “Behold, Thou dost desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part Thou wilt make me know wisdom”; and then he prayed “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Ps. 51:6,10). Asaph wrote, “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart!” (Ps. 73:1). Jeremiah declared, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it? I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds” (Jer. 17:9-10). Evil ways and deeds begin in the heart and mind, which are here used synonymously. Jesus said, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man” (Matt. 15:19).

God has always been concerned above all else with the inside of man, with the condition of his heart. When the Lord called Saul to be Israel’s first king, “God changed his heart” (1 Sam. 10:9). Until then Saul had been handsome, athletic, and not much more. But the new king soon began to revert to his old heart patterns. He chose to disobey God and to trust in himself. Among other things, he presumed to take for himself the priestly role of offering sacrifice (13:9) and refused to destroy all of the Amalekites and their possessions as God had commanded (15:3-19). Consequently, the Lord took the kingdom from Saul and gave it to David (15:23, 28). Saul’s actions were wrong because his heart rebelled, and it is by our hearts that the Lord judges us (16:7). It was said of David’s leadership over Israel, “He shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart, and guided them with his skillful hands” (Ps. 78:72).

God took the kingdom from Saul because he refused to live by the new heart God had given him. He gave the kingdom to David because David was “a man after [God’s] own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14). David pleased God’s heart because God pleased David’s heart. “I will give thanks to the Lord with all my heart,” he sang (Ps. 9:1). His deepest desire was, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer” (Ps. 19:14). He prayed, “Examine me, O Lord, and try me; test my mind and my heart” (Ps. 26:2).

When God told David, “Seek My face,” David’s heart replied, “Thy face, O Lord, I shall seek” (Ps. 27:8).

Once when David was fleeing from Saul he went to Gath, a Philistine city, for help. When he realized that his life was also in danger there, he “acted insanely in their hands, and scribbled on the doors of the gate, and let his saliva run down into his beard” (1 Sam. 21:13). Thinking him to be mad, the Philistines let him go, and he went to hide in the cave of Adullam. He came to his senses and realized how foolish and unfaithful he had been to trust the Philistines for help instead of the Lord. It was there that he wrote Psalm 57, in which he declared, “My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast” (v. 7). He rededicated his heart, his innermost being, single-mindedly to God. David often failed, but his heart was fixed on God. The evidence of his true-hearted commitment to God is found in all the first 175 verses of Psalm 119. The fact that his flesh sometimes overruled his heart is the final admission of verse 176: “I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Thy servant.”

Pure translates *katharos*, a form of the word from which we get catharsis. The basic meaning is to make pure by cleansing from dirt, filth, and contamination. Catharsis is a term used in psychology and counseling for a cleansing of the mind or emotions. The Greek word is related to the Latin *castus*, from which we get chaste. The related word chasten refers to discipline given in order to cleanse from wrong behavior.

The Greek term was often used of metals that had been refined until all impurities were removed, leaving only the pure metal. In that sense, purity means unmixed, unalloyed, unadulterated. Applied to the heart, the idea is that of pure motive—of single-mindedness, undivided devotion, spiritual integrity, and true righteousness.

Double-mindedness has always been one of the great plagues of the church. We want to serve the Lord and follow the world at the same time. But that, says Jesus, is impossible. “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other” (Matt. 6:24). James puts the same truth in another way: “Do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4). He then gives the solution to the problem: “Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (v. 8).

Christians have the right heart motive concerning God. Even though we often fail to be single-minded, it is our deep desire to be so. We confess with Paul, “For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.... I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good.... So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin” (Rom. 7:15, 21, 25). Paul’s deepest spiritual desires were pure, although the sin dwelling in his flesh sometimes overrode those desires.

Those who truly belong to God will be motivated to purity. Psalm 119 is the classic illustration of that longing, and Romans 7:15-25 is the Pauline counterpart. The deepest desire of the redeemed is for holiness, even when sin halts the fulfillment of that desire.

Purity of heart is more than sincerity. A motive can be sincere, yet lead to worthless and sinful things. The pagan priests who opposed Elijah demonstrated great sincerity when they lacerated their bodies in order to induce Baal to send fire down to consume their sacrifices (1 Kings 18:28). But their sincerity did not produce the desired results, and it did not enable them to see the wrongness of their paganism—because their sincere trust was in that very paganism. Sincere devotees walk on nails to prove their spiritual power. Others crawl on their knees for hundreds of yards, bleeding and grimacing in pain, to show their devotion to a saint or a shrine. Yet their sincere devotion is sincerely wrong and is completely worthless before God.

The scribes and Pharisees believed they could please God by such superficial practices as tithing “mint and dill and cummin”; but they “neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness” (Matt. 23:23). They were meticulously careful about what they did outwardly but paid no attention to what they were inwardly. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! “Jesus told them, “For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also” (vv. 25-26).

Even genuinely good deeds that do not come from a genuinely good heart are of no spiritual value. Thomas Watson said, “Morality can drown a man as fast as vice,” and, “A vessel may sink with gold or with

dung.” Though we may be extremely religious and constantly engaged in doing good things, we cannot please God unless our hearts are right with Him.

The ultimate standard for purity of heart is perfection of heart. In the same sermon in which He gave the Beatitudes Jesus said, “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). One hundred percent purity is God’s standard for the heart.

Man’s tendency is to set the opposite standard. We are inclined to judge ourselves by the worst instead of the best. The Pharisee who prayed in the Temple, thanking God that he was not like other men, considered himself to be righteous simply because he was not a swindler, an adulterer, or a tax-gatherer (Luke 18:11). We are all tempted to feel better about ourselves when we see someone doing a terrible thing that we have never done. The “good” person looks down on the one who seems to be less good than himself, and that person looks down on those worse than he is. Carried to its extreme, that spiral of judgment would go down and down until it reached the most rotten person on earth—and that last person, the worst on earth, would be the standard by which the rest of the world judged itself!

God’s standard for men, however, is Himself. They cannot be fully pleasing to God until they are pure as He is pure, until they are holy as He is holy and perfect as He is perfect. Only those who are pure in heart may enter the kingdom. “Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord?” David asks, “and who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart” (Ps. 24:3-4).

It is impurity of heart that separates man from God. “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not so short that it cannot save; neither is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He does not hear” (Isa. 59:1-2). And just as impurity of heart separates men from God, only purity of heart through Jesus Christ will reconcile men to God.

Basically there are but two kinds of religion—the religion of human achievement and the religion of divine accomplishment. There are many variations of the first kind, which includes every religion but biblical Christianity. Within the religions of human accomplishment are

two basic approaches: head religion, which trusts in creeds and religious knowledge, and hand religion, which trusts in good deeds.

The only true religion, however, is heart religion, which is based on God's implanted purity. By faith in what God has done through His Son, Jesus Christ, "we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace" (Eph. 1:7). When God imputes His righteousness to us He imputes His purity to us.

As we look at Scripture we discover six kinds of purity. One may be called *primal purity*, the kind that exists only in God. That purity is as essential to God as light is to the sun or wetness is to water.

Another form of purity is *created purity*, the purity that existed in God's creation before it was corrupted by the Fall. God created the angels in purity and He created man in purity. Tragically, some of the angels and all of mankind fell from that purity.

A third kind of purity is *positional purity*, the purity we are given the moment we trust in Jesus Christ as Savior. When we trust in Him, God imputes to us Christ's own purity, Christ's own righteousness. "To the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5; cf. Gal. 2:16). From that day the Father sees us just as He sees the Son, perfectly righteous and without blemish (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 9:14).

Fourth, imputed purity is not just a statement without substance; with imputed purity God grants *actual purity* in the new nature of the believer (Rom. 6:4-5; 8:5-11; Col. 3:9-10; 2 Pet. 1:3). In other words, there is no justification without sanctification. Every believer is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). Paul affirms that when a believer sins, it is not caused by the pure new self, but by sin in the flesh (Rom. 7:17, 19-22, 25).

Fifth, there is *practical purity*. This, of course, is the hard part, the part that *does* require our supreme effort. Only God possesses or can possess primal purity. Only God can bestow created purity, ultimate purity, positional purity, and actual purity. But practical purity, though it too comes from God, demands our participation in a way that the other kinds of purity do not. That is why Paul implores, "Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). It is why Peter pleads, "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who

called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet. 1:14-16).

We are not saved just for future heavenly purity but also for present earthly purity. At best it will be gold mixed with iron and clay, a white garment with some black threads. But God wants us now to be as pure as we can be. If purity does not characterize our living, we either do not belong to Christ, or we are disobedient to Him. We will have temptations, but God will always provide a way of escape (1 Cor. 10:13). We will fall into sin, but “if we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Finally, for believers there will also one day be *ultimate purity*, the perfected purity that God’s redeemed people will experience when they are glorified in His presence. All sins will be totally and permanently washed away, and “we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is” (1 John 3:2).

THE WAY TO HOLINESS

Throughout the history of the church people have suggested various ways to achieve spiritual purity and holiness. Some have suggested monasticism, getting away from the normal cares and distractions of the world and devoting oneself entirely to meditation and prayer. Others claim that holiness is a second work of grace, by which God miraculously eradicates not only sins but the sin nature, allowing a sinless earthly life from that point onward. But neither Scripture nor experience supports either of those views. The problem of sin is not primarily the world around us but the worldliness within us, which we cannot escape by living in isolation from other people.

But God always provides for what He demands, and He has provided ways for us to live purely. First, we must realize that we are unable to live a single holy moment without the Lord’s guidance and power. “Who can say, ‘I have cleansed my heart, I am pure from my sin’?” (Prov. 20:9), the obvious answer to which is “No one.” The Ethiopian cannot change his skin or the leopard its spots (Jer. 13:23). Cleansing

begins with a recognition of weakness. Weakness then reaches out for the strength of God.

Second, we must stay in God's Word. It is impossible to stay in God's will apart from His Word. Jesus said, "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you" (John 15:3).

Third, it is essential to be controlled by and walking in the will and way of the Holy Spirit. Galatians 5:16 says it clearly: "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh."

Fourth, we must pray. We cannot stay in God's will or understand and obey His Word unless we stay near Him. "With all prayer and petition" we are to "pray at all times in the Spirit" (Eph. 6:18; cf. Luke 18:1; 1 Thess. 5:17). With David we cry, "Create in me a clean heart, O God" (Ps. 51:10).

THE RESULT OF HOLINESS

The great blessing of those who are pure in heart is that **they shall see God**. The Greek is in the future indicative tense and the middle voice, and a more literal translation is, "They shall be continuously seeing God for themselves." It is *only they* (the emphatic *autos*), the pure in heart, who **shall see God**. Intimate knowledge of and fellowship with God is reserved for the pure.

When our hearts are purified at salvation we begin to live in the presence of God. We begin to see and to comprehend Him with our new spiritual eyes. Like Moses, who saw God's glory and asked to see more (Ex. 33:18), the one who is purified by Jesus Christ sees again and again the glory of God.

To see God was the greatest hope of Old Testament saints. Like Moses, David wanted to see more of God. "As the deer pants for the water brooks," he said, "so my soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?" (Ps. 42:1). Job rejoiced when he was able to say, "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees Thee" (Job 42:5).

Purity of heart cleanses the eyes of the soul so that God becomes visible. One sign of an impure heart is ignorance, because sin obscures the

truth (John 3:19-20). Evil and ignorance come in a package. Other signs of an impure heart are self-centeredness (Rev. 3:17), pleasure in sin (2 Tim. 3:4), unbelief (Heb. 3:12), and hatred of purity (Mic. 3:2). Those who belong to God exchange all of those things for integrity and purity.

F. F. Bullard wrote,

When I in righteousness at last
Thy glorious face shall see;
When all the weary night has passed,
And I awake with Thee,
To view the glories that abide,
Then and only then will I be satisfied.

(Cited in William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973], p. 278)

Happy Are the Peacemakers (5:9)

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. (5:9)

The God of peace (Rom. 15:33; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 4:9) has emphasized that cherished but elusive reality by making peace one of the dominant ideas of His Word. Scripture contains four hundred direct references to peace, and many more indirect ones. The Bible opens with peace in the Garden of Eden and closes with peace in eternity. The spiritual history of mankind can be charted based on the theme of peace. Although the peace on earth in the garden was interrupted when man sinned, at the cross Jesus Christ made peace a reality again, and He becomes the peace of all who place their faith in Him. Peace can now reign in the hearts of those who are His. Someday He will come as Prince of Peace and establish a worldwide kingdom of peace, which will eventuate in ultimate peace, the eternal age of peace.

But one of the most obvious facts of history and of human experience is that peace does not characterize man's earthly existence. There is no peace now for two reasons: the opposition of Satan and the disobedience of man. The fall of the angels and the fall of man established a world without peace. Satan and man are engaged with the God of peace in a battle for sovereignty.

The scarcity of peace has prompted someone to suggest that "peace is that glorious moment in history when everyone stops to reload." In 1968 a major newspaper reported that there had been to that date 14,553 known wars since thirty-six years before Christ. Since 1945 there have been some seventy or so wars and nearly two hundred internationally significant outbreaks of violence. Since 1958 nearly one hundred nations have been involved in some form of armed conflict.

Some historians have claimed that the United States has had two generations of peace—one from 1815 to 1846 and the other from 1865 to 1898. But that claim can only be made if you exclude the Indian wars, during which our land was bathed in Indian blood.

With all the avowed and well-intentioned efforts for peace in modern times, few people would claim that the world or any significant part of it is more peaceful now than a hundred years ago. We do not have economic peace, religious peace, racial peace, social peace, family peace, or personal peace. There seems to be no end of marches, sit-ins, rallies, protests, demonstrations, riots, and wars. Disagreement and conflict are the order of the day. No day has had more need of peace than our own.

Nor does the world honor peace as much by its standards and actions as it does by its words. In almost every age of history the greatest heroes have been the greatest warriors. The world lauds the powerful and often exalts the destructive. The model man is not meek but macho. The model hero is not self-giving but self-seeking, not generous but selfish, not gentle but cruel, not submissive but aggressive, not meek but proud.

The popular philosophy of the world, bolstered by the teaching of many psychologists and counselors, is to put self first. But when self is first, peace is last. Self precipitates strife, division, hatred, resentment, and war. It is the great ally of sin and the great enemy of righteousness and, consequently, of peace.

The seventh beatitude calls God's people to be peacemakers. He has called us to a special mission to help restore the peace lost at the Fall.

The peace of which Christ speaks in this beatitude, and about which the rest of Scripture speaks, is unlike that which the world knows and strives for. God's peace has nothing to do with politics, armies and navies, forums of nations, or even councils of churches. It has nothing to do with statesmanship, no matter how great, or with arbitration, compromise, negotiated truces, or treaties. God's peace, the peace of which the Bible speaks, never evades issues; it knows nothing of peace at any price. It does not gloss or hide, rationalize or excuse. It confronts problems and seeks to solve them, and after the problems are solved it builds a bridge between those who were separated by the problems. It often brings its own struggle, pain, hardship, and anguish, because such are often the price of healing. It is not a peace that will be brought by kings, presidents, prime ministers, diplomats, or international

humanitarians. It is the inner personal peace that only He can give to the soul of man and that only His children can exemplify.

Four important realities about God's peace are revealed: its meaning, its Maker, its messengers, and its merit.

THE MEANING OF PEACE: RIGHTEOUSNESS AND TRUTH

The essential fact to comprehend is that the peace about which Jesus speaks is more than the absence of conflict and strife; it is the presence of righteousness. Only righteousness can produce the relationship that brings two parties together. Men can stop fighting without righteousness, but they cannot live peaceably without righteousness. Righteousness not only puts an end to harm, but it administers the healing of love.

God's peace not only stops war but replaces it with the righteousness that brings harmony and true well-being. Peace is a creative, aggressive force for goodness. The Jewish greeting *shalom* wishes "peace" and expresses the desire that the one who is greeted will have all the righteousness and goodness God can give. The deepest meaning of the term is "God's highest good to you."

The most that man's peace can offer is a truce, the temporary cessation of hostilities. But whether on an international scale or an individual scale, a truce is seldom more than a cold war. Until disagreements and hatreds are resolved, the conflicts merely go underground—where they tend to fester, grow, and break out again. God's peace, however, not only stops the hostilities but settles the issues and brings the parties together in mutual love and harmony.

James confirms the nature of God's peace when he writes, "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable" (James 3:17). God's way to peace is through purity. Peace cannot be attained at the expense of righteousness. Two people cannot be at peace until they recognize and resolve the wrong attitudes and actions that caused the conflict between them, and then bring themselves to God for cleansing. Peace that ignores the cleansing that brings purity is not God's peace.

The writer of Hebrews links peace with purity when he instructs believers to “pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). Peace cannot be divorced from holiness. “Righteousness and peace have kissed each other” is the beautiful expression of the psalmist (Ps. 85:10). Biblically speaking, then, where there is true peace there is righteousness, holiness, and purity. Trying to bring harmony by compromising righteousness forfeits both.

Jesus’ saying “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10:34) seems to be the antithesis of the seventh beatitude. His meaning, however, was that the peace He came to bring is not peace at any price. There will be opposition before there is harmony; there will be strife before there is peace. To be peacemakers on God’s terms requires being peacemakers on the terms of truth and righteousness—to which the world is in fierce opposition. When believers bring truth to bear on a world that loves falsehood, there will be strife. When believers set God’s standards of righteousness before a world that loves wickedness, there is an inevitable potential for conflict. Yet that is the only way.

Until unrighteousness is changed to righteousness there cannot be godly peace. And the process of resolution is difficult and costly. Truth will produce anger before it produces happiness; righteousness will produce antagonism before it produces harmony. The gospel brings bad feelings before it can bring good feelings. A person who does not first mourn over his own sin will never be satisfied with God’s righteousness. The sword that Christ brings is the sword of His Word, which is the sword of truth and righteousness. Like the surgeon’s scalpel, it must cut before it heals, because peace cannot come where sin remains.

The great enemy of peace is sin. Sin separates men from God and causes disharmony and enmity with Him. And men’s lack of harmony with God causes their lack of harmony with each other. The world is filled with strife and war because it is filled with sin. Peace does not rule the world because the enemy of peace rules the world. Jeremiah tells us that “the heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick [or wicked]” (Jer. 17:9). Peace cannot reign where wickedness reigns. Wicked hearts cannot produce a peaceful society.” “There is no peace for the wicked,” says the Lord” (Isa. 48:22).

To talk of peace without talking of repentance of sin is to talk foolishly and vainly. The corrupt religious leaders of ancient Israel proclaimed, "Peace, peace," but there was no peace, because they and the rest of the people were not "ashamed of the abominations they had done" (Jer. 8:11-12).

"From within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man" (Mark 7:21-23). Sinful men cannot create peace, either within themselves or among themselves. Sin can produce nothing but strife and conflict. "For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing," James says. "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace" (James 3:16-18).

Regardless of what the circumstances might be, where there is conflict it is because of sin. If you separate the conflicting parties from each other but do not separate them from sin, at best you will succeed only in making a truce. Peacemaking cannot come by circumventing sin, because sin is the source of every conflict.

The bad news of the gospel comes before the good news. Until a person confronts his sin, it makes no sense to offer him a Savior. Until a person faces his false notions, it makes no sense to offer him the truth. Until a person acknowledges his enmity with God, it makes no sense to offer him peace with God.

Believers cannot avoid facing truth, or avoid facing others with the truth, for the sake of harmony. If someone is in serious error about a part of God's truth, he cannot have a right, peaceful relationship with others until the error is confronted and corrected. Jesus never evaded the issue of wrong doctrine or behavior. He treated the Samaritan woman from Sychar with great love and compassion, but He did not hesitate to confront her godless life. First He confronted her with her immoral living: "You have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband" (John 4:18). Then He corrected her false ideas about worship: "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father. You worship that which you do

not know; we worship that which we know, for salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:21-22).

The person who is not willing to disrupt and disturb in God’s name cannot be a peacemaker. To come to terms on anything less than God’s truth and righteousness is to settle for a truce—which confirms sinners in their sin and may leave them even further from the kingdom. Those who in the name of love or kindness or compassion try to witness by appeasement and compromise of God’s Word will find that their witness leads away from Him, not to Him. God’s peacemakers will not let a sleeping dog lie if it is opposed to God’s truth; they will not protect the status quo if it is ungodly and unrighteous. They are not willing to make peace at any price. God’s peace comes only in God’s way. Being a peacemaker is essentially the result of a holy life and the call to others to embrace the gospel of holiness.

THE MAKER OF PEACE: GOD

Men are without peace because they are without God, the source of peace. Both the Old and New Testaments are replete with statements of God’s being the God of peace (Lev. 26:6; 1 Kings 2:33; Ps. 29:11; Isa. 9:6; Ezek. 34:25; Rom. 15:33; 1 Cor. 14:33; 2 Thess. 3:16). Since the Fall, the only peace that men have known is the peace they have received as the gift of God. Christ’s coming to earth was the peace of God coming to earth, because only Jesus Christ could remove sin, the great barrier to peace. “But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace” (Eph. 2:13-14).

I once read the story of a couple at a divorce hearing who were arguing back and forth before the judge, accusing each other and refusing to take any blame themselves. Their little four-year-old boy was terribly distressed and confused. Not knowing what else to do, he took his father’s hand and his mother’s hand and kept tugging until he finally pulled the hands of his parents together.

In an infinitely greater way, Christ brings back together God and man, reconciling and bringing peace. “For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fulness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile

all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross” (Col. 1:19-20).

How could the cross bring peace? At the cross all of man’s hatred and anger was vented against God. On the cross the Son of God was mocked, cursed, spit upon, pierced, reviled, and killed. Jesus’ disciples fled in fear, the sky flashed lightning, the earth shook violently, and the veil of the Temple was torn in two. Yet through that violence God brought peace. God’s greatest righteousness confronted man’s greatest wickedness, and righteousness won. And because righteousness won, peace was won.

In his book *Peace Child* (Glendale, Calif.: Regal, 1979), Don Richardson tells of his long struggle to bring the gospel to the cannibalistic, headhunting Sawi tribe of Irian Jaya, Indonesia. Try as he would, he could not find a way to make the people understand the gospel message, especially the significance of Christ’s atoning death on the cross.

Sawi villages were constantly fighting among themselves, and because treachery, revenge, and murder were highly honored there seemed no hope of peace. The tribe, however, had a legendary custom that if one village gave a baby boy to another village, peace would prevail between the two villages as long as the child lived. The baby was called a “peace child.”

The missionary seized on that story as an analogy of the reconciling work of Christ. Christ, he said, is God’s divine Peace Child that He has offered to man, and because Christ lives eternally His peace will never end. That analogy was the key that unlocked the gospel for the Sawis. In a miraculous working of the Holy Spirit many of them believed in Christ, and a strong, evangelistic church soon developed—and peace came to the Sawis.

If the Father is the source of peace, and the Son is the manifestation of that peace, then the Holy Spirit is the agent of that peace. One of the most beautiful fruits the Holy Spirit gives to those in whom He resides is the fruit of peace (Gal. 5:22). The God of peace sent the Prince of Peace who sends the Spirit of peace to give the fruit of peace. No wonder the Trinity is called Yahweh Shalom, “The Lord is Peace” (Judg. 6:24).

The God of peace intends peace for His world, and the world that He created in peace He will one day restore to peace. The Prince of Peace will establish His kingdom of peace, for a thousand years on earth and for

all eternity in heaven. “ ‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope’ ” (Jer. 29:11). Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). The one who does not belong to God through Jesus Christ can neither have peace nor be a peacemaker. God can work peace through us only if He has worked peace in us.

Some of the earth’s most violent weather occurs on the seas. But the deeper one goes the more serene and tranquil the water becomes. Oceanographers report that the deepest parts of the sea are absolutely still. When those areas are dredged they produce remnants of plant and animal life that have remained undisturbed for thousands of years.

That is a picture of the Christian’s peace. The world around him, including his own circumstances, may be in great turmoil and strife, but in his deepest being he has peace that passes understanding. Those who are in the best of circumstances but without God can never find peace, but those in the worst of circumstances but with God need never lack peace.

THE MESSENGERS OF PEACE: BELIEVERS

The messengers of peace are believers in Jesus Christ. Only they can be peacemakers. Only those who belong to the Maker of peace can be messengers of peace. Paul tells us that “God has called us to peace” (1 Cor. 7:15) and that “now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18). The ministry of reconciliation is the ministry of peacemaking. Those whom God has called to peace He also calls to make peace. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us” (2 Cor. 5:19-20).

At least four things characterize a peacemaker. First, he is one who himself has made peace with God. The gospel is all about peace. Before we came to Christ we were at war with God. No matter what we may

consciously have thought about God, our hearts were against Him. It was “while we were enemies” of God that “we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son” (Rom. 5:10). When we received Christ as Savior and He imputed His righteousness to us, our battle with God ended, and our peace with God began. Because he has made peace with God he can enjoy the peace of God (Phil. 4:7; Col. 3:15). And because he has been given God’s peace he is called to share God’s peace. He is to have his very feet shod with “the gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15).

Because peace is always corrupted by sin, the peacemaking believer must be a holy believer, a believer whose life is continually cleansed by the Holy Spirit. Sin breaks our fellowship with God, and when fellowship with Him is broken, peace is broken. The disobedient, self-indulgent Christian is not suited to be an ambassador of peace.

Second, a peacemaker leads others to make peace with God. Christians are not an elite corps of those who have spiritually arrived and who look down on the rest of the world. They are a body of sinners cleansed by Jesus Christ and commissioned to carry His gospel of cleansing to the rest of the world.

The Pharisees were the embodiment of what peacemakers are not. They were smug, proud, complacent, and determined to have their own ways and defend their own rights. They had scant interest in making peace with Rome, with the Samaritans, or even with fellow Jews who did not follow their own party line. Consequently they created strife wherever they went. They cooperated with others only when it was to their own advantage, as they did with the Sadducees in opposing Jesus.

The peacemaking spirit is the opposite of that. It is built on humility, sorrow over its own sin, gentleness, hunger for righteousness, mercy, and purity of heart. G. Campbell Morgan commented that peacemaking is the propagated character of the man who, exemplifying all the rest of the beatitudes, thereby brings peace wherever he comes.

The peacemaker is a beggar who has been fed and who is called to help feed others. Having been brought to God, he is to bring others to God. The purpose of the church is to preach “peace through Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:36). To preach Christ is to promote peace. To bring a person to saving knowledge of Jesus Christ is the most peacemaking act a human being can perform. It is beyond what any diplomat or statesman can accomplish.

Third, a peacemaker helps others make peace with others. The moment a person comes to Christ he becomes at peace with God and with the church and becomes himself a peacemaker in the world. A peacemaker builds bridges between men and God and also between men and other men. The second kind of bridge building must begin, of course, between ourselves and others. Jesus said that if we are bringing a gift to God and a brother has something against us, we are to leave our gift at the altar and be reconciled to that brother before we offer the gift to God (Matt. 5:23-24). As far as it is possible, Paul says, “so far as it depends on [us],” we are to “be at peace with all men” (Rom. 12:18). We are even to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, “in order that [we] may be sons of [our] Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:44-45).

By definition a bridge cannot be one-sided. It must extend between two sides or it can never function. Once built, it continues to need support on both sides or it will collapse. So in any relationship our first responsibility is to see that our own side has a solid base. But we also have a responsibility to help the one on the other side build his base well. Both sides must be built on righteousness and truth or the bridge will not stand. God’s peacemakers must first be righteous themselves, and then must be active in helping others become righteous.

The first step in that bridge-building process is often to rebuke others about their sin, which is the supreme barrier to peace. “If your brother sins,” Jesus says, “go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church” (Matt. 18:15-17). That is a difficult thing to do, but obeying that command is no more optional than obeying any of the Lord’s other commands. The fact that taking such action often stirs up controversy and resentment is no excuse for not doing it. If we do so in the way and in the spirit the Lord teaches, the consequences are His responsibility. Not to do so does not preserve peace but through disobedience establishes a truce with sin.

Obviously there is the possibility of a price to pay, but any sacrifice is small in order to obey God. Often confrontation will bring more turmoil instead of less—misunderstanding, hurt feelings, and resentment. But the only way to peace is the way of righteousness. Sin that is not dealt with is

sin that will disrupt and destroy peace. Just as any price is worth paying to obey God, any price is worth paying to be rid of sin. “If your right eye makes you stumble,” Jesus said, “tear it out, and throw it from you; ... And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell” (Matt. 5:29-30). If we are unwilling to help others confront their sin, we will be unable to help them find peace.

Fourth, a peacemaker endeavors to find a point of agreement. God’s truth and righteousness must never be compromised or weakened, but there is hardly a person so ungodly, immoral, rebellious, pagan, or indifferent that we have absolutely no point of agreement with him. Wrong theology, wrong standards, wrong beliefs, and wrong attitudes must be faced and dealt with, but they are not usually the best places to start the process of witnessing or peacemaking.

God’s people are to contend without being contentious, to disagree without being disagreeable, and to confront without being abusive. The peacemaker speaks the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). To start with love is to start toward peace. We begin peacemaking by starting with whatever peaceful point of agreement we can find. Peace helps beget peace. The peacemaker always gives others the benefit of the doubt. He never assumes they will resist the gospel or reject his testimony. When he does meet opposition, he tries to be patient with other people’s blindness and stubbornness just as he knows the Lord was, and continues to be, patient with his own blindness and stubbornness.

God’s most effective peacemakers are often the simplest and least noticed people. They do not try to attract attention to themselves. They seldom win headlines or prizes for their peacemaking, because, by its very nature, true peacemaking is unobtrusive and prefers to go unnoticed. Because they bring righteousness and truth wherever they go, peacemakers are frequently accused of being troublemakers and disturbers of the peace—as Ahab accused Elijah of being (1 Kings 18:17) and the Jewish leaders accused Jesus of being (Luke 23:2, 5). But God knows their hearts, and He honors their work because they are working for His peace in His power. God’s peacemakers are never unfruitful or unrewarded. This is a mark of a true kingdom citizen: he not only hungers for righteousness and holiness in his own life but has a passionate desire to see those virtues in the lives of others.

THE MERIT OF PEACE: ETERNAL SONSHIP IN THE KINGDOM

The merit, or result, of peacemaking is eternal blessing as God's children in God's kingdom. Peacemakers **shall be called sons of God**.

Most of us are thankful for our heritage, our ancestors, our parents, and our family name. It is especially gratifying to have been influenced by godly grandparents and to have been raised by godly parents. But the greatest human heritage cannot match the believer's heritage in Jesus Christ, because we are "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17). Nothing compares to being a child of God.

Both *huios* and *teknon* are used in the New Testament to speak of believers' relationship to God. *Teknon* (child) is a term of tender affection and endearment as well as of relationship (see John 1:12; Eph. 5:8; 1 Pet. 1:14; etc.). **Sons**, however, is from *huios*, which expresses the dignity and honor of the relationship of a child to his parents. As God's peacemakers we are promised the glorious blessing of eternal sonship in His eternal kingdom.

Peacemaking is a hallmark of God's children. A person who is not a peacemaker either is not a Christian or is a disobedient Christian. The person who is continually disruptive, divisive, and quarrelsome has good reason to doubt his relationship to God altogether. God's sons—that is, all of His children, both male and female—are peacemakers. Only God determines who His children are, and He has determined that they are the humble, the penitent over sin, the gentle, the seekers of righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers.

Shall be called is in a continuous future passive tense. Throughout eternity peacemakers will go by the name "children of God." The passive form indicates that all heaven will call peacemakers **sons of God**, because God Himself has declared them to be His children.

Jacob loved Benjamin so much that his whole life came to be bound up in the life of that son (Gen. 44:30). Any parent worthy of the name loves his children more than his own life, and immeasurably more than all of his possessions together. God loves His children today as He loved Israel of old, as "the apple of His eye" (Zech. 2:8; cf. Ps. 17:8). The Hebrew expression "apple of the eye" referred to the cornea, the most exposed and sensitive part of the eye, the part we are the most careful to

protect. That is what God's children are to Him: those whom He is most sensitive about and most desires to protect. To attack God's children is to poke a ringer in God's eye. Offense against Christians is offense against God, because they are His very own children.

God puts the tears of His children in a bottle (Ps. 56:8), a figure reflecting the Hebrew custom of placing into a bottle the tears shed over a loved one. God cares for us so much that He stores up His remembrances of our sorrows and afflictions. God's children matter greatly to Him, and it is no little thing that we can call Him Father.

God's peacemakers will not always have peace in the world. As Jesus makes clear by the last beatitude, persecution follows peacemaking. In Christ we have forsaken the false peace *of* the world, and consequently we often will not have peace *with* the world. But as God's children we may always have peace even while we are *in* the world—the peace of God, which the world cannot give and the world cannot take away.

Happy Are the Harassed (5:10-12)

Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (5:10-12)

Of all the beatitudes, this last one seems the most contrary to human thinking and experience. The world does not associate happiness with humility, mourning over sin, gentleness, righteousness, mercy, purity of heart, or peacemaking holiness. Even less does it associate happiness with persecution.

Some years ago a popular national magazine took a survey to determine the things that make people happy. According to the responses they received, happy people enjoy other people but are not self-sacrificing; they refuse to participate in any negative feelings or emotions; and they have a sense of accomplishment based on their own self-sufficiency.

The person described by those principles is completely contrary to the kind of person the Lord says will be authentically happy. Jesus says a **blessed** person is not one who is self-sufficient but one who recognizes his own emptiness and need, who comes to God as a beggar, knowing he has no resources in himself. He is not confident in his own ability but is very much aware of his own inability. Such a person, Jesus says, is not at all positive about himself but mourns over his own sinfulness and isolation from a holy God. To be genuinely content, a person must not be self-serving but self-sacrificing. He must be gentle, merciful, pure in heart,

yearn for righteousness, and seek to make peace on God's terms—even if those attitudes cause him to suffer.

The Lord's opening thrust in the Sermon on the Mount climaxes with this great and sobering truth: those who faithfully live according to the first seven beatitudes are guaranteed at some point to experience the eighth. Those who live righteously will inevitably be persecuted for it. Godliness generates hostility and antagonism from the world. The crowning feature of the happy person is persecution! Kingdom people are rejected people. Holy people are singularly **blessed**, but they pay a price for it.

The last beatitude is really two in one, a single beatitude repeated and expanded. **Blessed** is mentioned twice (vv. 10, 11), but only one characteristic (**persecuted**) is given, although it is mentioned three times, and only one result (**for theirs is the kingdom of heaven**) is promised. **Blessed** apparently is repeated to emphasize the generous blessing given by God to those who are persecuted. "Double-blessed are those who are persecuted," Jesus seems to be saying.

Three distinct aspects of kingdom faithfulness are spoken of in this beatitude: the persecution, the promise, and the posture.

THE PERSECUTION

Those who have been persecuted are the citizens of the kingdom, those who live out the previous seven beatitudes. To the degree that they fulfill the first seven they may experience the eighth.

"All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). Before writing those words Paul had just mentioned some of his own "persecutions, and suffering, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra" (v. 11). As one who lived the kingdom life he had been persecuted, and all others who live the kingdom life can expect similar treatment. What was true in ancient Israel is true today and will remain true until the Lord returns. "As at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also" (Gal. 4:29).

Imagine a man who accepted a new job in which he had to work with especially profane people. When at the end of the first day his wife asked him how he had managed, he said, “Terrific! They never guessed I was a Christian.” As long as people have no reason to believe that we are Christians, at least obedient and righteous Christians, we need not worry about persecution. But as we manifest the standards of Christ we will share the reproach of Christ. Those born only of the flesh will persecute those born of the Spirit.

To live for Christ is to live in opposition to Satan in his world and in his system. Christlikeness in us will produce the same results as Christlikeness did in the apostles, in the rest of the early church, and in believers throughout history. Christ living in His people today produces the same reaction from the world that Christ Himself produced when He lived on earth as a man.

Righteousness is confrontational, and even when it is not preached in so many words, it confronts wickedness by its very contrast. Abel did not preach to Cain, but Abel’s righteous life, typified by his proper sacrifice to the Lord, was a constant rebuke to his wicked brother—who in a rage finally slew him. When Moses chose to identify with his own despised Hebrew people rather than compromise himself in the pleasures of pagan Egyptian society, he paid a great price. But he considered “the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt” (Heb. 11:26).

The Puritan writer Thomas Watson said of Christians: “Though they be never so meek, merciful, pure in heart, their piety will not shield them from sufferings. They must hang their harp on the willows and take the cross. The way to heaven is by way of thorns and blood.... Set it down as a maxim, if you will follow Christ you must see the swords and staves” (*The Beatitudes* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971], pp. 259-60).

Savonarola was one of the greatest reformers in the history of the church. In his powerful condemnation of personal sin and ecclesiastical corruption, that Italian preacher paved the way for the Protestant Reformation, which began a few years after his death. “His preaching was a voice of thunder,” writes one biographer, “and his denunciation of sin was so terrible that the people who listened to him went about the streets half-dazed, bewildered and speechless. His congregations were so often in tears that the whole building resounded with their sobs and their weeping.” But the people and the church could not long abide such a witness, and for

preaching uncompromised righteousness Savonarola was convicted of “heresy,” he was hanged, and his body was burned.

Persecution is one of the surest and most tangible evidences of salvation. Persecution is not incidental to faithful Christian living but is certain evidence of it. Paul encouraged the Thessalonians by sending them Timothy, “so that no man may be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know” (1 Thess. 3:3-4). Suffering persecution is part of the normal Christian life (cf. Rom. 8:16-17). And if we never experience ridicule, criticism, or rejection because of our faith, we have reason to examine the genuineness of it. “For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake,” Paul says, “not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me” (Phil. 1:29-30). Persecution for Christ’s sake is a sign of our own salvation just as it is a sign of damnation for those who do the persecuting (v. 28).

Whether Christians live in a relatively protected and tolerant society or whether they live under a godless, totalitarian regime, the world will find ways to persecute Christ’s church. To live a redeemed life to its fullest is to invite and to expect resentment and reaction from the world.

The fact that many professed believers are popular and praised by the world does not indicate that the world has raised its standards but that many who call themselves by Christ’s name have lowered theirs. As the time for Christ’s appearing grows closer we can expect opposition from the world to increase, not decrease. When Christians are not persecuted in some way by society it means that they are reflecting rather than confronting that society. And when we please the world we can be sure that we grieve the Lord (cf. James 4:4; 1 John 2:15-17).

When (*hotan*) can also mean whenever. The idea conveyed in the term is not that believers will be in a constant state of opposition, ridicule, or persecution, but that, whenever those things come to us because of our faith, we should not be surprised or resentful. Jesus was not *constantly* opposed and ridiculed, nor were the apostles. There were times of peace and even popularity. But every faithful believer will at times have *some* resistance and ridicule from the world, while others, for God’s own purposes, will endure more extreme suffering. But whenever and however

affliction comes to the child of God, his heavenly Father will be there with him to encourage and to bless. Our responsibility is not to seek out persecution, but to be willing to endure whatever trouble our faithfulness to Jesus Christ may bring, and to see it as a confirmation of true salvation.

The way to avoid persecution is obvious and easy. To live like the world, or at least to “live and let live,” will cost us nothing. To mimic the world’s standards, or never to criticize them, will cost us nothing. To keep quiet about the gospel, especially the truth that apart from its saving power men remain in their sins and are destined for hell, will cost us nothing. To go along with the world, to laugh at its jokes, to enjoy its entertainment, to smile when it mocks God and takes His name in vain, and to be ashamed to take a stand for Christ will not bring persecution. Those are the habits of sham Christians.

Jesus does not take faithlessness lightly. “For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when He comes in His glory, and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels” (Luke 9:26). If we are ashamed of Christ, He will be ashamed of us. Christ also warned, “Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for in the same way their fathers used to treat the false prophets” (Luke 6:26). To be popular with everyone is either to have compromised the faith or not to have true faith at all.

Though it was early in His ministry, by the time Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount He had already faced opposition. After He healed the man on the Sabbath, “the Pharisees went out and immediately began taking counsel with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him” (Mark 3:6). We learn from Luke that they were actually hoping Jesus would heal on the Sabbath “in order that they might find reason to accuse Him” (Luke 6:7). They already hated His teaching and wanted Him to commit an act serious enough to warrant His arrest.

Our Lord made it clear from His earliest teaching, and His opponents made it clear from their earliest reactions, that following Him was costly. Those who entered His kingdom would suffer for Him before they would reign with Him. That is the hard honesty that every preacher, evangelist, and witness of Christ should exemplify. We do the Lord no honor and those to whom we witness no benefit by hiding or minimizing the cost of following Him.

The cost of discipleship is billed to believers in many different ways. A Christian stonemason in Ephesus in Paul's day might have been asked to help build a pagan temple or shrine. Because he could not do that in good conscience, his faith would cost him the work and possibly his job and career. A believer today might be expected to hedge on the quality of his work in order to increase company profits. To follow His conscience in obedience to the Lord could also cost his job or at least a promotion. A Christian housewife who refuses to listen to gossip or to laugh at the crude jokes of her neighbors may find herself ostracized. Some costs will be known in advance and some will surprise us. Some costs will be great and some will be slight. But by the Lord's and the apostles' repeated promises, faithfulness always has a cost, which true Christians are willing to pay (contrast Matt. 13:20-21).

The second-century Christian leader Tertullian was once approached by a man who said, "I have come to Christ, but I don't know what to do. I have a job that I don't think is consistent with what Scripture teaches. What can I do? I must live." To that Tertullian replied, "Must you?" Loyalty to Christ is the Christian's only true choice. To be prepared for kingdom life is to be prepared for loneliness, misunderstanding, ridicule, rejection, and unfair treatment of every sort.

In the early days of the church the price paid was often the ultimate. To choose Christ might mean choosing death by stoning, by being covered with pitch and used as a human torch for Nero, or by being wrapped in animal skins and thrown to vicious hunting dogs. To choose Christ could mean torture by any number of excessively cruel and painful ways. That was the very thing Christ had in mind when He identified His followers as those willing to bear their crosses. That has no reference to mystical devotion, but is a call to be ready to die, if need be, for the cause of the Lord (see Matt. 10:35-39; 16:24-25).

In resentment against the gospel the Romans invented charges against Christians, such as accusing them of being cannibals because in the Lord's Supper they spoke of eating Jesus' body and drinking His blood. They accused them of having sexual orgies at their love feasts and even of setting fire to Rome. They branded believers as revolutionaries because they called Jesus Lord and King and spoke of God's destroying the earth by fire.

By the end of the first century, Rome had expanded almost to the outer limits of the known world, and unity became more and more of a problem. Because only the emperor personified the entire empire, the caesars came to be deified, and their worship was demanded as a unifying and cohesive influence. It became compulsory to give a verbal oath of allegiance to caesar once a year, for which a person would be given a verifying certificate, called a libellus. After publicly proclaiming, “Caesar is Lord,” the person was free to worship any other gods he chose. Because faithful Christians refused to declare such an allegiance to anyone but Christ, they were considered traitors—for which they suffered confiscation of property, loss of work, imprisonment, and often death. One Roman poet spoke of them as “the panting, huddling flock whose only crime was Christ.”

In the last beatitude Jesus speaks of three specific types of affliction endured for Christ’s sake: physical persecution, verbal insult, and false accusation.

PHYSICAL PERSECUTION

First, Jesus says, we can expect physical persecution. **Have been persecuted** (v. 10), **persecute** (v. 11), and **persecuted** (v. 12) are from *diōkō*, which has the basic meaning of chasing, driving away, or pursuing. From that meaning developed the connotations of physical persecution, harassment, abuse, and other unjust treatment.

All of the other beatitudes have to do with inner qualities, attitudes, and spiritual character. The eighth beatitude speaks of external things that happen to believers, but the teaching behind these results also has to do with attitude. The believer who has the qualities required in the previous beatitudes will also have the quality of willingness to face persecution **for the sake of righteousness**. He will have the attitude of self-sacrifice for the sake of Christ. It is the lack of fear and shame and the presence of courage and boldness that says, “I will be in this world what Christ would have me be. I will say in this world what Christ will have me say. Whatever it costs, I will be and say those things.”

The Greek verb is a passive perfect participle, and could be translated “allow themselves to be persecuted.” The perfect form indicates continuousness, in this case a continuous willingness to endure persecution if it is the price of godly living. This beatitude speaks of a constant attitude of accepting whatever faithfulness to Christ may bring.

It is in the demands of this beatitude that many Christians break down in their obedience to the Lord, because here is where the genuineness of their response to the other beatitudes is most strongly tested. It is here where we are most tempted to compromise the righteousness we have hungered and thirsted for. It is here where we find it convenient to lower God’s standards to accommodate the world and thereby avoid conflicts and problems that we know obedience will bring.

But God does not want His gospel altered under pretense of its being less demanding, less righteous, or less truthful than it is. He does not want witnesses who lead the unsaved into thinking that the Christ life costs nothing. A synthetic gospel, a man-made seed, produces no real fruit.

VERBAL INSULTS

Second, Jesus promises that kingdom citizens are **blessed . . . when men cast insults** at them. *Oneidizō* carries the idea of reviling, upbraiding, or seriously insulting, and literally means to cast in one’s teeth. To **cast insults** is to throw abusive words in the face of an opponent, to mock viciously.

To be an obedient citizen of the kingdom is to court verbal abuse and reviling. As He stood before the Sanhedrin after His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was spat upon, beaten, and taunted with the words “Prophecy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You?” (Matt. 26:67-68). As He was being sentenced to crucifixion by Pilate, Jesus was again beaten, spit upon, and mocked, this time by the Roman soldiers (Mark 15:19-20).

Faithfulness to Christ may even cause friends and loved ones to say things that cut and hurt deeply. Several years ago I received a letter from a woman who told of a friend who had decided to divorce her husband for no just cause. The friend was a professed Christian, but when she was

confronted with the truth that what she was doing was scripturally wrong, she became defensive and hostile. She was reminded of God's love and grace, of His power to mend whatever problems she and her husband were having, and of the Bible's standards for marriage and divorce. But she replied that she did not believe the Bible was really God's Word but was simply a collection of men's ideas about God that each person had to accept, reject, or interpret for himself. When her friend wanted to read some specific Bible passages to her, she refused to listen. She had made up her mind and would not give heed to Scripture or to reason. With hate in her eyes she accused the other woman of luring her into her house in order to ridicule and embarrass her, saying she could not possibly love her by questioning her right to get a divorce. As she left, she slammed the door behind her.

The woman who wrote the letter concluded by saying, "I love her, and it is with a heavy heart that I realize the extent of her rejection of Christ. Painful as this has been, I thank God. For the first time in my life I know what it is to be separate from the world."

Paul told the Corinthian church, whose members had such a difficult time separating themselves from the world, "For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men" (1 Cor. 4:9). Paul drew the expression "become a spectacle" from the practice of Roman generals to parade their captives through the street of the city, making a spectacle of them as trophies of war who were doomed to die once the general had used them to serve his proud and arrogant purposes. That is the way the world is inclined to treat those who are faithful to Christ.

In a note of strong sarcasm to enforce his point, Paul continues, "We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor" (v. 10). Many in the Corinthian church suffered none of the ridicule and conflict the apostle suffered because they prized their standing before the world more than their standing before the Lord. In the world's eyes they were prudent, strong, and distinguished—because they were still so much like the world.

God does not call His people to be sanctified celebrities, using their worldly reputations in a self-styled effort to bring Him glory, using

their power to supplement His power and their wisdom to enhance His gospel. We can mark it down as a cardinal principle that to the extent the world embraces a Christian cause or person—or that a Christian cause or person embraces the world—to that extent that cause or person has compromised the gospel and scriptural standards.

If Paul had capitalized on his human credentials he could have drawn greater crowds and certainly have received greater welcome wherever he went. His credentials were impressive. “If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more,” he says. He was “circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee” (Phil. 3:4-5). He had been “caught up to the third heaven,... into Paradise” (2 Cor. 12:2, 4) and had spoken in tongues more than anyone else (1 Cor. 14:18). He had studied under the famous rabbi Gamaliel and was even a free-born Roman citizen (Acts 22:3, 29). But all those things the apostle “counted as loss for the sake of Christ,... but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:7-8). He refused to use worldly means to try to achieve spiritual purposes, because he knew they would fail.

The marks of authenticity Paul carried as an apostle and minister of Jesus Christ were his credentials as a servant and a sufferer, “in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure” (2 Cor. 11:23-27).

The only thing of which he would boast was his weakness (12:5), and when he preached he was careful not to rely on “superiority of speech or of wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:1), which he could easily have done. “For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified,” he told the Corinthians. “And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and

of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God” (vv. 2-5).

We live in a day when the church, more than ever before, is engaged in self-glorification and an attempt to gain worldly recognition that must be repulsive to God. When the church tries to use the things of the world to do the work of heaven, it only succeeds in hiding heaven from the world. And when the world is pleased with the church, we can be sure that God is not. We can be equally sure that when we are pleasing to God, we will not be pleasing to the system of Satan.

FALSE ACCUSATION

Third, faithfulness to Christ will bring enemies of the gospel to **say all kinds of evil against [us] falsely**. Whereas **insults** are abusive words said to our faces, these **evil** things are primarily abusive words said behind our backs.

Jesus’ critics said of Him, “Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners” (Matt. 11:19). If the world said that of the sinless Christ, what things can His followers expect to be called and accused of?

Slander behind our backs is harder to take partly because it is harder to defend against than direct accusation. It has opportunity to spread and be believed before we have a chance to correct it. Much harm to our reputations can be done even before we are aware someone has slandered us.

We cannot help regretting slander, but we should not grieve about it. We should count ourselves **blessed**, as our Lord assures us we shall be when the slander is **on account of Me**.

Arthur Pink comments that “it is a strong proof of human depravity that men’s curses and Christ’s blessings should meet on the same persons” (*An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950], p. 39). We have no surer evidence of the Lord’s blessing than to be cursed for His sake. It should not seriously bother us when men’s curses fall on the head that Christ has eternally blessed.

The central theme of the Beatitudes is righteousness. The first two have to do with recognizing our own unrighteousness, and the next five have to do with our seeking and reflecting righteousness. The last beatitude has to do with our suffering **for the sake of righteousness**. The same truth is expressed in the second part of the beatitude as **on account of Me**. Jesus is not speaking of every hardship, problem, or conflict believers may face, but those that the world brings on us *because of* our faithfulness to the Lord.

It is clear again that the hallmark of the **blessed** person is **righteousness**. Holy living is what provokes persecution of God's people. Such persecution because of a righteous life is joyous. Peter identifies such experience as a happy honor.

And who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong. For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.” (1 Pet. 3:13-18)

With those words, the apostle extols the privilege of suffering for holiness, and thus of sharing in a small way in the same type of suffering Christ endured. In the next chapter, Peter emphasizes the same thing.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you

are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.... If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God.... Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” (4:12-14,16,19)

When we are hated, maligned, or afflicted as Christians, the real animosity is not against us but against Christ. Satan’s great enemy is Christ, and he opposes us because we belong to Jesus Christ, because He is in us. When we are despised and attacked by the world, the real target is the righteousness for which we stand and which we exemplify. That is why it is easy to escape persecution. Whether under pagan Rome, atheistic Communism, or simply a worldly boss, it is usually easy to be accepted if we will denounce or compromise our beliefs and standards. The world will accept us if we are willing to put some distance between ourselves and the Lord’s righteousness.

In the closing days of His ministry Jesus repeatedly and plainly warned His disciples of that truth. “If the world hates you,” He said, “you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me” (John 15:18-21).

The world went along for thousands of years before it ever saw a perfect man. Until Christ came, every person, even God’s best, were sinful and flawed. All had feet of clay. To see God’s people fail and sin is often taken as an encouragement by the wicked. They point a finger and say, “He claims to be righteous and good, but look at what he did.” It is easy to feel smug and secure in one’s sinfulness when everyone else is also sinful and imperfect. But when Christ came, the world finally saw the perfect Man, and all excuse for smugness and self-confidence vanished. And instead of rejoicing in the sinless Man, sinful men resented the rebuke that His

teaching and His life brought against them. They crucified Him for His very perfection, for His very righteousness.

Aristides the Just was banished from ancient Athens. When a stranger asked an Athenian why Aristides was voted out of citizenship he replied, “Because we became tired of his always being just.” A people who prided themselves in civility and justice chafed when something or someone was *too* just.

Because they refused to compromise the gospel either in their teaching or in their lives, most of the apostles suffered a martyr’s death. According to tradition, Andrew was fastened by cords to a cross in order to prolong and intensify his agony. We are told that Peter, by his own request, was crucified head down, because he felt unworthy to die in the same manner as Jesus. Paul presumably was beheaded by Nero. Though John escaped a violent death, he died in exile on Patmos.

THE PROMISE

But compared to what is gained, even a martyr’s price is small. Each beatitude begins with **blessed** and, as already suggested, Jesus pronounces a double blessing on those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, which is for His own sake. The specific blessing promised to those who are so persecuted is that **theirs is the kingdom of heaven**. The citizens of the kingdom are going to inherit the kingdom. Paul expresses a similar thought in 2 Thessalonians 1:5-7—“This a plain indication of God’s righteous judgment so that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire.”

I believe that the blessings of the **kingdom** are threefold: present, millennial, and eternal. Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel’s sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and

sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life” (Mark 10:29-30).

First, we are promised blessings here and now. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, was falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife, and was imprisoned. But the Lord raised him to be the prime minister of Egypt and used him to save His chosen people from starvation and extinction. Daniel was thrown into a den of lions because of his refusal to stop worshipping the Lord. Not only was his life spared, but he was restored to his high position as the most valued commissioner of King Darius, and the king made a declaration that “in all the dominion of my kingdom men are to fear and tremble before the God of Daniel; for He is the living God and enduring forever” (Dan. 6:26).

Not every believer is rewarded in this life with the things of this life. But every believer is rewarded in this life with the comfort, strength, and joy of His indwelling Lord. He is also blessed with the assurance that no service or sacrifice for the Lord will be in vain.

As a sequel to his book *Peace Child*, Don Richardson has written *Lords of the Earth* (Glendale, Calif.: Regal, 1977). He tells the story of Stan Dale, another missionary to Irian Jaya, Indonesia, who ministered to the Yali tribe in the Snow Mountains. The Yali had one of the strictest known religions in the world. For a tribe member even to question, much less disobey, one of its tenets brought instant death. There could never be any change or modification. The Yali had many sacred spots scattered throughout their territory. If even a small child were to crawl onto one of those sacred pieces of ground, he was considered defiled and cursed. To keep the whole village from being involved in that curse, the child would be thrown into the rushing Heluk River to drown and be washed downstream.

When Stan Dale came with his wife and four children to that cannibalistic people he was not long tolerated. He was attacked one night and miraculously survived being shot with five arrows. After treatment in a hospital he immediately returned to the Yali. He worked unsuccessfully for several years, and the resentment and hatred of the tribal priests increased. One day as he, another missionary named Phil Masters, and a Dani tribesman named Yemu were facing what they knew was an imminent attack, the Yali suddenly came upon them. As the others ran for safety, Stan and Yemu remained back, hoping somehow to dissuade the

Yali from their murderous plans. As Stan confronted his attackers, they shot him with dozens of arrows. As the arrows entered his flesh he would pull them out and break them in two. Eventually he no longer had the strength to pull the arrows out, but he remained standing.

Yemu ran back to where Phil was standing, and Phil persuaded him to keep running. With his eyes fixed on Stan, who was still standing with some fifty arrows in his body, Phil remained where he was and was himself soon surrounded by warriors. The attack had begun with hilarity, but it turned to fear and desperation when they saw that Stan did not fall. Their fear increased when it took nearly as many arrows to down Phil as it had Stan. They dismembered the bodies and scattered them about the forest in an attempt to prevent the resurrection of which they had heard the missionaries speak. But the back of their “unbreakable” pagan system was broken, and through the witness of the two men who were not afraid to die in order to bring the gospel to this lost and violent people, the Yali tribe and many others in the surrounding territory came to Jesus Christ. Even Stan’s fifth child, a baby at the time of this incident, was saved reading the book about his father.

Stan and Phil were not rewarded in this life with the things of this life. But they seem to have been double-blessed with the comfort, strength, and joy of their indwelling Lord—and the absolute confidence that their sacrifice for Him would not be in vain.

There is also a millennial aspect to the kingdom blessing. When Christ establishes His thousand-year reign on earth, we will be co-regents with Him over that wonderful, renewed earth (Rev. 20:4).

Finally, there is the reward of the eternal kingdom, the blessing of all blessings of living forever in our Lord’s kingdom enjoying His very presence. The ultimate fruit of kingdom life is eternal life. Even if the world takes from us every possession, every freedom, every comfort, every satisfaction of physical life, it can take nothing from our spiritual life, either now or throughout eternity.

The Beatitudes begin and end with the promise of **the kingdom of heaven** (cf. v. 3). The major promise of the Beatitudes is that in Christ we become kingdom citizens now and forever. No matter what the world does to us, it cannot affect our possession of Christ’s kingdom.

THE POSTURE

Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (5:12)

The believer's response to persecution and affliction should not be to retreat and hide. To escape from the world is to escape responsibility. Because we belong to Christ, we are no longer *of* this world, but He has sent us *into* this world to serve just as He Himself came into this world to serve (John 17:14-18).

His followers are "the salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" (Matt. 5:13-14). For our salt to flavor the earth and our light to lighten the world we must be active in the world. The gospel is not given to be hidden but to enlighten. "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (vv. 15-16).

When we become Christ's salt and Christ's light, our salt will sting the world's open wounds of sin and our light will irritate its eyes that are used to darkness. But even when our salt and light are resented, rejected, and thrown back in our face, we should **rejoice, and be glad**.

Be glad is from *agalliaō*, which means to exult, to rejoice greatly, to be overjoyed, as is clear in the King James Version, "be exceeding glad." The literal meaning is to skip and jump with happy excitement. Jesus uses the imperative mood, which makes His words more than a suggestion. We are *commanded* to **be glad**. Not to be glad when we suffer for Christ's sake is to be untrusting and disobedient.

The world can take away a great deal from God's people, but it cannot take away their joy and their happiness. We know that nothing the world can do to us is permanent. When people attack us for Christ's sake, they are really attacking Him (cf. Gal. 6:17; Col. 1:24). And their attacks can do us no more permanent damage than they can do Him.

Jesus gives two reasons for our rejoicing and being glad when we are persecuted for His sake. First, He says, **your reward in heaven is great**. Our present life is no more than "a vapor that appears for a little

while and then vanishes away” (James 4:14); but **heaven** is forever. Small wonder that Jesus tells us not to lay up treasures for ourselves here on earth, “where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal” (Matt. 6:19-20). Whatever we do for the Lord now, including suffering for Him—in fact, especially suffering for Him—reaps eternal dividends.

God’s dividends are not ordinary dividends. They are not only eternal but are also **great**. If God “is able to do exceedingly abundantly beyond all that *we* ask or think” (Eph. 3:20), how much more abundantly is He able to grant what He Himself promises to us?

We often hear, and perhaps are tempted to think, that it is unspiritual and crass to serve God for the sake of rewards. But that is one of the motives that God Himself gives for serving Him. We first of all serve and obey Christ because we love Him, just as on earth He loved and obeyed the Father because He loved Him. But it was also because of “the joy set before Him” that Christ Himself “endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb. 12:2). It is neither selfish nor unspiritual to do the Lord’s work for a motive that He Himself gives and has followed.

Second, we are to **rejoice** because the world **persecuted the prophets who were before** us in the same way that it persecutes us. When we suffer for Christ’s sake, we are in the best possible company. To be afflicted for righteous-ness’s sake is to stand in the ranks of the prophets. Persecution is a mark of our faithfulness just as it was a mark of the prophets’ faithfulness. When we suffer for Christ’s sake we know beyond a doubt that we belong to God, because we are experiencing the same reaction from the world that the prophets experienced.

When we suffer for our Lord we join with the prophets and the other saints of old who “experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground” (Heb. 11:36-38). Though the world is not worthy of their company, every persecuted believer is. To be persecuted verifies that we belong to the line of the righteous.

Our assurance of salvation does not come from knowing we made a decision somewhere in the past. Rather, our assurance that the decision was a true decision for Jesus Christ is found in the life of righteousness that results in suffering for the sake of Christ. Many will claim to have preached Christ, cast out demons, and done mighty works for His sake, but will be refused heaven (Matt. 7:21-23). But none who have suffered righteously for Him will be left out.

The world cannot handle the righteous life that characterizes kingdom living. It is not understandable and acceptable to them, and they cannot stomach it even in others. Poverty of spirit runs counter to the pride of the unbelieving heart. The repentant, contrite disposition that mourns over sin is never appreciated by the callous, indifferent, unsympathetic world. The meek and quiet spirit that takes wrong and does not strike back is regarded as pusillanimous, and it rasps against the militant, vengeful spirit characteristic of the world. To long after righteousness is repugnant to those whose fleshly cravings are rebuked by it, as is a merciful spirit to those whose hearts are hard and cruel. Purity of heart is a painful light that exposes hypocrisy and corruption, and peacemaking is a virtue praised by the contentious, self-seeking world in words but not in heart.

John Chrysostom, a godly leader in the fourth-century church preached so strongly against sin that he offended the unscrupulous Empress Eudoxia as well as many church officials. When summoned before Emperor Arcadius, Chrysostom was threatened with banishment if he did not cease his uncompromising preaching. His response was, "Sire, you cannot banish me, for the world is my Father's house." "Then I will slay you," Arcadius said. "Nay, but you cannot, for my life is hid with Christ in God," came the answer. "Your treasures will be confiscated" was the next threat, to which John replied, "Sire, that cannot be, either. My treasures are in heaven, where none can break through and steal." "Then I will drive you from man, and you will have no friends left!" was the final, desperate warning. "That you cannot do, either," answered John, "for I have a Friend in heaven who has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'" Chrysostom was indeed banished, first to Armenia and then farther away to Pityus on the Black Sea, to which he never arrived because he died on the way. But neither his banishment nor his death disproved or diminished his claims. The things that he valued most highly not even an emperor could take from him.

Salt of the Earth and
Light of the World
(5:13-16)

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under the peck-measure, but on the lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. (5:13-16)

In these four verses the Lord summarizes the function of believers in the world. Reduced to one word, that function is *influence*. Whoever lives according to the Beatitudes is going to function in the world as salt and light. Christian character consciously or unconsciously affects other people for better or for worse. As John Donne reminds us, “No man is an island.”

An ancient Greek myth tells of a goddess who came to earth unseen but whose presence was always known by the blessings she left behind in her pathway. Trees burned by forest fires sprouted new leaves, and violets sprang up in her footprints. As she passed a stagnant pool its water became fresh, and parched fields turned green as she walked through them. Hills and valleys blossomed with new life and beauty wherever she went. Another Greek story tells of a princess sent as a present to a king. She was as beautiful as Aphrodite and her breath was as sweet as perfume. But she carried with her the contagion of death and decay. From infancy she had fed on nothing but poison and became so permeated with it that she poisoned the very atmosphere around her. Her breath would kill a swarm

of insects; she would pick a flower and it would wither. A bird flying too close would fall dead at her feet.

Andrew Murray lived an exceptionally holy life. Among those on whom his influence was the greatest were his children and grandchildren. Five of his six sons became ministers of the gospel and four of his daughters became minister's wives. Ten grandsons became ministers and thirteen grandchildren became missionaries.

Woodrow Wilson told the story of being in a barbershop one time. "I was sitting in a barber chair when I became aware that a powerful personality had entered the room. A man had come quietly in upon the same errand as myself to have his hair cut and sat in the chair next to me. Every word the man uttered, though it was not in the least didactic, showed a personal interest in the man who was serving him. And before I got through with what was being done to me I was aware I had attended an evangelistic service, because Mr. D. L. Moody was in that chair. I purposely lingered in the room after he had left and noted the singular affect that his visit had brought upon the barber shop. They talked in undertones. They did not know his name, but they knew something had elevated their thoughts, and I felt that I left that place as I should have left a place of worship."

Many years ago Elihu Burrit wrote, "No human being can come into this world without increasing or diminishing the sum total of human happiness, not only of the present but of every subsequent age of humanity. No one can detach himself from this connection. There is no sequestered spot in the universe, no dark niche along the disc of nonexistence to which he can retreat from his relations with others, where he can withdraw the influence of his existence upon the moral destiny of the world. Everywhere his presence or absence will be felt. Everywhere he will have companions who will be better or worse because of him. It is an old saying, and one of the fearful and fathomless statements of import, that we are forming characters for eternity. Forming characters? Whose? Our own or others? Both. And in that momentous fact lies the peril and responsibility of our existence. Who is sufficient for the thought? Thousands of my fellow beings will yearly enter eternity with characters differing from those they would have carried thither had I never lived. The sunlight of that world will reveal my finger marks in their primary formations and in their successive strata of thought and life."

In Matthew 5:13-16 Jesus talks about the influence of His people on the world for God and for good. In His high priestly prayer Jesus said to His Father, “I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.... As Thou didst send Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world” (John 17:15-16, 18). John wrote, “Do not love the world, nor the things in the world” (1 John 2:15). Christ’s kingdom people are not to reflect the world but they are to influence the world; they are to be in it but not of it.

When we live the life of the Beatitudes some people will respond favorably and be saved, whereas others will ridicule and persecute us. In the words of Paul, we will manifest “the sweet aroma of the knowledge of [Christ] in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life” (2 Cor. 2:14-16). In either case our lives have profound effects, and even persecution is not to alter our function in the world. We “are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that [we] may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called [us] out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

Though Jesus was speaking before a great multitude of people on the hillside, His teaching about kingdom life was primarily for His disciples, for those who believed in Him. His concern was for the all of the multitude, and in hearing His teaching on godly living many of them may have been drawn to faith. But the principles He teaches here are appropriate only for believers, for they are impossible to follow apart from the power of God’s own Spirit.

Here is a mandate for Christians to influence the world. The Beatitudes are not to be lived in isolation or only among fellow believers, but everywhere we go. God’s only witnesses are His children, and the world has no other way of knowing of Him except through the testimony of what we are.

The figures of salt and light emphasize different characteristics of influence, but their basic purpose is the same. They will both be studied from the aspects of the presupposition of the world’s corruption and darkness, the plan for believers’ godly dominion in the world, the problem of the danger of failure, and the purpose of glorifying God.

THE PRESUPPOSITION: CORRUPTION AND DARKNESS

The world needs salt because it is corrupt and it needs light because it is dark. G. Campbell Morgan said, “Jesus, looking out over the multitudes of His day, saw the corruption, the disintegration of life at every point, its breakup, its spoliation; and, because of His love of the multitudes, He knew the thing that they needed most was salt in order that the corruption should be arrested. He saw them also wrapped in gloom, sitting in darkness, groping amid mists and fogs. He knew that they needed, above everything else,... light” (*The Gospel According to Matthew* [New York: Revell, 1929], p. 46).

The biblical world view is that the world is corrupted and decayed, that it is dark and darkening. “Evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived,” Paul warns (2 Tim. 3:13). The world cannot do anything but get worse, because it has no inherent goodness to build on, no inherent spiritual and moral life in which it can grow. Year after year the system of evil accumulates a deeper darkness.

A college student told me his professor had recently told the class that marriage was on the decline because man was evolving to a higher level. Marriage was something that man needed only at the lower stages of his evolutionary development. Now that man had ascended farther up the evolutionary scale, marriage was falling off just as his prehensile tail had done millions of years ago.

Any person who knows the history of mankind, even the history of the past hundred years, and thinks that man is evolving upward is “deceiving and being deceived,” just as Paul said. Man has increased in scientific, medical, historical, educational, psychological, and technological knowledge to an astounding degree. But he has not changed his own basic nature and he has not improved society. Man’s knowledge has greatly improved, but his morals have progressively degenerated. His confidence has increased, but his peace of mind has diminished. His accomplishments have increased, but his sense of purpose and meaning have all but disappeared. Instead of improving the moral and spiritual quality of his life, man’s discoveries and accomplishments have simply provided ways for him to express and promote his depravity faster and

more destructively. Modern man has simply invented more ways to corrupt and destroy himself.

Many philosophers, poets, and religious leaders at the end of the last century had great optimism about man's having come of age, about his inevitable moral and social improvement. They believed that Utopia was around the corner and that man was getting better and better in every way. The golden age of mankind was near. Wars would be a bad memory, crime and violence would disappear, ignorance would be gone, and disease would be eradicated. Peace and brotherhood would reign completely and universally. Few people today hold to such blind, unrealistic ideas.

It was not many generations after the Fall that "the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). Because wickedness was so great, God destroyed every person but eight—and they were far from perfect. A few generations after that, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah became so rotten from the offspring of those eight that God destroyed them with fire and brimstone. Another day of judgment is coming when God will again rain fire on earth, but that destruction will be a holocaust such as men have never dreamed of. "The present heavens and earth by His word are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men... the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up" (2 Pet. 3:7,10).

Man is infected with the deadly virus of sin, which has no cure apart from God. Yet unlike their attitude toward physical diseases, most men do not want their sin cured. They love their decadence and they hate God's righteousness (cf. John 3:19-21). They love their own way and they hate God's.

Man's knowledge is increasing by quantum leaps, but his increased knowledge is mechanical knowledge, inanimate knowledge, lifeless knowledge, knowledge that has no bearing on the inner man (cf. 2 Tim. 3:7). His knowledge does not retard his corruption but rather is used to intensify and defend it.

Bertrand Russell devoted most of his 96 years to the study of philosophy. Yet at the end of his life he acknowledged that philosophy proved to be a washout, and had taken him nowhere. Nothing he had thought or had heard that other philosophers had thought had changed the

world for the better. He felt that the basic causes of man's problems, not to mention the solutions, had evaded the best minds of every age including his own.

Some scientists have proposed that by surgery or careful electronic stimulation of the brain, a person's bad impulses can be eradicated, leaving only the better part of his nature. Others propose that the ideal, crime-free, problem-free person will be developed by genetic engineering. But every part of every man is corrupt. He has no inherent, naturally good traits that can be isolated from the bad. His total nature is depraved. David knew that he was sinful from the moment of his conception. "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (Ps. 51:5). There is no good part in man from which a better can be constructed or from which his corrupt part can be isolated. Isaiah said, "The whole head is sick, and the whole heart is faint" (Isa. 1:5), and Jeremiah labeled the heart as "more deceitful than all else" and as "desperately sick" (Jer. 17:9).

We go on from war to greater war, from crime to greater crime, from immorality to greater immorality, from perversion to greater perversion. The spiral is downward, not upward (see Rom. 1:18-32). Despair and pessimism reign in our day, because the honest person knows that man has not been able to retard his descent. He hopes that he can just live out his own life before someone pushes the button that blows mankind into oblivion.

A leading news magazine reported a few years ago that Americans tend to see themselves as potential saints rather than real-life sinners. Another leading magazine reported, "Today's young radicals in particular are almost painfully sensitive to... wrongs of their society, and they denounce them violently. But at the same time they are typically American in that they fail to place evil in its historic and human perspective. To them evil is not an irreducible component of man; it is not an inescapable fact of life, but something committed by the older generation, attributable to a particular class or the establishment and eradicable through love or revolution" (*Time*, 5 December 1969).

Just as every person is affected by the sin problem, every person also contributes to the sin problem.

THE PLAN: THE DOMINION OF HIS DISCIPLES

The church cannot accept the world's self-centeredness, easy solutions, immorality, amorality, and materialism. We are called to minister to the world while being separated from its standards and ways. Sadly, however, the church today is more influenced by the world than the world is influenced by the church.

In both verse 13 and verse 14 the pronoun you is emphatic. The idea is, "You are the only salt of the earth" and "You are the only light of the world." The world's corruption will not be retarded and its darkness will not be illumined unless God's people are its salt and light. The very ones who are despised by the world and persecuted by the world are the world's only hope.

The **you** in both verses is also plural. It is His whole body, the church, that is called to be the world's salt and light. Each grain of salt has its limited influence, but it is only as the church collectively is scattered in the world that change will come. One ray of light will accomplish little, but when joined with other rays a great light is created.

Some years ago a magazine carried a series of pictures that graphically depicted a tragic story. The first picture was of a vast wheat field in western Kansas. The second showed a distressed mother sitting in a farmhouse in the center of the field of wheat. The accompanying story explained that her four-year-old son had wandered away from the house and into the field when she was not looking. The mother and father looked and looked all day but the little fellow was too short to see or be seen over the wheat. The third picture showed dozens of friends and neighbors who had heard of the boy's plight and who had joined hands the next morning to make a long human chain as they walked through the field searching. The final picture was of the heartbroken father holding his lifeless son who had been found too late and had died of exposure. The caption underneath read, "O God, if only we had joined hands sooner."

The world is full of lost souls who cannot see their way above the distractions and barriers of the world and cannot find their way to the Father's house until Christians join together as salt and light and sweep through the world in search of them. Our work is not simply as individual

grains of salt or as individual rays of light but as the whole church of Jesus Christ.

Are stresses being rather than doing. Jesus is stating a fact, not giving a command or request. Salt and light represent what Christians *are*. The only question, as Jesus goes on to say, is whether or not we are tasteful salt and effective light. The very fact that we belong to Jesus Christ makes us His salt and light in the world.

Christ is the source of our savor and of our light. He is “the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man” (John 1:9). “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world,” He said (John 9:5). But now that He has left the world His light comes to the world through those whom He has enlightened. We shine forth the reflected light of Christ. “You were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord,” Paul tells us; “walk as children of light” (Eph. 5:8). “For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Col. 1:13).

We are God’s salt to retard corruption and His light to reveal truth. One function is negative, the other positive. One is silent, the other is verbal. By the indirect influence of the way we live we retard corruption, and by the direct influence of what we say we manifest light.

Both salt and light are unlike that which they are to influence. God has changed us from being part of the corrupted and corrupting world to being salt that can help preserve it. He has changed us from our own darkness to be His agents of giving light to others. By definition, an influence must be different from that which it influences, and Christians therefore must be different from the world they are called to influence. We cannot influence the world for God when we are worldly ourselves. We cannot give light to the world if we revert to places and ways of darkness ourselves.

The great blessings emphasized in verses 3-12 lead to the great responsibilities of verses 13-16. The blessings of heaven, comfort, inheriting the earth, being filled with righteousness, being given mercy, being called God’s children, and being given heavenly reward bring the responsibility of being His salt and light in the world.

BEING SALT

Salt has always been valuable in human society, often much more so than it is today. During a period of ancient Greek history it was called *theon*, which means divine. The Romans held that, except for the sun, nothing was more valuable than salt. Often Roman soldiers were paid in salt, and it was from that practice that the expression “not worth his salt” originated.

In many ancient societies salt was used as a mark of friendship. For two persons to share salt indicated a mutual responsibility to look after one another’s welfare. Even if a worst enemy ate salt with you, you were obliged to treat him as a friend.

Salt was frequently used in the ancient Near East to bind a covenant, somewhat in the way an agreement or contract is notarized in our day. When the parties to a covenant ate salt together before witnesses, the covenant was given special authentication. Though no particulars are given in the account, we learn from 2 Chronicles 13:5 that God made a covenant of salt with David. God prescribed that all sacrificial offerings in Israel were to be offered with salt “so that the salt of the covenant of your God shall not be lacking” (Lev. 2:13).

In numerous ways Jesus’ hearers—whether Greek, Roman, or Jewish—would have understood **salt of the earth** to represent a valuable commodity. Though most could not have understood His full meaning, they knew He was saying that His followers were to have an extremely important function in the world. Whatever else it may have represented, salt always stood for that which was of high value and importance.

Many suggestions have been made as to the particular characteristics of salt that Jesus intended to associate with this figure. Some interpreters point out that salt is white and therefore represents purity. As the “pure in heart” (v. 8), Jesus’ disciples are to be pure before the world and are to be God’s means of helping purify the rest of the world. Their glistening white moral and spiritual purity is to contrast with the moral discolor of the world. Christians are to exemplify the divine standards of righteousness in thought, speech, and actions, remaining “unstained by the world” (James 1:27). All that is certainly true; but it does not seem to the point, because saltiness, not the color of salt, is the issue.

Others emphasize the characteristic of flavor. That is, Christians are to add divine flavor to the world. Just as many foods are tasteless without salt, the world is drab and tasteless without the presence of Christians. Someone has even said, “We Christians have no business being boring. Our function is to add flavor and excitement to the world.” Christians are a means of God’s blessing mankind, including unbelievers, just as He sends His sun and rain on the righteous and unrighteous alike.

There are certain senses in which that principle is true. An unbelieving marriage partner is sanctified by a believing spouse (1 Cor. 7:14), and God offered to spare Sodom for the sake of only ten righteous people, if that many could be found within it (Gen. 18:32).

The problem with that view, however, is that, from the earliest days of the church, the world has considered Christianity to be anything but attractive and “flavorful.” It has, in fact, often found the most spiritual Christians to be the most unpalatable. In the world’s eyes, Christians, almost above all others, take the flavor *out* of life. Christianity is stifling, restrictive, and a rain on the world’s parade.

After Christianity became a recognized religion of the Roman Empire, the emperor Julian lamented, “Have you looked at these Christians closely? Hollow-eyed, pale-cheeked, flat-breasted, they brood their lives away unspurred by ambition. The sun shines for them, but they don’t see it. The earth offers them its fullness, but they desire it not. All their desire is to renounce and suffer that they may come to die.”

Oliver Wendell Holmes reportedly once said that he might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen he knew had not looked and acted so much like undertakers. Sometimes the world is turned away from the church because Christians are hypocritical, self-righteous, judgmental, and truly boring by any standard. But even when the church is faithful—indeed, especially when it is faithful—the world does not value whatever taste or aroma it sees in Christianity. Paul reminds us that Christians are an “aroma from life to life” and “a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved,” but are an “aroma of death to death” among “those who are perishing” (2 Cor. 2:15-16).

Because salt stings when placed in a wound, some interpreters believe that Jesus meant to illustrate just the opposite characteristic to that of flavor. Christians are to sting the world, prick its conscience, make it uncomfortable in the presence of God’s holy gospel.

That analogy also has merit. The church frequently is so concerned with trying to please, attract, and excuse that its witness against sin is obscured and all but lost. We may be so concerned with not offending others that we fail to confront them with their lostness and their desperate need to be saved from their sin. A gospel that does not confront sin is not the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Some years ago a young couple who came to me to be married said they knew the Lord had brought them together and given them to each other. The woman claimed to have been a Christian all her life, but her concept of salvation was that of trying to please God by doing the best she could. She admitted that, although she had filed for divorce because her husband had been unfaithful, she was still married to him. On further questioning, she admitted that she had been committing fornication with the young man she now wanted to marry. The young man claimed to be born again, but he saw no great wrong in their relationship and no reason why they should not be married in a Christian service. I told them that God could not possibly have brought them together because they were living contrary to His revealed will—and worse, trying to justify it. At that point they both got up and angrily stormed out of the office.

The church cannot stand for the Lord if it does not stand for His Word, and when it stands for His Word its witness will often sting.

Salt also creates thirst. Partly because it increases the body's craving for water, salt tablets often are given to those who do hard work in excessive heat. Without proper intake of fluids, dehydration and even death may result. God intends for His people so to live and testify before the world that others will be made more aware of their spiritual dehydration and danger. A person may see our peace in a trying circumstance, or our confidence in what we believe, and thereby be persuaded to try our faith.

I believe that all of the foregoing analogies have some validity. Christians are to be pure; they should add a certain attractiveness to the gospel; they should be true to God's Word even when it stings; and their living should create a thirst for God in those who do not know Him.

But I believe the primary characteristic Jesus emphasizes is that of preservation. Christians are a preserving influence in the world; they retard moral and spiritual spoilage. When the church is taken out of the world at the rapture, Satan's perverse and wicked power will be unleashed

in an unprecedented way (see 2 Thess. 2:7-12). Evil will go wild and demons will be almost unbridled. Once God's people are removed it will take only seven years for the world to descend to the very pits of hellishness (see Dan. 9:27; Rev. 6-19).

Until that day Christians can have a powerful influence on the welfare of the world. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes, "Most competent historians are agreed in saying that what undoubtedly saved [England] from a revolution such as that experienced in France at the end of the eighteenth century was nothing but the Evangelical Revival. This was not because anything was done directly, but because masses of individuals had become Christians and were living this better life and had this higher outlook. The whole political situation was affected, and the great Acts of Parliament which were passed in the last century were mostly due to the fact that there were such large numbers of individual Christians found in the land" (*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971], 1:157).

As God's children and as the temples of His Holy Spirit, Christians represent God's presence in the earth. We are the salt that prevents the entire earth from degenerating even faster than it is.

Helen Ewing was saved as a young girl in Scotland and gave her life completely to the lordship of Christ. When she died at the age of 22 it is said that all Scotland wept. She had expected to serve God as a missionary in Europe and had become fluent in the Russian language. But she was not able to fulfill that dream. She had no obvious gifts such as speaking or writing, and she had never traveled far from home. Yet by the time she died she had won hundreds of people to Jesus Christ. Countless missionaries mourned her death because they knew that a great channel of their spiritual strength was gone. She had risen every morning at five in order to study God's Word and to pray. Her diary revealed that she regularly prayed for over three hundred missionaries by name. Everywhere she went the atmosphere was changed. If someone was telling a dirty story, he would stop if he saw her coming. If people were complaining, they would become ashamed of it in her presence. An acquaintance reported that while she was at Glasgow University she left the fragrance of Christ wherever she went. In everything she said and did she was God's salt.

BEING LIGHT

Jesus also calls us to be light. **You are the light of the world.** Whereas salt is hidden, light is obvious. Salt works secretly, while light works openly. Salt works from within, light from without. Salt is more the indirect influence of the gospel, while light is more its direct communication. Salt works primarily through our living, while light works primarily through what we teach and preach. Salt is largely negative. It can retard corruption, but it cannot change corruption into incorruption. Light is more positive. It not only reveals what is wrong and false but helps produce what is righteous and true.

In his introduction to the book of Acts, Luke refers to his gospel as “the first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (1:1). Christ’s work always has to do with both doing and speaking, with living and teaching.

David wrote, “For with Thee is the fountain of life; in Thy light we see light” (Ps. 36:9). “God is light,” John reminds us, “and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:5-7). Light is not given simply to have but to live by. “Thy word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path,” the psalmist tells us (Ps. 119:105). God’s light is to walk by and to live by. In its fullest sense, God’s light is the full revelation of His Word—the written Word of Scripture and the living Word of Jesus Christ.

God’s people are to proclaim God’s light in a world engulfed in darkness, just as their Lord came “to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death” (Luke 1:79). Christ is the true light, and we are His reflections. He is the Sun, and we are His moons. A free rendering of 2 Corinthians 4:6 could be, “God, who first ordered the light to shine in the darkness has flooded our hearts with His light. We now can enlighten men only because we can give them knowledge of the glory of God as we have seen it in the face of Jesus Christ.” God sheds His light on the world through those who have received His light through Jesus Christ.

The Jews had long claimed to have God’s light, and He had long called them

to be His light. But because they had ignored and rejected His light, they could not be His light. They were confident that they were guides “to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness,” but Paul told them they were blind guides and lamps without light. “You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?” he asks (Rom. 2:19-21). They had the light, but they were not living by it. “You who preach that one should not steal, do you steal?” Paul continues by way of illustration. “You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?” (vv. 21-22). We are to prove ourselves “to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom [we are to] appear as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15).

By its nature and by definition light must be visible in order to illuminate. Christians must be more than the largely indirect influence of salt; they must also be the direct and noticeable instruments of light.

Both in the daytime and at night, **a city set on a hill cannot be hidden.** It is exposed for all to see. By day its houses and buildings stand out on the landscape, and at night the many lights shining out of its windows make it impossible to miss. A secret Christian is as incongruous as a hidden light. Lights are to illuminate, not to be hidden; to be displayed, not to be covered. Christians are to be both subtle salt and conspicuous light.

God did not give the gospel of His Son to be the secret, hidden treasure of a few but to enlighten every person (John 1:9). Many reject the light and reject those who bring it, but just as God offers His light to the whole world, so must His church. It is not our gospel but God’s, and He gives it to us not only for our own sakes but the entire world’s. True believers *are* salt and light, and must fulfill that identity.

THE PROBLEM: DANGER OF FAILURE

but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. (5:13b)

Much salt in Palestine, such as that found on the shores of the Dead Sea, is contaminated with gypsum and other minerals that make it taste flat and even repulsive. When a batch of such contaminated salt would find its way into a household and be discovered, it was thrown out. People would be careful not to throw it on a garden or field, because it would kill whatever was planted. Instead it would be thrown onto a path or road, where it would gradually be ground into the dirt and disappear.

There is a sense in which salt cannot really become unsalty. But contamination can cause it to lose its value as salt. Its saltiness can no longer function.

Jesus is not speaking of losing salvation. God does not allow any of His own to be taken from Him. "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand," Jesus assures us (John 10:27). Christians cannot lose their salvation, just as salt cannot lose its inherent saltiness. But Christians can lose their value and effectiveness in the kingdom when sin and worldliness contaminate their lives, just as salt can become **tasteless** when contaminated by other minerals. It is a common New Testament truth that although true believers are identified as righteous, godly, and salty, there are times when they fail to be what they are (cf. Rom. 7:15-25), which Peter says leads to loss of assurance (2 Pet. 1:9-10), not loss of salvation.

With great responsibility there is often great danger. We cannot be an influence for purity in the world if we have compromised our own purity. We cannot sting the world's conscience if we continually go against our own. We cannot stimulate thirst for righteousness if we have lost our own. We cannot be used of God to retard the corruption of sin in the world if our own lives become corrupted by sin. To lose our saltiness is not to lose our salvation, but it is to lose our effectiveness and to become disqualified for service (see 1 Cor. 9:27).

Pure salt does not lose its saltiness, that which makes it valuable and effective. Christians who are pure in heart do not become **tasteless**, ineffective, and useless in the kingdom of God.

Light, too, is in danger of becoming useless. Like salt, it cannot lose its essential nature. A hidden light is still light, but it is useless light. That is why people do not **light a lamp, and put it under the peck-measure, but on a lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the**

house. The exemplary woman praised in Proverbs 31 does not let her lamp go out at night (v. 18). There was always illumination for anyone in the household who had to get up or find his way home during the night. A light that is hidden under a peck-sized basket cannot even be used to read by; it helps neither the person who hides it nor anyone else.

Whether we hide our light because of fear of offending others, because of indifference and lovelessness, or because of anything else, we demonstrate unfaithfulness to the Lord.

THE PURPOSE: TO GLORIFY GOD

Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. (5:16)

The word (*kalos*) for **good** that Jesus uses here does not so much emphasize quality—though that obviously is important—as it does attractiveness, beautiful appearance. Letting our **light shine before men** allows them to see our **good** works, the beauty the Lord has worked in us. To see good works by us is to see Christ in us. That is why Jesus says, **let your light shine.** It is not something we create or make up, but something we allow the Lord to do through us. It is God's light; our choice is whether to hide it or let it shine.

The purpose of letting our light shine and reveal our good works is not to bring attention or praise to ourselves but to God. Our intent should be that, in what we are and in what we do, others may see God in order that they may **glorify [our] Father who is in heaven.** Jesus' speaking of the **Father** emphasizes God's tenderness and intimacy, and speaking of His being **in heaven** emphasizes His majesty and holiness, as He is pictured dwelling in the splendor of His eternal holy home. Our good works are to magnify God's grace and power. This is the supreme calling of life: glorifying God. Everything we do is to cause others to give praise to the God who is the source of all that is good. The way we live should lead

those around us to **glorify** (*doxazō*, from which we get *doxology*) the heavenly **Father**.

When what we do causes people to be attracted to us rather than to God, to see our human character rather than His divine character, we can be sure that what they see is not His light.

It is said of Robert Murray McCheyne, a godly Scottish minister of the last century, that his face carried such a hallowed expression that people were known to fall on their knees and accept Jesus Christ as Savior when they looked at him. Others were so attracted by the self-giving beauty and holiness of his life that they found his Master irresistible.

It was also said of the French pietist Francois Fenelon that his communion with God was such that his face shined with divine radiance. A religious skeptic who was compelled to spend the night in an inn with Fenelon, hurried away the next morning, saying, "If I spend another night with that man I'll be a Christian in spite of myself."

That is the kind of salt and light God wants His kingdom people to be.

**Christ and the
Law —part 1
The Preeminence
of Scripture (5:17)**

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. (5:17)

In a recent book titled *The Interaction of Law and Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), Harold J. Berman, professor of law at Harvard University, has developed a significant thesis. He notes that Western culture has had a massive loss of confidence in law and in religion. One of the most important causes of this double loss of confidence is the radical separation that has been made between the two. Berman concludes that you cannot have workable rules for behavior without religion, because only religion provides an absolute base on which morality and law can be based. The author fears that western society is doomed to relativism in law because of the loss of an absolute. When men break away from the idea of an authoritative religion, and even from the concept of God, they break away from the possibility of absolute truth. Their only remaining resource is existential relativism, a slippery, unstable, and ever-changing base on which no authoritative system of law or morals can be built. Religionless law can never command authority.

In that book Professor Berman notes that “Thomas Franck of New York University [has observed that law] in contrast to religion ‘has become undisguisedly a pragmatic human process. It is made by men and it lays no claim to divine origin or eternal validity.’” (p. 27). Berman says that this observation

leads Professor Franck to the view that a judge, in reaching a decision, is not propounding a truth but is rather experimenting in the solution of a problem, and if his decision is reversed by a higher court or if it is subsequently overruled, that does not mean it was wrong but only that it was, or became in the course of time, unsatisfactory. Having broken away from religion, Franck states, law is now characterized by “existential relativism.” Indeed, it is now generally recognized “that no judicial decision is ever ‘final,’ that the law both follows the event (is not eternal or certain) and is made by man (is not divine or True).” (pp. 27-28)

Professor Berman goes on to ask, “If law is merely an experiment, and if judicial decisions are only hunches, why should individuals or groups of people observe those legal rules or commands that do not conform to their own interests?” (p. 28)

He is right. Rules without absolutes are rules without authority, except the authority of force and coercion. When God is abandoned, truth is abandoned; and when truth is abandoned, the basis for morals and law is abandoned. A consistent, coherent legal system cannot be built on philosophical humanism, on the principle that right and wrong fluctuate according to man’s ideas and feelings.

In an article in *Esquire* magazine titled “The Reasonable Right,” Peter Steinfeld asks, “How can moral principles be grounded and social institutions ultimately legitimized in the absence of a religiously based culture?” (13 February 1979). The obvious answer is that they cannot be.

If there is no religious absolute there can be no basis for real law. People will not respect or long obey laws that are only judicial guesses. An evil, godless society, floating about on a sea of relativism, realizes that it has no foundation, no anchor, no unmoving point of reference. Law becomes a matter of preference and order a matter of power. A democracy where power is ultimately vested in the people is particularly vulnerable to chaos.

Is there an absolute basis for truth, for law, for morals, for real right and wrong; and if so, what is it? Those questions are the essence of what Jesus teaches in Matthew 5:17-20. The absolute, He says, is the law of the eternally sovereign God. God has laid down His absolute, eternal,

abiding law and made it known to men. And as God's own Son, Jesus declared unequivocally that He did not come to teach or practice anything contrary to that law in even the slightest way, but to uphold it entirely.

We continually hear the idea that because times have changed the Bible does not fit our day. The truth, of course, is the opposite. The Bible always fits, because the Bible is God's perfect, eternal, and infallible Word. It is the standard by which true "fit" is measured. It is the world that does not fit the Bible, and not because the world has changed but because the Bible has *not* changed. Outwardly the world has changed a great deal since biblical days, but in its basic nature and orientation it has always been opposed to God and has never conformed to His Word. The world has never fit Scripture.

The argument is also proposed that Scripture is but a collection of various men's ideas about God and about right and wrong. One person's interpretation of the Bible is therefore just as good as another's, and there is no place for dogmatism. Men have been left free to believe or not believe, to follow or not follow, any or all of Scripture as it suits them. Each person becomes his own judge over Scripture, and the end result for most is to disregard it altogether.

It is impossible, however, to take Jesus seriously and not take Scripture seriously. It is impossible to believe Jesus spoke absolute truth and not to consider Scripture to be that absolute truth, because that is precisely what Jesus taught it to be. If Jesus was mistaken or deluded on this point, there would be no reason to accept anything else that He said. At the outset of His ministry He makes clear that His authority and Scripture's authority are the same; His truth and Scripture's truth are identical and inseparable.

God's revealed Word, Jesus says, not only is truth, but is truth conveyed with absolute, inviolable authority. It is in that authority that He came to teach and to minister, and it is to that authority that He commands His kingdom citizens to bow and obey. "Let it speak," He says. "Let it rebuke, correct, shatter, overturn all your evil ways and let it show the absolute, inerrant, and perfect will of God—and the way to eternal life."

For thirty years Jesus lived in privacy and obscurity. Only Mary and intimates to the family would have remembered the miraculous events that surrounded His birth and early years. As far as His friends and neighbors were concerned, He was but a unique Jewish carpenter. It was

when He began His ministry, when He was immersed in the Jordan by John the Baptist and started to preach, that all eyes suddenly turned on Him. At that point, even the leaders of Israel could not ignore Him.

Jesus' meekness, humility, gentleness, and love marked Him out in great contrast to the proud, selfish, and arrogant scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and priests. His call to repentance and His proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom made people listen, even if they did not understand or agree. They wondered if He was just another prophet, a special prophet, or a false prophet. They wondered if He was a political or military revolutionary who might be the Messiah they anxiously awaited, who would break the yoke of Rome. He did not talk or act like anyone else they had ever heard or seen. He did not identify Himself with any of the scribal schools, or with any of the sects or movements of the time. Nor did He identify Himself with Herod or with Rome. Instead, Jesus openly and lovingly identified Himself with the outcast, the sick, the sinful, and the needy of every sort. He proclaimed grace and dispensed mercy. Whereas all the other rabbis and religious leaders talked only about the religious externals, He taught about the heart. They focused on ceremonies, rituals, and outward acts of every kind, whereas He focused on the heart. They set themselves above other men and demanded their service, while He set Himself below other men and became their Servant.

Of primary concern to every faithful Jew seeking to evaluate Jesus was, "What does He think of the law; what does He think of Moses and the prophets?" The leaders often confronted Jesus on matters of the law. Many Jews believed that the Messiah would radically revise or completely overturn the Mosaic law and establish His own new standards. They interpreted Jeremiah 31:31 as teaching that God's new promised covenant would annul the old covenant and start over on a completely new moral basis. Sickened of the demanding, hypocritical legalism of the Pharisees, many people hoped the Messiah would bring in a new day of freedom from the burdensome, mechanical, and meaningless demands of the traditional system.

Even the scribes and Pharisees realized God's revealed standards of righteousness were impossible to keep—which is one reason they invented traditions that were easier to keep than the law. The traditions were more involved, complicated, and detailed than God's law, but for the most part, they stayed within the bounds of human accomplishment, within what man

could do in his own power and resources. Because of that, the traditions invariably and inevitably lowered the standards of God's scriptural teaching. The whole system of self-righteousness is built on reducing God's standards and elevating one's own imagined goodness.

It soon became obvious that Jesus fit none of the common molds of the religious leaders. He obviously had a high regard for the law, but at the same time He taught things completely contrary to the traditions. His teachings did not lower scriptural standards but upheld them in every way. He not only put God's standard at the height where it belonged but lived at that humanly impossible level.

The Law and the Prophets represent what we now call the Old Testament, the only written Scripture at the time Jesus preached (see Matt. 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Luke 16:16; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; 28:23). It is therefore about the Old Testament that Jesus speaks in Matthew 5:17-20. Everything He taught directly in His own ministry, as well as everything He taught through the apostles, is based on the Old Testament. It is therefore impossible to understand or accept the New Testament apart from the Old.

As has been pointed out several times, each teaching in the Sermon on the Mount flows out of the teachings that have preceded it. Each beatitude logically follows the ones before it, and every subsequent teaching is related to previous teachings. What Jesus teaches in 5:17-20 also follows directly from what He has just said. Verses 3-12 depict the character of believers, who are kingdom citizens and children of God. Verses 13-16 teach the function of believers as God's spiritual salt and light in the corrupt and darkened world. Verses 17-20 teach the foundation for the inner qualities of the Beatitudes and for functioning as God's salt and light. That foundation is God's Word, the only standard of righteousness and of truth.

We cannot live the righteous life or be God's faithful witnesses by lowering His standards and claiming to follow a higher law of love and permissiveness. Whatever is contrary to God's law is beneath His law, not above it. No matter what the motive behind them, standards that are unbiblically permissive have no part either in God's love or His law, because His love and His law are inseparable. The key, and the only key, to a righteous life is keeping the Word of the living God.

Jesus' warning, **do not think**, indicates that most, if not all, of His hearers had a wrong conception about His teaching. Most traditionalistic Jews considered the rabbinic instructions to be the proper interpretations of the law of Moses, and they concluded that, because Jesus did not scrupulously follow those traditions, He obviously was doing away with the law or relegating it to minor importance. Because Jesus swept away the traditions of washings, special tithes, extreme Sabbath observance, and such things, the people thought He was thereby overthrowing God's law. From the outset, therefore, Jesus wanted to disabuse His hearers of any misconceptions about His view of Scripture.

Throughout the gospel of Matthew, more than in the other gospels, Jesus repeatedly uses Scripture to contradict and indict the superficial and hypocritical scribes and Pharisees. Though not always specifically identified as such, it is primarily their beliefs and practices that Jesus exposes in Matthew 5:21—6:18.

Kataluō (**abolish**) means to utterly overthrow or destroy, and is the same word used of the destruction of the Temple (Matt. 24:2; 26:61; etc.) and of the death of the physical body (2 Cor. 5:1). The basic idea is to tear down and smash to the ground, to obliterate completely. In several places, as here, the word is used figuratively to indicate bringing to naught, rendering useless, or nullifying (see Acts 5:38-39; Rom. 14:20). Doing that to God's law is the antithesis of the work and teaching of Jesus.

In the remainder of verse 17 Jesus focuses on the preeminence of Scripture as God's perfect, eternal, and wholly authoritative Word. By implication He suggests three reasons for that preeminence: it is authored by God, it is affirmed by the prophets, and it is accomplished by Christ.

AUTHORED BY GOD

By including the definite article (**the**) Jesus made clear to His Jewish audience what **Law** He was talking about—*the* Law of God. The giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai was prefaced by the statement: "Then God spoke all these words, saying..." (Ex. 20:1). That God gave the law personally and directly is emphasized repeatedly in verses 2-6 by the use of the first person pronouns I and Me. The law given

there is the only law because the Lord is the only God. The Lord does not change (Mal. 3:6), and His law does not change. It does not change to meet the whims of society or even of theologians. It was not given to be adapted and modified but to be obeyed. It was not given to suit man's will but to reveal God's.

Jews of that day referred to the law in four different ways. In its most limited sense it was used of the Ten Commandments. In a broader sense it was used of the Pentateuch, the five books written by Moses. In a still broader sense it was used to speak of the entire Scriptures, what we now call the Old Testament.

The fourth and most common use of the term law, however, was in reference to the rabbinical, scribal traditions—the thousands of detailed and external requirements that obscured the revealed Word of God the traditions were supposed to interpret. Jesus sternly told the scribes and Pharisees that they “invalidated the word of God for the sake of [their] tradition” (Matt. 15:6). On the surface it seemed that the traditions made the law harder, but in reality they made it much easier, because observance was entirely external. Keeping the traditions demanded a great deal of effort, but it demanded no heart obedience and no faith in God.

God's law had always required inward as well as outward obedience. “This people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote” (Isa. 29:13). During the Exile and especially during the intertestamental period, the traditions were greatly multiplied and covered almost every conceivable activity a person could be involved in.

The rabbis looked through Scripture to find various commands and regulations, and to those they would add supplemental requirements. To the command not to work on the Sabbath they added the idea that carrying a burden was a form of work. They then faced the question of determining exactly what constituted a burden. They decided that a burden is food equal to the weight of a fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to put on a wound, oil enough to anoint a small member of the body, water enough to moisten eyesalve, paper enough to write a customs house notice, ink enough to write two letters of the alphabet, reed enough to make a pen, and so on and on. To

carry anything more than those prescribed amounts on the Sabbath was to break the law.

Since it was not possible to anticipate or provide for every contingency, much time was spent arguing about such things as whether a tailor committed a sin if he went out on the Sabbath with a needle stuck in his robe, or whether moving a lamp from one place in a room to another was permissible. Some strict interpreters believed that even wearing an artificial leg or using a crutch on the Sabbath constituted work and argued about whether or not a parent could lift a child on the Sabbath. They decided that to heal was work, but made exceptions for grave situations. But only enough treatment to keep the patient from getting worse was allowed; he could not be fully treated until after the Sabbath.

It was the keeping of such external minutia that had become the essence of religion for the scribes and Pharisees and for many other Jews as well. To the strict orthodox Jew of Jesus' day the law was a plethora of extra-Scriptural rules and regulations.

The phrase *the Law and the Prophets*, however, was always understood to refer to the Jewish Scriptures themselves, not the rabbinical interpretations. The phrase is used in that sense some fifteen times in the New Testament (see Matt. 11:13; Luke 16:16; cf. 24:27,44; etc.), reflecting the common Jewish understanding. Therefore when Jesus said, **Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets**, His Jewish hearers knew He was speaking of the Old Testament Scripture.

The foundation of the Old Testament is the law given in the Pentateuch, which the prophets, psalmists, and other inspired writers preached, expounded, and applied. That law of God was composed of three parts: the moral, the judicial, and the ceremonial. The moral law was to regulate behavior for all men; the judicial law was for Israel's operation as a unique nation; and the ceremonial law was prescribed to structure Israel's worship of God. The moral law was based on the Ten Commandments, and the judicial and ceremonial laws were the subsequent legislation given to Moses. On the plains of Moab Moses reminded Israel that "He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, that is, the ten commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone. And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments, that you might perform them in the land where you are going over to possess it" (Deut. 4:13-14).

Because Matthew does not qualify his use of **Law**, we are safe to say that it was God's whole law—the commandments, statutes, and judgments; the moral, judicial, and ceremonial—that Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill. It was also the other Old Testament teachings based on the law, and all their types, patterns, symbols, and pictures that He came to fulfill. Jesus Christ came to accomplish every aspect and every dimension of the divinely authored Word (cf. Luke 24:44).

AFFIRMED BY THE PROPHETS

The law is also preeminent because it is affirmed by **the Prophets**. The prophets reiterated and reinforced the law. All of their warnings, admonitions, and predictions were directly or indirectly based on the Mosaic law. God's revelation to the prophets was an extension of His law. The prophets expounded the moral, the judicial, and the ceremonial law. They spoke on idolatry, adultery, lying, stealing, and all the other Ten Commandments. They warned the kings, the nobles, and the people in general about keeping the laws God had given for their government, their life-style, and their worship.

Though all the prophets did not have their mouths touched by God's own hand as did Jeremiah, they could all claim with him that the Lord had put His very words in their mouths (Jer. 1:9; Heb. 1:1). Clearly, the work of the prophet was to preach the law of God. Exodus 4:16 gives an excellent definition of a prophet when it records the word of the Lord to Moses regarding the service of Aaron: "He shall be as a mouth for you, and you shall be as God to him."

ACCOMPLISHED BY CHRIST

The culminating reason, however, for the law's preeminence was its fulfillment by Jesus Christ, God's own Son. **I did not come to abolish but to fulfill**. In His incarnation, in the work of His Holy Spirit through

the church, and in His coming again Jesus would fulfill all of the law—moral, judicial, and ceremonial.

The Old Testament is complete; it is all God intended it to be. It is a wondrous, perfect, and complete picture of the coming King and His kingdom, and Jesus the King came to fulfill it in every detail. Five times in the New Testament we are told of Jesus' claiming to be the theme of the Old Testament: here, in Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:39; and in Hebrews 10:7.

Bible students have suggested a number of ways in which Jesus fulfilled the law. Some say He fulfilled it by His teaching. The law was the divine sketch or outline which He filled in with detail and color. In this view Jesus completed what was incomplete by giving it full dimension and meaning. There is a sense in which Jesus did that. Through His direct teaching in the gospels and through the apostles in the rest of the New Testament, Jesus elucidated more of the law of God than anyone ever had.

But that cannot be the primary meaning of **fulfill**, because that is not what the word means. It does not mean fill out but fill up. It does not mean to add to but to complete what is already present. Jesus did not add any basic new teaching but rather clarified God's original meaning.

Other commentators say that Jesus fulfilled the law by fully meeting its demands. In His life He perfectly kept every part of the law. He was perfectly righteous and did not violate the smallest part of God's law. Jesus, of course, did that. He was utterly flawless in His obedience, and He provided the perfect model of absolute righteousness.

But most importantly, as the Spirit surely intends to emphasize here, Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament by *being* its fulfillment. He did not simply teach it fully and exemplify it fully—He *was* it fully. He did not come simply to teach righteousness and to model righteousness; He came *as* divine righteousness. What He said and what He did reflected who He *is*.

JESUS FULFILLED THE MORAL LAW

The moral law was God's foundational code. As already mentioned, Jesus fulfilled that law by His perfect righteousness. Every commandment He obeyed, every requirement He met, every standard He lived up to.

Because keeping the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments, it may be helpful to comment on that part of the moral law. The essence of Sabbath observance was holiness, not resting or refraining from work. It was a provision meant to remove the heart from earthly endeavors and to turn it toward God. Because Christ fulfilled all righteousness and has become our righteousness, the purpose of Sabbath observance ended at the cross. Christians possess the reality, and so no longer need the symbol. All believers have entered into permanent salvation rest, as the writer of Hebrews carefully points out (4:1-11). Every day has become holy to the Lord.

In demonstration of that fact the early church met together every day for worship (Acts 2:46). But before long their primary worship meetings were held on the first day of the week (see 1 Cor. 16:2), which came to be called the Lord's Day (Rev. 1:10) because of its association with Jesus' resurrection. That day was to stimulate them to holiness every other day as well (Heb. 10:24-25). As Paul made clear, however, there is no longer any special day of worship (Rom. 14:5-6; Col. 2:16-17). Worship on Tuesday, Thursday, or any other day of the week is no less biblical or spiritual than worship on the Lord's Day. Sunday is not the "Christian Sabbath," as some claim, but is simply the day of worship most Christians have observed since New Testament times, a special time set aside for spiritual exercises. The moral aspect inherent in the Sabbath law is the heart of true worship.

JESUS FULFILLED THE JUDICIAL LAW

God's judicial law was given to provide unique identity for Israel as a nation that belonged to Jehovah. The laws relating to agriculture, settlement of disputes, diet, cleanliness, dress, and such things were special standards by which His chosen people were to live before the Lord and apart from the world. That judicial law Jesus fulfilled on the cross. His crucifixion marked Israel's ultimate apostasy in the final rejection of her Messiah (see Matt. 27:25; John 19:15) and the interruption of God's dealing with that people as a nation. With that the judicial law passed away, because Israel no longer served as His chosen nation. Before His crucifixion Jesus warned the Jews, "I say to you, the kingdom of God will

be taken away from you” (Matt. 21:43). Praise God, He will someday redeem and restore Israel (Rom. 9-11), but in the meanwhile the church is His chosen body of people on earth (1 Pet. 2:9-10). All the redeemed—those who receive the work of His cross—are His chosen ones.

JESUS FULFILLED THE CEREMONIAL LAW

The ceremonial law governed the form of Israel’s worship. When Jesus died on the cross He fulfilled that law as well as the judicial. Sacrifice was the heart of all Old Testament worship, and as the perfect Sacrifice, Jesus brought all the other sacrifices to an end. While He was on the cross “the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Matt. 27:51). Christ Himself was the new and perfect way into the Holy of Holies, into which any man could come by faith. “Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (Heb. 10:19-22). The Levitical, priestly, sacrificial system ended. Though the Temple was not destroyed until A.D. 70, every offering made there after Jesus died was needless.

Symbolically they had no more significance. The Tabernacle and Temple sacrifices even before Christ’s death *never* had power to cleanse from sin. They were only pictures of the Messiah-Savior’s work of cleansing, pictures that pointed to that supreme manifestation of God’s mercy and grace. “When Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:11-12).

The ceremonial law ended because it was fulfilled. Because the reality had come, the pictures and symbols had no more place or purpose. On the final Passover night of our Lord’s life, He instituted new symbols to commemorate His death. (The Prophet Ezekiel points to a future time in

the kingdom when Old Testament symbols will be a renewed part of worship by the redeemed; see Ezek. 40-48.)

Aaron was the first and foremost high priest of the Old Covenant, but he could not compare with the great High Priest of the New Covenant. Aaron entered the earthly tabernacle, but Christ entered the heavenly. Aaron entered once a year, Christ once for all time. Aaron entered beyond the veil, Christ tore the veil in two. Aaron offered many sacrifices, Christ only one. Aaron sacrificed for his own sin, Christ only for the sins of others. Aaron offered the blood of bulls, Christ His own blood. Aaron was a temporary priest, Christ is an eternal one. Aaron was fallible, Christ infallible. Aaron was changeable, Christ unchangeable. Aaron was continual, Christ is final. Aaron's sacrifice was imperfect, Christ's was perfect. Aaron's priesthood was insufficient, Christ's is all-sufficient.

Nor could the Tabernacle and Temple compare with Christ. They each had a door, whereas Christ is the door. They had a brazen altar, but He is the altar. They had a laver, but He Himself cleanses from sin. They had many lamps that continually needed filling; He is the light of the world that shines eternally. They had bread that had to be replenished, but Christ is the eternal bread of life. They had incense, but Christ's own prayers ascend for His saints. They had a veil, but His veil was His own body. They had a mercy seat, but He is now the mercy seat.

Nor could the offerings compare with Christ. The burnt offering spoke of perfection, but Christ was perfection incarnate. The meal offering spoke of dedication, but Jesus was Himself wholly dedicated to the Father. The peace offering spoke of peace, but Jesus is Himself our peace. The sin and trespass offerings spoke of substitution, but He is our Substitute.

Nor could the feasts compare to Christ. The Passover spoke of deliverance from physical death, whereas Christ is our Passover who delivers from spiritual death. The unleavened bread spoke of holiness, but Christ fulfilled all holiness. The first fruits spoke of harvest, but Jesus rose from the dead and became "the first fruits of those who are asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20). The feast of Tabernacles spoke of reunion, but only Christ is able one day to gather all of His people together in His heavenly house forever.

From Genesis 1:1 through Malachi 4:6, the Old Testament is Jesus Christ. It was inspired by Christ, it points to Christ, and it is fulfilled by Christ.

Over and over the New Testament tells us that the law could not make anyone righteous. Jesus had to do what the law could not. “Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith” (Gal. 3:24). The law only pointed to righteousness, but Christ gives us righteousness, His own righteousness.

The judicial law and the ceremonial law were fulfilled and set aside. They ended at the cross. But the moral law fulfilled by Christ is still being fulfilled through His disciples. Because Christ fulfilled the law, so can those who belong to Him. God sent “His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:3-4). When we walk in the Spirit we fulfill the righteousness of the law, because Christ in us fulfills it with His own righteousness which He has given to us.

**Christ and the
Law —part 2
The Permanence
of Scripture (5:18)**

For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. (5:18)

The honest Jew of Jesus' day knew he could not fulfill all the requirements of the Mosaic law, and that he could not even keep all the traditions developed over the years by the rabbis and scribes. Many hoped the Messiah would bring God's standards down to a level they could manage.

But as indicated in previous chapters, Jesus made it clear in His first major sermon that God's true standard was even higher than the traditions, and that, as the Messiah, He had not come to diminish the law in the least bit, but to uphold and fulfill it in every detail.

By introducing His statement with **truly I say to you**, Jesus confirmed the special importance of what He was about to say. *Amēn* (**truly**) was a term of strong, intense affirmation. Jesus was saying, "I say this to you absolutely, without qualification and with the fullest authority."

His teaching not only was absolute but was permanent. **Until heaven and earth pass away** represents the end of time as we know it, the end of earthly history. As God's Word, the law would outlast the universe, which someday will cease to exist. "The present heavens and earth by His word are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men" (2 Pet. 3:7; cf. v. 10). Even the psalmist knew that "Of old Thou didst found the earth; and the heavens are the work of

Thy hands. Even they will perish, but Thou dost endure; and all of them will wear out like a garment; like clothing Thou wilt change them, and they will be changed. But Thou art the same, and Thy years will not come to an end” (Ps. 102:25-26). Isaiah said, “Lift up your eyes to the sky, then look to the earth beneath; for the sky will vanish like smoke, and the earth will wear out like a garment, and its inhabitants will die in like manner, but My righteousness shall not wane” (Isa. 51:6; cf. 34:4; Rev. 6:13-14).

Jesus equated His own words with the Word of God: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away” (Matt. 24:35). What was true of the law, in its fullest meaning as the Old Testament, was also true of Jesus’ teaching. It is timeless.

It is incredibly foolish to ask, “What does the Bible, a two-thousand-year-old book, have to say to us today?” The Bible is the eternal Word of the eternal God. It “is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12). It has long preceded and will long outlast every person who questions its validity and relevancy.

Not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, Jesus continued. **The smallest letter** translates the word *iōta*, the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet. To Jesus’ Jewish hearers it would have represented the *yodh*, the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which looks something like an apostrophe. A **stroke** (*keraiā*) literally means “little horn” and refers to the small marks that help distinguish one Hebrew letter from another. It was a small extension of a letter similar to a serif in modern typefaces.

In other words, not only will the smallest letter not be erased, but even the smallest part of a letter will not be erased **from the Law**. Not even the tiniest, seemingly most insignificant, part of God’s Word will be removed or modified **until all is accomplished**.

As discussed in the last chapter, Jesus brought to completion all the judicial and ceremonial law and certain parts of the moral law, such as Sabbath observance. But God’s basic moral law, centered in the Ten Commandments, is still every bit as valid today as when God gave it to Moses at Sinai. During His earthly ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus fulfilled many of the prophecies of the Old Testament. Others, such as the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, would be fulfilled in later New Testament times. Still other prophecies, both of the Old and New Testaments, are yet to be fulfilled. But without the smallest

exception, every commandment, every prophecy, every figure and symbol and type would be **accomplished**.

No other statement made by our Lord more clearly states His absolute contention that Scripture is verbally inerrant, totally without error in the original form in which God gave it. That is, Scripture is God's own Word not only down to every single written word, but down to every letter and the smallest part of every letter.

"Fulfill" in verse 17 has the idea of completion, of filling up. **Accomplished** (from *ginomai*) has the similar meaning of becoming or taking place. Arthur Pink comments, "Everything in the Law must be fulfilled [or accomplished]: not only its prefigurations and prophecies, but its precepts and penalty: fulfilled, first, personally and vicariously, by and upon the Surety; fulfilled, second and evangelically, in and by His people; and fulfilled, third, in the doom of the wicked, who shall experience its awful curse forever and ever. Instead of Christ's being opposed to the law of God, He came here to magnify it and render it honourable.... And rather than His teachings being subversive thereof, they confirmed and enforced it" (*An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950], p. 57).

Jesus referred to the Old Testament at least sixty-four times, and always as authoritative truth. In the course of defending His messiahship and divinity before the unbelieving Jewish leaders in the Temple, He said, "The Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35).

When the Sadducees tried to trip Him up by asking which of seven successive husbands would be a woman's husband in the resurrection, that is in heaven, He replied, "You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures, or the power of God" (Matt. 22:29). The question itself was foolish, He said, because its very premise was wrong, "For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (v. 30). He then went on to correct the Sadducees' view of resurrection, in which they did not believe. "But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken to you by God, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living" (vv. 31-32).

In that confrontation with the Sadducees, Jesus' whole argument is based on a single verb tense. In the book of Exodus, which He was here quoting, God told Moses that He *is*, not *was*, "the God of Abraham, the

God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (3:6). Hundreds of years after those patriarchs had died, the Lord was still their God. Obviously those men were still alive. God’s Word is therefore authoritative not only down to the smallest part of every letter, but also to the grammatical forms of every word. Because Scripture itself is without error, when it is believed and obeyed it will save us from error.

Over and over again, Jesus confirmed the accuracy and the authenticity of the Old Testament. He confirmed the standard of marriage that God established in the Garden of Eden (Matt. 19:4), the murder of Abel (Luke 11:51), Noah and the flood (Matt. 24:38-39), Abraham and his faith (John 8:56), Sodom, Lot, and Lot’s wife (Luke 17:29), the call of Moses (Mark 12:26), the manna from heaven (John 6:31, 58), and the bronze serpent (John 3:14).

Jesus also made clear that Scripture was given to lead men to salvation. In Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Abraham told the rich man that if his brothers, whom he hoped to save from hell, “do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31). In other words, they had God’s Word, which was sufficient to bring them to

God and to salvation—if they would believe it.

Jesus also used Scripture in His own defense. When He was tempted by Satan in the wilderness at the outset of His ministry, Jesus countered each temptation with quotations from Deuteronomy (Matt. 4:4, 7,10; cf. Deut. 8:3; 6:16, 13). He could have challenged the devil in the power and authority of new words spoken simply for that occasion. But in quoting the Scriptures, He testified to their divine origin and authority.

I heard a preacher once say, “The one thing I’ve learned is that when you get into the pulpit you’ve got to somehow communicate without using the Bible, because the Bible turns people off. I’ve spent a long time developing the ability to communicate to people without ever using the Bible. I started out in my ministry saying this verse says this and this verse says that, and I finally realized that wouldn’t get me anywhere. Now I say it in my own way and people will accept it.”

What that preacher said is true. Many people today are very much turned off by the Bible. But men’s being turned off by God’s Word is hardly a new phenomenon. It has been turning off unbelievers for thousands of years. Many people today, just as in Jesus’ day—and in the

days of Moses and of the prophets—would much rather hear the opinions of men than the Word of God. But those opinions cannot lead them to the truth or to salvation. Opinions that do not square with Scripture will often leave men superficially contented and satisfied, but they will also leave them in darkness and sin.

Shortly after His temptation, Jesus went into the synagogue at Nazareth “on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book, and found the place where it was written, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.’ And He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon Him. And He began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’” (Luke 4:16-21; cf. Isa. 61:1).

The Lord used Scripture’s authority to establish His own. When John the Baptist sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else? . . . Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them’” (Matt. 11:3-5). In that reply Jesus again referred to the same passage from Isaiah which predicted the Messiah and His work.

When He cleansed the Temple on returning to Jerusalem for the last time, Jesus defended His action on the basis of Scripture. “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a robbers’ den” (Mark 11:17).

It is impossible to accept Christ’s authority without accepting Scripture’s authority, and vice versa. They stand together. To accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is to accept what He taught about Scripture as binding. To be a kingdom citizen is to accept what the King says about God’s Word. To have a kingdom character and a kingdom testimony is to obey the King’s manifesto, the Scriptures. Scripture’s authority is Christ’s authority, and to obey the Lord is to obey His Word. “He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you

are not of God” (John 8:47). To trust in Christ is to say of Him as Peter did, “You have words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

If the Old Testament contains any errors we must conclude one of two things about Jesus Christ. One possibility is that He was ignorant of those errors, in which case He was not omniscient and was therefore not God. The other possibility is that He knew of the errors but denied them, in which case He would have been a liar and a hypocrite, and therefore not holy God.

If not a single letter or stroke or tense of God’s Word is going to pass away, we first should receive it for what it is, “the word implanted, which is able to save [our] souls” (James 1:21). We should receive it because of the infinite majesty of the Author and His authoritative statements about it. We should receive it because of the price that God paid to get it to us, and because it is the standard of truth, joy, blessing, and salvation. And we should receive it because not to receive it brings judgment.

Second, we are called to honor God’s Word. “How sweet are Thy words to my taste!” said the psalmist, “Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Ps. 119:103). Charles Spurgeon said, “They called George Fox a Quaker. Why? Because when he spoke he would quake exceedingly through the force of the truth he so thoroughly apprehended.” He went on to say, “It were better to break stones on a road than to be a preacher, unless God had given the Holy Spirit to sustain him. The heart and soul of a man who speaks for God will know no ease, for he hears in his ears that warning admonition, ‘If the watchman warned them not, they perished, but their blood will I require at the watchman’s hands.’ Is the infallible revelation of the infallible Jehovah to be moderated, to be shaped, to be toned down to the fancies and fashions of the hour? God forbid us if we ever alter His Word.”

Martin Luther never feared men, but when he stood up to preach he often felt his knees knock together under a sense of great responsibility to be true to the Word of God.

Third, we should obey God’s Word. We should be diligent to present ourselves approved to God as workmen who do “not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). Like Jeremiah, we should find God’s words and eat them (Jer. 15:16), and “let the word of Christ richly dwell within” us (Col. 3:16).

Fourth, we must defend God's Word. We are to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). Like Jude, we should fight for the integrity, purity, and authority of Scripture. Spurgeon said, "The everlasting gospel is worth preaching even if one stood on a burning fagot and addressed the crowds from a pulpit of flames. The truths revealed in Scripture are worth living for and they are worth dying for. I count myself thrice happy, to bear reproach for the sake of the faith. It is an honor of which I feel myself to be unworthy, and yet most truly I can say the words of our hymn, 'Shall I to soothe the unholy throng, soften Thy truths and smooth my tongue to gain earth's gilded toys, or flee the cross endured my God by Thee?'"

Finally, we live to proclaim God's Word. Says Spurgeon again, "I cannot speak out my whole heart on this theme which is so dear to me, but I would stir you all up to be instant in season and out of season in telling out the gospel message, especially to repeat such a word as this: 'God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.' Whisper it in the ear of the sick, shout it in the corner of the streets, write it on your tablet, send it forth from the press, but everywhere let this be your great motive and warrant. You preach the gospel because the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."

**Christ and the
Law —part 3
The Pertinence of
Scripture (5:19)**

Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (5:19)

In the last several decades the expression “do your own thing” has described a popular approach to behavior. Freedom has been equated with doing what you want. The philosophical corollary of that attitude is antinomianism, the rejection of law, regulations, and rules of every sort. Such was the attitude in ancient Israel during the time of the judges, when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 21:25).

Antinomianism is reflected in our own day in personal existentialism, the concept that teaches the fulfillment only of the present moment, regardless of standards or codes or consequences. Rejection of authority follows logically from personal existentialism: we want no one else making rules for us or holding us accountable for what we say or do. The inevitable consequence of that philosophy is breakdown of the home, of school, of church, of government, and of society in general. When no one wants to be accountable to anyone else, the only thing to survive is anarchy.

Even the church has not escaped such attitudes. Many congregations hesitate or even refuse to discipline members who are flagrantly immoral, dishonest, or heretical. For fear of offending, of losing financial support, of being thought old-fashioned or legalistic, or even for

fear of stepping on someone else's presumed rights, there is widespread failure to maintain God's clear standards of righteousness in His own church. In the name of grace, love, forgiveness, and other "positive" biblical teachings and standards, sin is dismissed or excused.

Some Christians claim that, because God's grace covers every offense a believer can ever commit, there is no need to bother about holy living. Some even argue that, because the sinful flesh is presently unredeemed in its corruption and is going to be done away with at glorification, it does not make any difference what that part of us does now. Our new divine, incorruptible nature is good and eternal, and that is all that counts. That idea is simply a rebirth of the Greek dualism that wreaked so much havoc in the early church, and that Paul dealt with in the Corinthian letters.

But even the sincere Christian cannot help wondering about the relation between law and grace. The New Testament plainly teaches that in some very important ways believers are freed from the law. But what, exactly, is our freedom in Christ? In Matthew 5:19 the Lord confronts that question and reaffirms what that freedom cannot mean.

In Matthew 5:17 Jesus had pointed out the law's preeminence, because it was authored by God, affirmed by the prophets, and accomplished by the Messiah, the Christ. In verse 18 He showed its permanence, its lasting without the smallest change or reduction "until heaven and earth pass away." Now in verse 19 He shows its pertinence. The Jews were still under the full requirements of the Old Testament law.

In verses 17 and 18 Jesus declared that He came to fulfill and not diminish or disobey the law, and in verse 19 He declares that citizens of His kingdom are also not to diminish or disobey it. In light of His own attitude about and response to the law, Jesus now teaches what the attitude and response of His followers should be.

The law is pertinent for those who believe in Christ because of its own character, because of the consequences of obeying or disobeying, and because its demands are clarified and enforced throughout the rest of the New Testament.

THE CHARACTER OF THE LAW

The **then**, or therefore, refers to what Jesus has just said about the law. The law is utterly pertinent to those who trust in God, because it is His Word and is exalted by the prophets and accomplished by the Messiah Himself. Because the Bible is not a collection of men's religious ideas but God's revelation of divine truth, its teachings are not speculations to be judged but truths to be believed; its commands are not suggestions to be considered but requirements to be followed.

Because Scripture is given by God for man, nothing could be more relevant to man than this revelation. Scripture is the standard of relevance by which all other relevance is measured.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF MEN'S RESPONSES TO THE LAW

The consequences of the law depend on a person's response to it. Whoever responds to it positively will receive a positive result, but whoever responds to it negatively will receive a negative result.

THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCE

Jesus mentions the negative result first: **Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.**

Luō (**annuls**) is a common word in the New Testament and can mean to break, set loose, release, dissolve, or even to melt. The idea here is that of annulling God's law, or making it void, by loosing ourselves from its requirements and standards. Jesus used a compounded and stronger form of that term (*kataluō*) in verse 17 in asserting that He had not come "to abolish the Law or the Prophets."

Fallen human nature resents prohibitions and demands. Even Christians are tempted to modify and weaken God's standards. Because of ignorance, misunderstanding, or outright disregard, believers find reasons to make God's commands less demanding than they are. But when a

Christian ceases to revere and obey God's Word in even the slightest degree, to that degree He is being un-Christlike, because that is something Christ refused to do.

The Jews of Jesus' day had divided the Old Testament laws into two categories. Two hundred forty-eight were positive commands, and three hundred sixty-five—one for each day of the year—were negative. The scribes and Pharisees would have long, heated debates about which laws in each category were the most important and which were the least.

Scripture itself makes clear that all of God's commands are not of equal importance. When a lawyer among the Pharisees asked which commandment was the greatest, Jesus replied without hesitation: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment." He then went on to say, "The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matt. 22:37-39). Jesus acknowledged that one commandment is supreme above all others and that another is second in importance. It follows that all the other commandments fall somewhere below those two and that, like them, they vary in importance.

In His series of woes Jesus gives another indication of the relative importance of God's commands. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others" (Matt. 23:23). The tithing of herbs was required; but being just, merciful, and faithful are much more spiritually important.

Jesus' point here, however, is that it is not permissible to **annul**—by ignoring, modifying, or disobeying—even **one of the least of these commandments**. Some commands are greater than others, but none are to be disregarded.

Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that while he had ministered among them, he "did not shrink from declaring to [them] the whole purpose of God" (Acts 20:27). The apostle did not pick and choose what he would teach and exhort. He stressed some things more than others, but he left nothing out.

The person who **teaches others** to disregard or disobey any part of God's word is an even worse offender. He not only annuls the law himself but causes others to annul it. Besides that, his disobedience obviously is

intentional. It is possible to break God's commands by being ignorant of them or forgetting them. But to teach others to break them has to be conscious and intentional.

James cautions, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment" (James 3:1). Every believer is accountable for himself, but those who teach are also accountable for those whom they teach. "The head is the elder and honorable man," writes Isaiah, "and the prophet who teaches falsehood is the tail. For those who guide this people are leading them astray; and those who are guided by them are brought to confusion" (Isa. 9:15-16).

Jesus' warning does not simply apply to official or formal teachers. Every person teaches. By our example we continually help those around us either to be more obedient or more disobedient. We also teach by what we say. When we speak lovingly and respectfully of God's Word, we teach love and respect for it. When we speak disparagingly or slightingly of God's Word, we teach disregard and disrespect for it. When we ignore its demands, we give loud testimony to its unimportance to us.

Just after Paul reminded the elders from Ephesus that he had been faithful in teaching them God's full Word, he warned them, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock. . . . I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:28-30).

The consequence of practicing or teaching disobedience of any of God's Word is to **be called least in the kingdom of heaven**. I do not believe, as some commentators suggest, that **called** refers to what men say about us, but to what God says about us. Our reputation among other people, including other Christians, may or may not be adversely affected. Often other people do not know about our disobedience, and often when they know they do not care. But God always knows, and He always cares. It is only what we are **called** by God that is of any ultimate importance. It should be the concern of every believer who loves his Lord that He never have cause to call him **the least**.

Determining rank in **the kingdom of heaven** is entirely God's prerogative (cf. Matt. 20:23), and Jesus declares that He will hold those in lowest esteem who hold His Word in lowest esteem. There is no impunity for those who disobey, discredit, or belittle God's law.

That Jesus does not refer to loss of salvation is clear from the fact that, though offenders will **be called least**, they will still be **in the kingdom of heaven**. But blessing, reward, fruitfulness, joy, and usefulness will all be sacrificed to the extent that we are disobedient. “Watch yourselves,” John warns, “that you might not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward” (2 John 8). It is possible to lose in the second phase of our Christian lives what we built up in the first.

To disdain even the smallest part of God’s Word is to demonstrate disdain for all of it, because its parts are inseparable. James teaches that “whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all” (James 2:10). To ignore or reject the least of God’s law is therefore to cheapen all of it and to become **the least** in His kingdom. Such Christians receive their rank because of their ill treatment of Scripture, not, as some imagine, because they may have lesser gifts.

THE POSITIVE CONSEQUENCE

The positive result is that **whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven**. Here again Jesus mentions the two aspects of doing and teaching. Kingdom citizens are to uphold every part of God’s law, both in their living and in their teaching.

Paul could tell the Thessalonians, “You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory” (1 Thess. 2:10-12). Paul had been faithful to live and teach among them all of God’s Word, just as he had done at Ephesus and everywhere else he ministered.

God’s moral law is a reflection of God’s very character and is therefore changeless and eternal. The things it requires will not have to be commanded in heaven, but they will be manifested in heaven because they manifest God. While God’s people are still on earth, however, they do not naturally reflect the character of their heavenly Father, and His moral

standards continue to be commanded and supernaturally produced (cf. Rom. 8:2-4).

“Prescribe and teach these things,” Paul tells Timothy, “[and] in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe” (1 Tim. 4:11-12). Near the end of the same letter Paul tells Timothy to flee from all evil things and, as a man of God, to “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called” (6:11-12).

Paul both kept and taught the full Word of God, and he is therefore among those who will **be called great in the kingdom of heaven**. No one who does not do the same will be in the ranks of God’s great saints.

Greatness is not determined by gifts, success, popularity, reputation, or size of ministry—but by a believer’s view of Scripture as revealed in his life and teaching.

Jesus’ promise is not simply to great teachers such as Paul—or Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Wesley, or Spurgeon. His promise applies to every believer who teaches others to obey God’s Word by faithfully, carefully, and lovingly living by and speaking of that Word. Every believer does not have the gift of teaching the deep doctrines of Scripture, but every believer is called and is able to teach the right attitude toward it.

THE CLARIFICATION OF THE LAW

We know from the thrust of the New Testament epistles that Jesus is speaking here of God’s permanent moral law. The Sermon on the Mount is just as valid for believers today as it was for those to whom Jesus preached it directly, because every principle and standard taught here is also taught in the epistles. The other writers make absolutely clear that believers’ obligation to obey God’s moral law not only did not cease at Christ’s coming but was reaffirmed by Christ and remains energized by the Holy Spirit for the entire church age.

There is indeed a paradox in regard to the law, and it is especially evident in Paul’s letters. On the one hand we are told of the law’s being fulfilled and done away with, and on the other that we are still obliged to

obey it. Speaking of the Jews and Gentiles, Paul says that Christ “is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace” (Eph. 2:14-15). When the church came into existence the “dividing wall” of civil, judicial law crumbled and disappeared.

In God’s eyes Israel was temporarily set aside as a nation at the cross, when she crucified her King and rejected His kingdom. In the world’s eyes Israel ceased to exist as a nation in A.D. 70, when all of Jerusalem, including the Temple, was razed to the ground by the Romans under Titus. (Her restoration nationally is but a preparation for her restoration spiritually, as Romans 9-11 teaches.)

The ceremonial law also came to an end. While Jesus was still hanging on the cross, “the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Mark 15:38). The Temple worship and the sacrifices were no longer valid, even symbolically. That part of the law was finished, accomplished, and done away with by Christ.

There is even a sense in which God’s moral law is no longer binding on believers. Paul speaks of our not being under law but under grace (Rom. 6:14). But just before that he had said, “do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts” (v. 12), and immediately after verse 14 he says, “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!” (v. 15). Those in Christ are no longer under the ultimate penalty of the law, but are far from free of its requirement of righteousness.

To the Romans Paul said, “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom. 10:4), and to the Galatians he wrote, “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law” (Gal. 5:18). But he had just made it clear that Christians are not in the least free from God’s moral standards. “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please” (v. 17). The law that was once “our tutor to lead us to Christ” (Gal. 3:24) now leads us as “sons of God through Christ Jesus” to be clothed with Christ (vv. 26-27), and His clothing is the clothing of practical righteousness. If Christ’s

own righteousness never diminished or disobeyed God's moral law, how can His disciples be free to do so?

Paul harmonized the idea when he spoke of himself as being "without the law of God but under the law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21). In Christ we are anything but lawless. Christ's law is totally different from the Jewish judicial and ceremonial law and different from the Old Testament moral law, with its penalties and curses for disobedience. But it is not different in the slightest from the holy, righteous standards that the Old Testament law taught.

The Old Testament law is still a moral guide, as in revealing sin (Rom. 7:7). Even when it provokes sin (v. 8), it helps us see the wickedness of our own flesh and our helplessness apart from Christ. And even when we see the condemnation of the law (vv. 9-11), it should remind us that our Savior took that condemnation upon Himself on the cross (5:18; 8:1; 1 Pet. 2:24; etc.). Whenever a Christian looks at God's moral law with humility, meekness, and a sincere desire for righteousness, the law will invariably point him to Christ—as it was always intended to do. And for believers to live by it is for them to become like Christ. It could not possibly be otherwise, because it is *God's* law, and it reflects God's character. "So then," Paul is careful to remind us, "the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good" (v. 12).

Paul concludes Romans 7 by thanking "God through Jesus Christ our Lord" that even though his flesh served "the law of sin," his mind served "the law of God" (7:25). The penalty of the law has been paid for us by Jesus Christ, but also in Him the righteousness of the law is "fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according the Spirit" (Rom. 8:4; cf. Gal. 5:13-24).

Christ and the Law

—part 4

The Purpose

of Scripture (5:20)

For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. (5:20)

It is the false teaching of salvation by self-effort that Jesus confronts head-on in this verse and which all of Scripture, from beginning to end, contradicts. As Paul makes clear in the Book of Romans, even Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, was saved by his faith, not by his works (Rom. 4:3; cf. Gen. 15:6). In Galatians the apostle explains that “the Scripture has shut up all men under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (Gal. 3:22). Outside of sin itself, the Bible opposes nothing more vehemently than the religion of human achievement.

Jesus told a “parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and viewed others with contempt” (Luke 18:9). In that well-known story a Pharisee and a tax-gatherer went to the Temple to pray. The Pharisee prayed self-righteously, “‘God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’” But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other,” Jesus said, “for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted” (vv. 10-14).

The least-esteemed and most-hated man in Jewish society was the tax-gatherer, a fellow Jew who had sold out to Rome for the purpose of collecting taxes from his brethren. He extorted all he could get from the people, keeping for himself everything he purloined above what Rome required. He had forsaken both national, social, family, and religious loyalty for the sake of money. The Pharisee, on the other hand, was the model Jew, highly religious, moral, and respectable. Yet Jesus said that, despite the tax-gatherer's treachery and sin, he would be justified by God because of his penitent faith, whereas the Pharisee, despite his high morals and religiousness, would be condemned, because he trusted in his own righteousness and good works.

In the present passage Jesus teaches that the sort of righteousness exemplified by the Pharisees was not sufficient to gain entrance into His kingdom. To Jesus' legalistic, works-oriented hearers, this was doubtlessly the most radical thing He had yet taught. If the meticulously religious and moral Pharisees could not get into heaven, who could?

After showing the preeminence (v. 17), permanence (v. 18), and pertinence (v. 19) of Scripture, Jesus now shows its purpose. From the context of those preceding three verses it is clear that He is still speaking of "the Law and the Prophets," the Old Testament Scriptures. In saying that true righteousness exceeds the kind displayed by the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus said that, whatever they did with man-made tradition, they did not live up to the standards of Scripture.

The implied truth of Matthew 5:20 is this: The purpose of God's law was to show that, to please God and to be worthy of citizenship in His kingdom, more righteousness is required than anyone can possibly have or accomplish in himself. The purpose of the law was not to show what to do in order to make oneself acceptable, much less to show how good one already is, but to show how utterly sinful and helpless all men are in themselves. (That is one of Paul's themes in Romans and Galatians.) As the Lord pointed out to the Jews in the first beatitude, the initial step toward kingdom citizenship is poverty of spirit, recognizing one's total wretchedness and inadequacy before God.

THE IDENTITY OF THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES

Like Ezra (Ezra 7:12), the earliest *grammateōn* (scribes) were found only among the priests and Levites. They recorded, studied, interpreted, and often taught Jewish law. Although there were scribes among the Sadducees, most were associated with the Pharisees.

Israel had two kinds of scribes, civil and ecclesiastical. The civil scribes functioned somewhat like notaries, and were involved in various governmental duties. Shimshai (Ezra 4:8) was such a scribe. The ecclesiastical scribes devoted their time to study of the Scriptures, and came to be its primary interpreters and articulators.

Yet, as Jesus repeatedly made plain, they failed to understand what they studied and taught. With all their exposure to God's Word, being superficially immersed in it continually, they missed its profound spiritual intent.

The influential, rigid **Pharisees** were particularly confident in their system of righteousness. The Jews had a saying, "If only two people go to heaven, one will be a scribe and the other a Pharisee." Those men were completely convinced that God was obligated to honor their devoted and demanding works. In comparing themselves with the standards they had established—and especially in comparing themselves with the average Jew, not to mention Gentile—they could not imagine God was not favorably impressed with their goodness.

Yet, like many serious and capable scholars throughout the history of the church, the Pharisees of Judaism were also blind to the meaning of the words they diligently studied and discussed.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES

The standard of **righteousness** that **the scribes and Pharisees** taught and practiced differed from God's righteousness in several important ways. It was external, partial, redefined, and self-centered.

EXTERNAL

First of all the scribes and Pharisees concerned themselves entirely with external observance of the law and tradition. They took little consideration of motives or attitudes. No matter how much they may have hated a person, if they did not kill him they were not guilty of breaking the commandment. No matter how much they may have lusted, they did not consider themselves guilty of adultery or fornication as long as they did not commit the physical act.

In Matthew 23 our Lord gives a graphic picture of the external character of that religion. “You clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence” (v. 25). The Lord prefaced those words with, “Woe to you, . . . hypocrites,” labeling those leaders with their sin. They saw nothing wrong with having evil thoughts as long as they did not carry out those thoughts externally. They did not think God would judge them for what they thought but only for what they did.

Yet that is precisely the sort of righteousness Jesus declared to be the worst sort. He condemned such externalism because those who practiced it were really thieves, self-indulgent, unclean, lawless, murderous, and enemies of God’s true spokesmen (Matt. 23:25-31). Jesus’ next teachings in the Sermon on the Mount show that God’s first concern is with the heart—with such things as anger, hatred, and lust—not just with their outward manifestations in murder or adultery (Matt. 5:22, 27-28). Hypocrisy cannot substitute for holiness.

God’s concern about religious ceremony is the same. Jesus is soon to teach that if, for example, our giving, our prayer, and our fasting are not done out of a humble, loving spirit, they count for nothing with Him (6:5-18). Ritual cannot substitute for righteousness.

The scribes and Pharisees were proud that they had “seated themselves in the chair of Moses” (Matt. 23:2), that is, that they were the custodians and teachers of the law God gave to Moses. “All that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them” (v. 3). By their ungodly system of works righteousness, Jesus told them, “You shut off the kingdom of heaven from men; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in” (v. 13). On another occasion He told the Pharisees, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your

hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15).

PARTIAL

The righteousness practiced by the scribes and Pharisees also fell short of God’s righteousness because it was partial, woefully incomplete. Again Matthew 23 gives an example: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness” (v. 23). Those religious leaders were meticulous in tithing the smallest plants and seeds from their gardens, though that was not specifically commanded in the law. Yet they had total disregard for showing justice and mercy to other people and for being faithful in their hearts to God. They were much concerned about making long, pretentious prayers in public, but had no compunction about taking a widow’s house away from her (v. 14).

To some extent this second evil was caused by the first. They disregarded such things as justice, mercy, and faithfulness because those things are essentially the reflections of a transformed heart. It is impossible to be merciful, just, and faithful without a divinely wrought change. No external formality can produce that.

Quoting God’s scathing words to their forefathers, Jesus told them, “In vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men. Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men” (Mark 7:7-8). Yet they considered themselves to be Israel’s religious elite and the objects of God’s special affection.

REDEFINED

In many ways the scribes and Pharisees were like neoorthodox and liberal theologians of our own day. They took biblical terms and redefined them to suit their own human perspectives and philosophy. They reworked biblical teachings, commands, and standards to produce variations in keeping with their own desires and capabilities.

Even such commands as “Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am holy” (Lev. 11:44) they interpreted not as a call to pure attitude of heart but as a requirement to perform certain rituals. They knew they could not be holy in the same way God is holy—and had no desire to be—so they simply changed the meaning of holiness.

SELF-CENTERED

Not only was the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees external, partial, and redefined, but it was also completely self-centered. It was produced by self for the purposes of self-glory. Above all else, those leaders sought to be self-satisfied, and their system of religion was designed to enhance that self-satisfaction by providing ways to accomplish external, showy things about which they could boast and be proud. Their satisfaction came when they received approval and commendation from men.

In stark contrast, the godly person is broken about his sin and mourns over the wicked condition of his inner life, the unrighteousness he sees in his heart and mind. He has absolutely no confidence in what he is or in what he can do, but longs for the righteousness only God can give out of His mercy and grace.

But the person who is righteous in his own eyes sees no need for any other righteousness, no need for salvation, mercy, forgiveness, or grace. Just as their self-righteous forefathers had not wanted the grace God offered in the Old Testament, the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day did not want the grace the Messiah now offered. They wanted to rule their own lives and determine their own destinies and were not ready to submit to a King who wanted to rule their inner as well as their outward lives. “Not knowing about God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God” (Rom. 10:3).

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS GOD REQUIRES

The **righteousness** God requires of His kingdom citizens far **surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees**. The term **surpasses** is used of a river overflowing its banks, emphasizing that which is far in excess of the normal. The Lord requires genuine righteousness, real holiness that far exceeds anything human and that exists only in the redeemed heart. The psalmist wrote, “The King’s daughter is all glorious within; her clothing is interwoven with gold” (Ps. 45:13). When the inside is beautiful, outward beauty is appropriate; but without inner beauty, outward adornment is pretense and sham.

God has always been concerned first of all with inner righteousness. When Samuel was ready to anoint Jesse’s oldest son, Eliab, to be Saul’s successor, the Lord said, “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7).

God not only requires inner righteousness but perfect righteousness. “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). To be qualified for God’s kingdom we must be as holy as the King Himself. That standard is so infinitely high that even the most self-righteous person would not dare claim to possess it or be able to attain it.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS GOD GIVES

That impossibility leads the sincere person to wonder how such a holy heart is obtained, to ask the question Jesus’ disciples one day asked Him, “Then who can be saved?” (Matt. 19:25). And the only answer is the one Jesus gave on that occasion: “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (v. 26).

The One who demands perfect righteousness gives perfect righteousness. The One who tells us of the way into the kingdom is Himself that way. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me” (John 14:6), Jesus said. The King not only sets the standard of perfect righteousness, but will Himself bring anyone

up to that standard who is willing to enter the kingdom on the King's terms.

“A man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus,... since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified” (Gal. 2:16). To be justified is to be made righteous, and to be made righteous by Christ is the only way to become righteous.

“But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe” (Rom. 3:21-22). Faith had always been God's way to righteousness, a truth that the scribes and Pharisees, the experts on the Old Testament, should have known above all other people. As Paul reminded his Jewish readers in Rome, “For what does the Scripture say? ‘And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’” (Rom. 4:3). He quoted from the Book of Genesis (15:6), the earliest book of the Old Testament. The first patriarch, the first Jew, was saved by faith, not by works (Rom. 4:2) or the act of circumcision (v. 10). Abraham “received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them” (v. 11).

The uncircumcised includes those before as well as after Abraham. He was the father of the faithful, but he was not the first of the faithful. “By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous” and “by faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found because God took him up; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God” (Heb. 11:4-5). It was also only by faith that Noah found salvation (v. 7).

“For if by the transgression of the one [that is, Adam], death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:17). “As sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (v. 21).

The righteousness God requires, God also gives. It cannot be deserved, earned, or accomplished, but only accepted. By offering Himself

for sin, Christ “condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom. 8:4-5). God gave the impossible standard and then Himself provided its fulfillment.

The writer of Romans had considerably more claim to man-made righteousness than most of the scribes and Pharisees to whom Jesus spoke. “If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more,” wrote Paul; “circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless” (Phil. 3:4-6).

But when the apostle was confronted by Christ’s righteousness, he was also confronted by his own sinfulness. When he saw what God had done for him, he saw that what he had done for God was worthless. “Whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith” (vv. 7-9).

For those who trust in Him, Christ has become “to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). When God looks at imperfect, sinful believers, He sees His perfect, sinless Son. We have become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4) and possess in ourselves the very righteous life of the holy, eternal God. Admittedly, until our flesh is also redeemed (Rom. 8:23) that new righteous self is in a battle with sin. Even so, we are righteous in our standing before God in Christ, and have the new capacity to act righteously.

If even God’s own law alone cannot make a person righteous, how much less can man-made traditions do so? Those who insist on coming to God in their own way and in their own power will never reach Him; they **shall not enter the kingdom of heaven**. No church, no ritual, no works, no philosophy, no system can bring a person to God. Those who, through a church, through a cult, or simply through their own personal standards, try to work their way into God’s grace know nothing of what His grace is about.

It is tragic that many people today, like the scribes and Pharisees, will try any way to God but His way. They will pay any price, but will not accept the price He paid. They will do any work for Him, but they will not accept the finished work of His Son for them. They will accept any gift from God except the gift of His free salvation. Such people are religious but not regenerated, and they **shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.**

“I am not setting God’s law aside,” Jesus said. “I will uphold God’s law, and I will strip it of all the barnacles of man-made tradition with which it has been encrusted. I will reestablish its preeminence, its permanence, and its pertinence. I will reaffirm the purpose God had for it from the beginning: to show that every person is a sinner and is incapable of fulfilling the law. The one who lowers the standards to a level he *can* fulfill will be judged by God’s law and excluded from God’s grace.”

The Attitude
Behind the Act
(an Overview
of 5:21-48)

From the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus focuses on the internal, on what men are like in their minds and hearts. That is the primary thrust of Matthew 5:21-48, as the Lord reemphasizes the divine standards for living in His kingdom, the divine standards already given in the law of the Old Testament, in contrast to Jewish tradition.

Contrary to the external, superficial, and hypocritical righteousness that typified the scribes and Pharisees, the righteousness God requires is first of all internal. If it does not exist in the heart, it does not exist at all. Though it had been long forgotten or neglected by most Jews of Jesus' day, that truth was presented to them throughout the Old Testament.

Solomon prayed, "Hear Thou in heaven Thy dwelling place, and forgive and act and render to each according to all his ways, whose heart Thou knowest, for Thou alone dost know the hearts of all the sons of men" (1 Kings 8:39). In David's last words to Solomon he said, "As for you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the Lord searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts" (1 Chron. 28:9). Hanani the seer reminded King Asa, "For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His" (2 Chron. 16:9). "All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight," we are told in Proverbs, "but the Lord weighs the motives" (Prov. 16:2).

That God is first of all concerned about what men are like on the inside is a central truth of both testaments. A good outward act is validated before God only when it honestly represents what is on the inside. "I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds" (Jer. 17:10). In the last book of the Bible the Lord warns the church at Thyatira, "I am He who

searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds” (Rev. 2:23). Right external behavior only pleases Him when it corresponds to right internal attitudes and motives. “I am conscious of nothing against myself,” Paul said, “yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God” (1 Cor. 4:4-5).

The presumed good deeds of the proud scribes and self-glorifying Pharisees did not come from the heart attitudes Jesus says are characteristic of kingdom citizens: poverty of spirit, mourning over sin, gentleness, hunger and thirst for righteousness, and so on (vv. 3-12).

Because Jesus knew that His hearers, especially the self-righteous and self-satisfied religious leaders, could not possibly understand what He was saying, He devoted much of this sermon to exposing the faulty principles and motivations of the legalistic system that had replaced God’s own revealed Word.

Jesus used the phrase “You have heard that the ancients were told,” or a similar one, to introduce each of the six corrective illustrations He gives in this part of His sermon (see vv. 21,27,31,33,38,43). The phrase has reference to rabbinical, traditional teaching, and in each illustration Jesus contrasts that human teaching with the divine Word of God. The examples show ways in which God’s righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees (see v. 20). They deal with the specific subjects of murder, sexual sin, divorce, speaking the truth, retaliation, and loving others. Yet they all illustrate the same basic principle, the principle Jesus says must be applied to every area of life: righteousness is a matter of the heart.

Jesus is not modifying the law of Moses, the teaching of the Psalms, the standards of the prophets, or any other part of Scripture. The essence of what He has just said in verses 17-20 is (1) that His teaching stands firmly in agreement with every truth, even every word, of the Old Testament, and (2) that the Jewish religious traditions *did not*.

In the six illustrations found in verses 21-48, Jesus first refers to two of the Ten Commandments, then to two more general principles in the law of Moses, and finally to the two broad principles of mercy and love. Murder and adultery deal with the foundational issues of individual and

social preservation. Protection of life is the foundation of individual welfare, and protection of marriage is the foundation of social welfare. Divorce and truth-telling involve a wider area of social relationships, and mercy and love a wider area still. The illustrations progress from the protection of each human life to the love of all human life, including enemies. Together, those illustrations affirm that every area of our lives should be characterized and measured by God's perfect standard of inner righteousness. Patrick Fairbairn wrote,

In the revelation of law there was a substratum of grace recognized in the words that prefaced the ten commandments, and promises of grace and blessing also intermingled with the stern prohibitions and injunctions of which they consist. And so, inversely, in the Sermon on the Mount, while it gives grace the priority and the prominence, [such as in the Beatitudes], it is far from excluding the severer aspect of God's character and government. No sooner, indeed, had grace poured itself forth in a succession of beatitudes, than there appear the stern demands of righteousness and law. (Cited in Arthur Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950], p. 67)

The phrase "The ancients were told" could also be rendered "the ancients told, or said." In the first instance the implication would be that the ancients were told by God, in which case Jesus would be referring to God's revealed Word. That cannot be, because He contrasts His teaching, the teaching of God, with that of the ancients. For Him to contradict God's Word in any way would be totally out of the question in view of verses 17-19. In the second rendering the implication is that the ideas the ancients taught were primarily of their own devising. That must be the correct approach.

Jesus customarily referred to the Scriptures by such phrases as "Moses commanded," "the prophet Isaiah said," "it is written," and such. Here His words are much more general and therefore cannot refer directly to the Old Testament. He shows that, even in regard to the specific biblical commands against murder and adultery, their tradition was at variance with the holy Scripture, which reveals that God's primary concern has always been for inner purity, not simply outward compliance.

Fairbairn again observes, “The scribes and Pharisees of that age had completely inverted the order of things. Their carnality and self-righteousness had led them to exalt the precepts respecting ceremonial observances to the highest place and to throw the duties inculcated in the ten commandments comparatively into the background” (cited in Pink, *An Exposition on the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 69).

The rabbis of past generations were often called the “fathers of antiquity,” or “the men of long ago,” and it is to them that “the ancients” (vv. 21, 33) refers. Jesus was contrasting His teaching—and the true teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures themselves—with the Jewish written and oral traditions that had accumulated over the previous several hundred years and that had so terribly perverted God’s revelation.

As Martyn Lloyd-Jones has pointed out, the condition of Judaism at the time of Christ was remarkably like that of the church in the early sixteenth century. The Scriptures were not translated into the languages of the people. The liturgy, the prayers, the Scripture reading, and even most of the hymns and anthems were in Latin, which none of the common people knew or understood. When a priest gave a sermon or homily, the people had nothing by which to judge what he said. They had no idea as to whether or not his message was scriptural, or even whether or not being scriptural was important. The Bible taught what the church said it taught. The church, therefore, placed its own authority over that of Scripture (see *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971], 1:212).

Over the centuries the Roman Catholic church had developed a system of religion that departed further and further from Scripture. It was a system that the common man had no way of investigating or verifying. The greatest contribution of the Protestant Reformation was to give the Bible to the people in their own language. It put God’s Word into the hands of God’s people. It was the truth of Scripture that brought light to the Middle Ages and consequently an end to the Dark Ages.

In a less extreme way the Jews of Jesus’ day had been separated from their Scriptures. During and after the Exile most Jews lost their use of the Hebrew language and had come to speak Aramaic, a Semitic language related to Hebrew. Parts of Ezra, Jeremiah, and Daniel were originally written in Aramaic, but the rest of the Old Testament was in Hebrew. The Septuagint, a Greek edition of the Old Testament, had been

translated some two hundred fifty years earlier. But though it was widely used by Jews throughout the Roman Empire, the Septuagint was not used or understood by most Jews in Palestine. In addition to that, copies of the Scriptures were bulky, expensive, and far out of the financial reach of the average person. Therefore, when the Hebrew text was read and expounded in the synagogue services, most of the worshipers understood little of the text and consequently had no basis for judging the exposition. Their respect for the rabbis also led them to accept whatever those leaders said.

After the return from exile in Babylon, when Ezra and others read publicly from the law of Moses, they had to translate “to give the sense so that they [the people] understood the reading” (Neh. 8:8). Most later scribes and rabbis, however, did not attempt to translate or expound the scriptural text itself but rather taught from the Talmud, an exhaustive codification of the rabbinic traditions.

Therefore both the Jewish leaders and the rank and file of the people were amazed at Jesus’ radical departure—in both content and delivery—from the type of teaching they were used to. Whether He was right or wrong, it was obvious to them that “He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Mark 1:22).

Among Jesus’ most amazing departures from traditional teaching were His insistence that tradition and Scripture were in conflict and that inner righteousness, not outward form, is the central and necessary characteristic of a right relationship to God.

In his *Institutes (Library of Christian Classics, vol. 1, p. 372)*, John Calvin wrote,

Let us agree that through the law man’s life is molded not only to outward honesty but to inward and spiritual righteousness. Although no one can deny this, very few duly note it. This happens because they do not look to the Lawgiver by whose character the nature of the law is to be appraised. If some king by edict forbids fornication, murder or theft, I admit that a man who does not commit such acts will not be bound by the penalty. That is because the mortal lawgiver’s jurisdiction extends only to the outward political order. But God, whose eye nothing escapes and who is concerned not so much with outward appearance as with purity of heart, forbids not only fornication,

murder and theft but lust, anger, hatred, coveting and deceit. For since He is a spiritual Lawgiver, He speaks not less to the soul than He does to the body.

Five basic principles summarize the central thrust of 5:21-48. The first principle is that the spirit of the law is more important than the letter. The law was not given as a mechanical set of rules by which men in their own power could govern their outward living. It was given as a guide to the type of character God requires.

The second principle is that the law is positive as well as negative. Its purpose not only is to prevent both inner and outward sin but to promote both inner and outward righteousness.

The third principle is that the law is not an end in itself. Its deeper purpose goes beyond purifying the lives of God's people. Its supreme purpose is to glorify God Himself.

The fourth principle is that God alone is qualified to judge men, because He alone can judge men's hearts. Only the Creator has the right and the ability to judge the deepest inner workings of His creatures.

The fifth principle is that every human being is commanded to live up to the perfect divine standard to which the law points. Because that command is impossible for man to fulfill, God Himself has provided fulfillment through His Son, Jesus Christ. The Demander of righteousness is also the Giver of righteousness; the Lawgiver is also the Redeemer.

Who Is a Murderer?

(5:21-26)

You have heard that the ancients were told, “You shall not commit murder” and “Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, “Raca,” shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, “You fool,” shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, in order that your opponent may not deliver you to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you shall not come out of there, until you have paid up the last cent. (5:21-26)

Man’s first crime was homicide. “It came about when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him” (Gen. 4:8). Since that day murder has been a constant part of human society.

Recent years have seen the arrests and convictions of a number of mass murderers, whose names became household words. Over twenty-five thousand known murders are committed in the United States every year—averaging nearly seventy a day. The unknown murders no doubt would increase those figures considerably. Murders have become so commonplace that, unless they are bizarre or multiple or involve a famous person, they make no more than local news. If we were to add suicides (self-murder) and abortions (prebirth murder) the numbers would be staggering.

The first of six illustrations of heart-righteousness that Jesus gives in 5:21-48 deals with the sin of murder: **You have heard that the ancients were told, “You shall not commit murder.”** As discussed in the previous chapter, **the ancients** refers to the rabbis and scribes of old who had devised the many traditions with which Judaism had become encumbered and which had virtually replaced the authority of the Scriptures. In the first two illustrations the ancient teachings to which Jesus refers are traditional interpretations of scriptural commands.

The murder of Abel was a terrible act, which Cain knew violated divine law (Gen. 4:9,13). But the first specific prohibition of murder is found later in Genesis: “Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man” (9:6). Here the penalty for murder and the reason for its seriousness are given. The penalty was death for the killer, and the reason for such severe punishment was that man is made in God’s image. To take the life of a fellow human being is to assault the sacredness of the image of God.

The specific commandment to which Jesus here refers is from the Decalogue, which every Jew knew. The command “You shall not murder” (Ex. 20:13) does not prohibit every form of killing a human being. The term used has to do with criminal killing, and from many accounts and teachings in Scripture it is clear that capital punishment, just warfare, accidental homicide, and self-defense are excluded. The commandment is against the intentional killing of another human being for purely personal reasons, whatever those reasons might be.

Just as Satan is the father of lies and of those who reject and rebel against God, he is also the original murderer (John 8:44). Men are themselves accountable for murders they commit, just as they are accountable for every other sin; but every sin, including every murder, is inspired by the would-be murderer of God.

Even so, we cannot blame Satan for our sins, because fallen human nature shares the presence of evil that Satan personifies. Jesus said it is out of a person’s own heart that “come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders” (Matt. 15:19). We do not sin simply because of Satan or because of social deprivation, stressful situations, bad influences, or any other external cause. Those things may tempt us to sin and make sinning easier, but when we commit sin—or even intend to commit sin—it is because we decide to sin. Sin is an act of the

will. When in their rejection of God men “did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful” (Rom. 1:28-31).

“There are six things which the Lord hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers” (Prov. 6:16-19). Murder is a despicable manifestation of a fleshly heart. The seriousness of the offense is seen in one of the last declarations in God’s Word: “Outside [of heaven] are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying” (Rev. 22:15).

The Old and New Testaments are filled with the names of murderers. In the Old are Cain, Lamech, Pharaoh, Abimelech, Joab, the Amalekites, David, Absalom, Zimri, Jezebel, Haziël, Jehu, Athaliah, Joash, Manasseh, and many others. The New Testament list includes Herod, Judas, the high priests, Barabbas, Herodias and her daughter, and others. Biblical history, like human history in general, is filled with murderers.

Jesus’ hearers were aware of the prevalence and seriousness of this sin. No doubt most of them were in full agreement with capital punishment for the crime and were convinced that they were innocent of that particular evil.

But now Jesus attacks such self-confidence by charging that no one is truly innocent of murder, because the first step in murder is anger. The anger that lies behind murder—anger which many people think is not really a sin—is one of the worst of sins. To one degree or another, it makes all men would-be murderers.

The Lord’s teaching about murder, whether the act is committed outwardly or not, affects our view of ourselves, our worship of God, and our relation to others.

THE EFFECT ON OUR VIEW OF OURSELVES

You have heard that the ancients were told, “You shall not commit murder” and “Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, “Raca,” shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, “You fool,” shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. (5:21-22)

The first effect of Jesus’ words is to shatter the illusion of self-righteousness. Like most people throughout history, the scribes and Pharisees thought that if there was any sin of which they were clearly not guilty it was murder. Whatever else they may have done, at least they had never committed murder.

According to rabbinic tradition, and to the beliefs of most cultures and religions, murder is strictly limited to the act of physically taking another person’s life. Jesus had already warned that God’s righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees (v. 20). As the chosen custodians of God’s Word (Rom. 3:2) the Jews, above all people, should have known that God commands heart-righteousness, not just external, legalistic behavior. But because most of them had come to converse in Aramaic rather than Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, and because the rabbis had created a vast collection of traditions, which they taught in place of the Scripture itself, the Jews of Jesus’ day were ignorant of much of the great revelation God had given them. Rabbinic interpretation of Scripture also obscured the divinely intended meaning.

As already pointed out, the traditional command **you shall not commit murder** was scriptural, being a rendering of Exodus 20:13. But the traditional Jewish penalty, **whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court**, fell short of the biblical standard in several ways. In the first place it fell short because it did not prescribe the scriptural penalty of death (Gen. 9:6; Num. 35:30-31; etc.). The traditional penalty for murder was liability before a civil court, which apparently used its own judgment as to punishment. In the second place, and more importantly, God’s holy

character was not even taken into consideration. Nothing was said of disobedience to His law, of desecrating His image in which man is made, or of His role in determining and dispensing judgment. In the third place nothing was said about the inner attitude, the heart offense of the murderer.

The rabbis, scribes, and Pharisees had confined murder to being merely a civil issue and had confined its prosecution to a human court. They had also confined its evil to the physical act. In doing so, they flagrantly disregarded what their own Scriptures taught. Long before the time of Christ, David had acknowledged, "Behold, Thou dost desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part Thou wilt make me know wisdom" (Ps. 51:6; cf. 15:2). The Lord said to Samuel, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).

In saying, **But I say to you**, Jesus was not contrasting His teaching with that of the Old Testament (cf. Matt. 5:17-19) but with that of rabbinic tradition. He was saying, in effect, "Let me tell what the Scriptures themselves say, what God's truth is on the matter. You cannot justify yourselves because you have not committed the physical act of murder. Murder goes much deeper than that. It originates in the heart, not in the hands. It starts with evil thoughts, regardless of whether or not those thoughts are brought to consummation in action."

Here Jesus begins to specifically point up the inadequacy of the righteousness in which the scribes, Pharisees, and many others trusted. Because their view of righteousness was external, their view of themselves was complimentary. But Jesus shatters that complacent self-righteousness by beginning with the accusation that a person is guilty of murder even if he is angry with, hates, curses, or maligns another person. In a statement that may have shocked His hearers more than anything He had yet said, Jesus declares that a person guilty of anger is guilty of murder and deserves a murderer's punishment.

It is possible for a model, law-abiding citizen to be as guilty of murder as anyone on death row. It is possible for a person who has never been involved in so much as a fist fight to have more of a murderous spirit than a multiple killer. Many people, in the deepest feelings of their hearts, have anger and hatred to such a degree that their true desire is for the hated person to be dead. The fact that fear, cowardice, or lack of opportunity does not permit them to take that person's life does not

diminish their guilt before God. In fact, as the Lord makes plain in the following three illustrations of heart-murder, those who consciously desire the death of another person are not free from guilt.

All anger is incipient murder. “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer” (1 John 3:15)—making all of us guilty, because who has never hated another person? In light of the context John used the term *brother* in the sense of a fellow believer. But Jesus’ emphasis was wider than that. Most of those who heard the Sermon on the Mount made no pretense of belief in Christ, and He used **brother** in the broad ethnic sense of meaning any other Jewish person in that culture.

Jesus strips away every vestige of self-righteousness. Not only did He sweep aside all the rabbinical rubbish of tradition, but He also swept aside the self-justification that is common to all of us. His indictment is total.

In the spring of 1931 one of the most notorious criminals of that day was captured. Known as Two-gun Crowley, he had brutally murdered a great many people, including at least one policeman. It is said that when he finally was captured in his girl friend’s apartment after a gun battle, the police found a blood-spattered note on him that read, “Under my coat is a weary heart, but a kind one, one that would do nobody any harm.” Even the worst of men try to exonerate themselves. Such obvious self-deceit as that of Crowley’s seems absurd, yet that is exactly the attitude the natural man has of himself. “I may have done some bad things,” he thinks, “but down deep I’m not really bad.”

In essence, that was the self-righteous attitude of the scribes and Pharisees, as it is of many people today. Comparing ourselves to a bloodthirsty criminal makes us seem very good in our own minds. Like the Pharisee in the Temple, we feel proud that we are “not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers” (Luke 18:11). What Jesus says in the present passage is that we *are* just like those other people. Even if we do not take someone else’s life, even if we never physically assault another person, we are guilty of murder.

Sociologists and psychologists report that hatred brings a person closer to murder than does any other emotion. And hatred is but an extension of anger. Anger leads to hatred, which leads to murder—in the heart if not in the act. Anger and hatred are so deadly that they can even turn to destroy the person who harbors them.

Jesus' main point here, and through verse 48, is that even the best of people, in their hearts, are sinful and so are in the same boat with the worst of people. Not to consider the state of our heart is not to consider that which the Lord holds to be the all-important measure of true guilt.

In verse 22 Jesus gives three examples that show the divine definition of murder: being **angry** with another person, saying **Raca** to him, and calling him a **fool**.

THE EVIL AND DANGER OF ANGER

everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court.
(5:22a)

We know from other Scripture, and from Jesus' own life, that He does not prohibit every form of anger. It was in righteous anger that He cleansed the Temple of those who defiled it (John 2:14-17; Matt. 21:12-13). Paul tells us to "be angry, and yet do not sin" (Eph. 4:26). Although the principle is often abused and misapplied, it is possible to have righteous anger. Faithfulness to Christ will sometimes demand it.

In our day of peace and harmony at any cost, of positive thinking, and of confusing godly love with human sentimentality, we often need to show more anger against certain things. There are things in our country, our communities, our schools, and even in our churches about which we have no excuse for *not* being angry, vocally angry. Many of the trends in our society, many of the philosophies and standards to which our children are exposed, and some of the unbiblical philosophies and standards within evangelicalism need to be challenged with righteous indignation, because they attack the kingdom and glory of God. God Himself is "angry with the wicked every day" (Ps. 7:11, KJV).

But Jesus is not talking about anger over God's being dishonored, but rather selfish anger, anger against a **brother**, whoever that might be, because he has done something against us, or simply irritates and displeases us. *Orgizō* (to be **angry**) has to do with brooding, simmering anger that is nurtured and not allowed to die. It is seen in the holding of a

grudge, in the smoldering bitterness that refuses to forgive. It is the anger that cherishes resentment and does not want reconciliation. The writer of Hebrews identifies its depth and intensity as a “root of bitterness” (Heb. 12:15).

Such anger, Jesus says, is a form of murder. The person who harbors anger **shall be guilty before the court**. To be guilty before the civil court should have been to be guilty of murder and deserving of the death penalty. Anger merits execution, because the fruit of anger is murder.

THE EVIL AND DANGER OF SLANDER

and whoever shall say to his brother, “Raca,” shall be guilty before the supreme court. (5:22b)

Raca was an epithet commonly used in Jesus’ day that has no exact modern equivalent. Therefore in most Bible versions, as here, it is simply transliterated. A term of malicious abuse, derision, and slander, it has been variously rendered as brainless idiot, worthless fellow, silly fool, empty head, blockhead, and the like. It was a word of arrogant contempt. David spoke of persons who use such slander as those who “sharpen their tongues as a serpent; poison of a viper is under their lips” (Ps. 140:3). It was the type of word that would have been used by the soldiers who mocked Jesus as they placed the crown of thorns on His head and led Him out to be crucified (Matt. 27:29-31).

A Jewish legend tells of a young rabbi named Simon Ben Eleazar who had just come from a session with his famous teacher. The young man felt especially proud about how he handled himself before the teacher. As he basked in his feelings of erudition, wisdom, and holiness, he passed a man who was especially unattractive. When the man greeted Simon, the rabbi responded, “You Raca! How ugly you are. Are all men of your town as ugly as you?” “That I do not know,” the man answered, “but go and tell the Maker who created me how ugly is the creature He has made.”

To slander a creature made in God's image is to slander God Himself and is equivalent to murdering that person. Contempt, says Jesus, is murder of the heart. The contemptuous person **shall be guilty before the supreme court**, the Sanhedrin, the council of the seventy who tried the most serious offenses and pronounced the severest penalties, including death by stoning (see Acts 6:12—7:60).

THE EVIL AND DANGER OF CONDEMNING CHARACTER

and whoever shall say, “You fool,” shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. (5:22c)

Mōros (**fool**) means “stupid” or “dull” and is the term from which we get moron. It was sometimes used in secular Greek literature of an obstinate, godless person. It was also possibly related to the Hebrew *mārâ*, which means “to rebel against.” To call someone **You fool** was to accuse them of being both stupid and godless.

The three illustrations in this verse show increasing degrees of seriousness. To be angry is the basic evil behind murder; to slander a person with a term such as *Raca* is even more serious, because it gives expression to that anger; and to condemn a person's character by calling him a **fool** is more slanderous still.

The Psalms twice tell us that “the fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Ps. 14:1; 53:1; cf. 10:4). The book of Proverbs is filled with references and warnings to fools. On the road to Emmaus Jesus used a similar, but less severe, term when He called the two disciples “foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!” (Luke 24:25).

Because of the testimony of God's Word, we know that fools of the worst sort do exist. And it is our obligation to warn those who are clearly in opposition to God's will that they are living foolishly. We certainly are not wrong to show someone what Scripture says about a person who rejects God. Jesus' prohibition is against slanderously calling a person a **fool** out of anger and hatred. Such an expression of malicious animosity is

tantamount to murder and makes us **guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.**

Geenna (hell) is derived from Hinnom, the name of a valley just southwest of Jerusalem used as the city dump. It was a forbidding place where trash was continually burned and where the fire, smoke, and stench never ceased. The location was originally desecrated by King Ahaz when “he burned incense in the valley of Ben-hinnom, and burned his sons in fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord had driven out before the sons of Israel” (2 Chron. 28:3). That wicked king had used the valley to erect an altar to the pagan god Molech, an altar on which one’s own children sometimes were offered by being burned alive. It would later be called “the valley of Slaughter” (Jer. 19:6). As part of his godly reforms, King Josiah tore down all the altars there and turned the valley into the garbage incinerator it continued to be until New Testament times. The name of the valley therefore came to be a metonym for the place of eternal torment, and was so used by Jesus eleven times.

To call a person a fool is the same as cursing him and murdering him, and to be guilty of that sin is to be worthy of the eternal punishment of **fiery hell.**

THE EFFECT ON OUR WORSHIP OF GOD

If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. (5:23-24)

Jesus’ teaching not only affects our view of ourselves by shattering all self-righteousness and showing that we are guilty and worthy of hell, but it also shows how the sins of anger and hatred affect our relationship to God.

Worship was a major concern of the scribes and Pharisees, directly or indirectly the focus of almost everything they did. They spent much

time in the synagogues and in the Temple. They made sacrifices, offered prayers, gave tithes, and carried on religious activities of every sort. But it was all heartless external ceremony.

Therefore refers back to Jesus' point that sin, just as righteousness, is first of all internal. As long as there is internal sin, outward acts of worship are not acceptable to God. Jesus continues to focus on the particular sin of hatred against someone else, a **brother** in the broadest sense. Reconciliation must precede worship.

Every Jew realized that sin caused a breach in one's relationship with God, and that the sacrifices and offerings were intended to restore a right relationship with Him. In their reliance on rabbinical tradition and its misinterpretation of the Old Testament, however, they no longer gave much consideration to sins that could not be seen. Although they would not have called such things as hatred and lust good, they nevertheless did not think of them as true sins. But now Jesus said that anger and hatred are every bit as sinful as murder and adultery.

The scene of **presenting your offering at the altar** was a familiar one to Jews. The Lord may have had in mind here the sacrifice made on the Day of Atonement, when the worshiper brought an animal sacrifice for his sins. When he came to the court of the priests he would stop, because only priests were allowed to enter the altar area. He would then lay his hands on the animal to identify with it and present it to the priest to offer on his behalf. "But do not hand the sacrifice to the priest," Jesus said, "if you **remember that your brother has something against you.**" Unresolved conflict has priority and must be settled. **Leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.** Settle the breach between you and your brother before you try to settle the breach between you and God. Not to do that is to be a hypocrite by asking for forgiveness without repenting.

That has always been God's requirement. He had told Israel, "What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?" says the Lord. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of cattle. And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs, or goats. . . . Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless; defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isa. 1:11,16-17; cf. 58:5-7). "Will you

steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and offer sacrifices to Baal, and walk after other gods that you have not known, then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, ‘We are delivered?’” (Jer. 7:9-10). The Jews knew, or should have known, that God demanded they be willing to forsake hatred and be made right with each other before they could be right with Him.

The phrase **your brother has something against you** could also refer to anger or hatred on the brother’s part. That is, even if we hold nothing against him, if he is angry with or hates us, we should do everything in our power to be reconciled to him. Obviously we cannot change another person’s heart or attitude, but our desire and effort should be to close the breach as much as is possible from our side and to hold no anger ourselves even if the other person does.

Regardless of who is responsible for the break in relationship—and often there is guilt on both sides—we should determine to make a reconciliation before we come before God to worship. True worship is not enhanced by better music, better prayers, better architecture, or even better preaching. True worship is enhanced by better relationships between those who come to worship. Worship may be improved by our staying away from church until we have made things right with those with whom we know our relationship is strained or broken.

When there is animosity or sin of any sort in our heart there cannot be integrity in our worship. Nearly a thousand years before Christ preached the Sermon on the Mount the psalmist had declared, “If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear” (Ps. 66:18). Even before that Samuel said, “Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams” (1 Sam. 15:22).

THE EFFECT ON OUR RELATIONS WITH OTHERS

Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, in order that your opponent may not deliver you to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison.

Truly I say to you, you shall not come out of there, until you have paid up the last cent. (5:25-26)

These verses are essentially a commentary on the previous two. Using an illustration from the common practice of imprisoning a person for an unpaid debt, Jesus teaches that if someone holds a debt of any sort against us, he is to make it good as soon as possible and before it is too late and he is imprisoned.

The time for reconciliation, just as the time for salvation, is always now. Tomorrow is often too late. We are not to allow bitterness, anger, hatred, or any other sin to keep us separated from other people, whoever they are.

Whereas in verses 23-24 the command for reconciliation is given to the innocent as well as the guilty party, here the focus is strictly on the one who is guilty. Roman law provided that a plaintiff could bring the accused with him to face the judge. The two themselves could settle the matter **on the way**, but not after the court became involved. If a man had wronged an **opponent at law** (indicating that the issue was headed for court) he should **make friends quickly**, that is, settle the account with his **opponent** before he had to face judgment. The sequence of going from the **judge** to the **officer** to **prison** shows the typical procedure in dealing with a guilty person. To avoid judgment and prison he had to pay **the last cent** (a small Roman coin) owed.

This illustration is a picture of sin against another person. Such sin must be resolved to avoid having to face a sentence from the divine Judge.

The precise penalty to which Jesus alludes is not made clear. Being **thrown into prison** and not being able to get **out of there until** the debt is paid is an analogy of God's punishment. The basic teaching is plain and unmistakable: we are to make every effort, with no delay, to make our relationship right with our brother before our relationship can be right with God and we can avoid chastening.

In the fullest sense, of course, because no one ever fully has right attitudes toward others, no worship is acceptable. Thus everything Jesus teaches in this passage, as in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, is to show the absolutely perfect standard of God's righteousness and the absolutely impossible task of our meeting that standard in our own power.

He shatters self-righteousness in order to drive us to His righteousness, which alone is acceptable to God.

Who Is an Adulterer?

(5:27-30)

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery”; but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell. (5:27-30)

Jesus continues to unmask the self-righteous externalism typified by the scribes and Pharisees by showing that the only righteousness acceptable to God is purity of heart. Without that purity, the outward life makes no difference. God’s divine evaluation takes place in the heart. He judges the source and origin of sin, not its manifestation or lack of manifestation. “As [a person] thinks within himself, so he is” (Prov. 23:7), and so he is judged by God (1 Sam. 16:7).

Jesus’ second illustration of heart righteousness has to do with adultery and sexual sin in general. In verses 27-30 He focuses on the deed of adultery, the desire behind it, and the deliverance from it.

THE DEED

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.”
(5:27)

As with the one relating to the sin of murder (vv. 21-26), this illustration begins with a quotation of one of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:14). In both of those cases, Jewish tradition was based on the law of Moses, at least superficially.

The sixth commandment protects the sanctity of life and the seventh the sanctity of marriage. Those who rely on external righteousness break both of those commandments, because in their hearts they attack the sanctity of life and the sanctity of marriage, whether they do so outwardly or not. When they are angry or hate, they commit murder. When they lust sexually, they commit adultery. And when they do either of those things, they choose to despise God’s law and God’s name (see Ex. 20:14; Lev. 20:10; Deut. 5:18).

Anger and sexual lust are two of the most powerful influences on mankind. The person who gives them reign will soon find that he is more controlled than in control. Every person has experienced temptation to anger and to sexual sin, and every person has at some time and to some degree given in to those temptations. Because of that fact, every person is guilty before God of murder and of adultery.

Although sexual temptations have been strong since man’s fall, our day of permissiveness and perversion has brought an increase in those destructive influences that no society in history has had before (see 2 Tim. 3:13). Ours is a day of unbridled indulgence in sexual passion. People propagate, promote, and exploit it through the most powerful and pervasive media ever known to man. It seems to be the almost uninterrupted theme of our society’s entertainment. Even in academic and religious circles we see seminars, books, tapes, and programs of all sorts that promise to improve sexual knowledge, experience, freedom, and enjoyment.

Mass media uses sex to sell its products and to glamorize its programs. Sex crimes are at all-time highs, while infidelity, divorce, and perversion are justified. Marriage, sexual fidelity, and moral purity are scorned, ridiculed, and laughed at. We are preoccupied with sex to a degree perhaps never before seen in a civilized culture.

But the philosophy of sexual hedonism is not new to our day. It was common in New Testament times, and Paul faced it full force in Corinth. His comment “Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food” (1 Cor. 6:13a) expressed the common Greek notion that biological functions are just biological functions and have no moral significance. It was a belief many of the Corinthian believers had reverted to, or had never given up, in order to justify their sexual misconduct. Apparently they were arguing, as do many hedonists today, that sex is simply a biological act, no different morally from eating, drinking, or sleeping. But Paul strongly refutes that idea by going on to say, “God will do away with both of them [that is, food and the stomach]. Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord; and the Lord is for the body” (v. 13b). The body is more than biological, as divine judgment will reveal. For Christians it is a member of Christ, a temple of the Holy Spirit, and belongs to the Lord rather than to us (w. 15,19). It is therefore never to be used for any purpose that dishonors the God who made and indwells it. Christians should have but one response to sexual temptation—running away from it (v. 18).

The same philosophy that corrupted Corinth is today engulfing most of western society in a sea of sexual excess and perversion. In its many forms, sexual license is destroying lives physically, morally, mentally, and spiritually. It is destroying marriages, families, and even whole communities.

Throughout history some Christians have reacted to sexual temptations and sins in ways that are unbiblical. Seeing the great power of the sex drive and the great damage its unbridled expression can cause, they have sometimes concluded that sex itself is evil and should be completely condemned and avoided. Commonly referred to today as the Victorian view, that philosophy was prevalent long before the age of Queen Victoria.

Origen (A.D. 185-254), one of the outstanding early church Fathers, was so convicted of his own sinfulness by reading Matthew 5:27-30 that he had himself castrated (*the New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. James D. Douglas [new edition; Grand Rapids, 1974,1978], p. 733. Peter Abelard, a twelfth-century French theologian, had lived a godly life for many years. He fell in love with a young woman (Heloise) and caused her to become pregnant. To protect her and to try to rectify the wrong, he married her. Damaging rumors had begun to circulate, however, and, rather than harm Abelard’s career still further,

Heloise entered a convent. Her uncle, angry at all that had happened, hired men to break into Abelard's quarters and castrate him; Abelard then joined the monastery of St.-Denis (*New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 3).

But geographical escapism, physical mutilation, or any form of forced celibacy violate God's purpose (see Heb. 13:4) and are just as unscriptural as sexual immorality. The Lord wants His people to be in the world but not of it (John 17:15-18). And because our bodies belong to Christ and are temples of the Holy Spirit, they are not to be abused in *any* way. God created sex and gives it as a blessing to those who enjoy it within the bounds of marriage. Anyone who promotes abstinence from marriage on the basis that all sexual expression is evil is "paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons" (see 1 Tim. 4:1-3). Speaking of the marriage relationship, Paul commands, "Let the husband fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband.... Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control" (1 Cor. 7:3, 5). Sexual expression not only is a thrilling privilege but an obligation of marriage.

In the middle of a biblical warning against adultery, husbands are instructed, "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth. As a loving hind and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; be exhilarated always with her love" (Prov. 5:18-19). The Song of Solomon is devoted to the beauty and wonder of marital love. God has designed and blessed sexual expression within marriage, and to malign or denigrate that proper expression by such practices as castration or forced celibacy is as much of a perversion as fornication, adultery, or homosexuality.

The solution to sexual impurity cannot be external because the cause is not external. Job proclaimed, "If my heart has been enticed by a woman, or I have lurked at my neighbor's doorway, may my wife grind for another, and let others kneel down over her. For that would be a lustful crime; moreover, it would be an iniquity punishable by judges" (Job 31:9-11). That ancient saint knew that physical infidelity is first of all a matter of the heart, and that lusting is just as sinful in God's eyes as the act of adultery.

The Mosaic law portrays adultery as one of the most despicable and heinous of sins, punishable by death (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22). In strongly opposing adultery, Jewish tradition appeared to be entirely scriptural. When the scribes and Pharisees told Jesus that Moses commanded them to stone the woman caught in the act of adultery, they were correct (John 8:4-5). Had not Jesus forgiven her of her sin she would have deserved stoning.

Throughout the New Testament, prohibitions against sexual immorality are every bit as clear as those of the Old. “Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals” will inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9; cf. Gal. 5:19-21; Rev. 2:22). “Fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Heb. 13:4). Regardless of how much a couple may care for each other and be deeply in love, sexual relations outside of marriage are forbidden. In every case, without exception, it is a heinous sin against God.

In its most technical sense, committing **adultery** (from *moichaō*) refers to sexual intercourse between a man and woman when one or both of them is married. In both the Old and New Testaments the word relates to sexual intercourse with anyone other than one’s marriage partner. That Jesus here implies that the principle of sexual purity can be seen in a wider sense than adultery (though adultery is His point here) seems clear from the fact that both **everyone** and **a woman** are comprehensive terms that could also apply to the unmarried.

THE DESIRE

but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. (5:28)

The pronoun **I** (*egō*) is emphatic, indicating that Jesus puts His own word above the authority of revered rabbinic tradition. **Looks** (from *blepō*) is a present participle and refers to the continuous process of looking. In this usage, the idea is not that of an incidental or involuntary glance but of

intentional and repeated gazing. *Pros to (to)* used with the infinitive (*epithumēσαι, lust for*) indicates a goal or an action that follows in time the action of the looking. Jesus is therefore speaking of intentional looking with the purpose of lusting. He is speaking of the man who looks so that he may satisfy his evil desire. He is speaking of the man who goes to an X-rated movie, who selects a television program known for its sexual orientation, who goes to a beach known for its scanty swimsuits, or who does any such thing with the expectation and desire of being sexually and sinfully titillated.

Looking at a woman lustfully does not cause a man to commit adultery in his thoughts. He already **has committed adultery in his heart**. It is not lustful looking that causes the sin in the heart, but the sin in the heart that causes lustful looking. The lustful looking is but the expression of a heart that is already immoral and adulterous. The heart is the soil where the seeds of sin are imbedded and begin to grow.

Jesus is not speaking of unexpected and unavoidable exposure to sexual temptation. When a man happens to see a woman provocatively dressed, Satan will surely try to tempt that man with lustful thoughts. But there is no sin if the temptation is resisted and the gaze is turned elsewhere. It is continuing to look in order to satisfy lustful desires that Jesus condemns, because it evidences a vile, immoral heart.

David was not at fault for seeing Bathsheba bathing. He could not have helped noticing her, because she was in plain view as he walked on the palace roof. His sin was in dwelling on the sight and in willingly succumbing to the temptation. He could have looked away and put the experience out of his mind. The fact that he had her brought to his chambers and committed adultery with her expressed the immoral desire that already existed in his heart (see 2 Sam. 11:1-4).

A popular proverb goes, “Sow a thought and reap an act. Sow an act and reap a habit. Sow a habit and reap a character. Sow a character and reap a destiny.” That process perfectly illustrates Jesus’ main thrust in this passage: No matter where it ends, sin always begins when an evil thought is sown in the mind and heart.

Although Jesus here uses a man as the example, His condemnation of lustful thoughts as well as actions applies equally to women. Women are equally susceptible to lustful looking, and even to inciting men to lust. As Arthur Pink observes,

If lustful looking is so grievous a sin, then those who dress and expose themselves with the desire to be looked at and lusted after . . . are not less but perhaps more guilty. In this matter it is not only too often the case that men sin but women tempt them to do so. How great then must be the guilt of the great majority of modern misses who deliberately seek to arouse the sexual passions of young men. And how much greater still is the guilt of most of their mothers for allowing them to become lascivious temptresses. (*An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974], p. 83)

Job said, “I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze at a virgin.... If my step has turned from the way, or my heart followed my eyes, or if any spot has stuck to my hands, let me sow and another eat, and let my crops be uprooted” (Job 31:1, 7-8). Job knew that sin begins in the heart and that he was just as deserving of God’s punishment for looking at a woman lustfully as for committing adultery with her. He therefore determined in advance to guard himself by making a pact with his eyes not to gaze at a woman who might tempt him.

Just as the adulterous heart plans to expose itself to lust-satisfying situations, the godly heart plans to avoid them whenever possible and to flee from them when unavoidable. Just as the adulterous heart panders to itself in advance, so the godly heart protects itself in advance, praying with the psalmist, “Turn away my eyes from looking at vanity, and revive me in Thy ways. Establish Thy word to Thy servant, as that which produces reverence for Thee” (Ps. 119:37-38). Paul exhorted Timothy to “flee from youthful lusts” and to cultivate a “pure heart” (2 Tim. 2:22).

Like Job, therefore, we must make a covenant with our eyes—and with every other part of our bodies, minds, and spirits—to shun lust and pursue purity.

THE DELIVERANCE

And if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell. (5:29-30)

Here Jesus points the way to deliverance from heart sin. At first His advice seems incongruous with what He has just been saying. If the problem is in the heart, what good is plucking out an eye or cutting off a hand? If the right eye were lost, the left would continue to look lustfully, and if the right hand were cut off, the left would still remain to carry on sinful acts.

Obviously Jesus is speaking figuratively of those things, physical or otherwise, that cause us to be tempted or make us more susceptible to temptation. In Jewish culture, the right eye and right hand represented a person's best and most precious faculties. The right eye represented one's best vision, and the right hand one's best skills. Jesus' point is that we should be willing to give up whatever is necessary, even the most cherished things we possess, if doing that will help protect us from evil. Nothing is so valuable as to be worth preserving at the expense of righteousness. This strong message is obviously not to be interpreted in a wooden, literal way so that the Lord appears to be advocating mutilation. Mutilation will not cleanse the heart. The intent of these words is simply to call for dramatic severing of the sinful impulses in us which push us to evil action (cf. Matt. 18:8-9).

Skandalizō basically means to cause to fall, but in its substantive form, as here (**makes . . . stumble**), it was often used of the bait stick that springs the trap when an animal touches it. Anything that morally or spiritually traps us, that causes us to fall into sin or to stay in sin, should be eliminated quickly and totally. For example, a married person's falling in love with someone besides his or her spouse is wrong. The relationship may be mutually enjoyable and considered to be rewarding, fulfilling, and beautiful. But it is totally sinful and should be immediately severed. What is a pure and truly beautiful relationship between marriage partners is

morally ugly and repulsive to God when it is shared between a man and woman if either or both are married to someone else.

The message of this hyperbolic statement of our Lord is clearly that sin must be dealt with radically. Paul said, “I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:27). If we do not consciously and purposefully control what is around us, where we go, what we do, what we watch and read, the company we keep, and the conversations we have, then those things will control us. And what we cannot control we should discard without hesitation.

Obviously getting rid of harmful influences will not change a corrupt heart into a pure heart. Outward acts cannot produce inner benefits. But just as the outward act of adultery reflects a heart that is already adulterous, the outward act of forsaking whatever is harmful reflects a heart that hungers and thirsts for righteousness. That outward act is effective protection, because it comes from a heart that seeks to do God’s will instead of its own.

Like Origen, Saint Anthony sought to escape immorality and lust by separating himself from the rest of society. He became a hermit in the Egyptian desert, where he lived in poverty and deprivation for thirty-five years. Yet by his own testimony he was never freed in all that time from the cares and temptations he sought to escape. Because his heart was still in the world he could not escape the world, and he quickly discovered that Satan, the god of this world, had no difficulty finding him in the desert (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 2 vols. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956], 1:146-47).

Jesus again sets forth the impossible standards of His kingdom righteousness. All people are murderers and adulterers. Many do not realize that they are because of the subtlety of sin and its blinding effect on the mind. Jesus does not suggest that the scribes and Pharisees, or anyone else, could deliver themselves from the propensity to sin. As always, the impossibility that He sets forth has a twofold purpose: to make men and women despair of their own righteousness and to seek His. The Lord’s remedy for a wicked heart is a new heart, and His answer for our helplessness is His sufficiency.

The story is told that during the Civil War a beautiful, highly educated, and popular young woman fell into prostitution. By the time she

was twenty-two years old, she was friendless, broken, and lay dying in a hospital in Cincinnati. Just before she died on a cold winter day she wrote a poem lamenting her life. The poem was published in a newspaper the next day and soon drew the sympathetic attention of thousands across the country. The poem ended with the lines:

Fainting, freezing, dying alone,
 too wicked for prayer,
Too weak for a moan to be heard
 in the streets of the crazy town
Gone mad in the joy
 of the snow coming down.
To lie, and to die,
 in my terrible woe,
With a bed and a shroud
 of the beautiful snow.

Sometime later a verse was added by another pen.

Helpless and frail as the trampled snow,
 Sinner despair not, Christ stoopeth low
To rescue the soul that is lost in its sin,
 And raise it to life and enjoyment again.
Groaning, bleeding, dying for thee,
 The Crucified hung, made a curse on the tree.
His accents of mercy fall soft on thine ear.
 Is there mercy for me? Will He heed my prayer?
O God! in the stream that for sinners doth flow,
 Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

(A. Nain Smith, *1200 Notes, Quotes, and Anecdotes* [Chicago: Moody, 1962], p. 184)

Many men and women go to hell forever because of the deception of self-righteous religion. The illusion that sin is only an external issue is damning.

Divorce and Remarriage (5:31-32)

And it was said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of dismissal”; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (5:31-32)

The many confused and conflicting ideas in our day about the biblical teaching on divorce are not caused by any deficiency in God’s revelation but by the fact that sin has clouded men’s minds to the straightforward simplicity of what God has said. When people read God’s Word through the lenses of their own preconceptions or carnal dispositions, a confused and perplexing picture is the only possible outcome. The confusion is not with God but with man.

British physician David Graham Cooper in his book *The Death of the Family* (New York: Pantheon, 1970) suggests the best thing society could do is to abolish the family altogether. He claims it is the primary conditioning device for a Western imperialistic world view. An advocate of women’s liberation, Kate Millet, maintains in her book *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970; Ballantine, 1978) that “the family unit must go because it is the family that has oppressed and enslaved women.” City after city and even some states are passing legislation that grants increasing rights to homosexuals. From every side the family is being directly attacked or indirectly undermined.

Yet the famous Harvard Medical School psychiatrist Armand Nicoli says that

certain trends prevalent today will incapacitate the family, destroy its integrity, and cause its members to suffer such crippling emotional conflicts that they will become an intolerable burden to society. If any one factor influences the character development and emotional stability of an individual, it is the quality of the relationship he or she experiences as a child with *both* parents. Conversely, if people suffering from severe nonorganic emotional illness have one experience in common, it is the absence of a parent through death, divorce, or some other cause. A parent's inaccessibility, either physically, emotionally, or both, can profoundly influence a child's emotional health. ("The Fractured Family: Following It into the Future," *Christianity Today*, 25 May 1979)

Dr. Nicoli identifies six trends or situations that are the most destructive of the family. They include mothers of young children working outside the home, frequent family moves, the invasion of television, lack of moral control in society, and lack of communication in the home. But he says that by far the major cause of emotional problems and the major detriment to the family is divorce. "The trend toward quick and easy divorce, and the ever-increasing divorce rate, subject more and more children to physically and emotionally absent parents." If the trend is not reversed, he says, "the quality of family life will continue to deteriorate, producing a society with a higher incidence of mental illness than ever before."

The harmful effects of divorce on children, parents, and on the family and society as a whole would be more than enough reason to be concerned about the problem. But the supreme tragedy of divorce is that it violates God's Word.

In many churches the problems of divorce and remarriage are minimized or ignored. Church standards and policies either do not exist or they are accommodated to the whims of the congregation. Often when those problems *are* faced, they are not dealt with on a firm scriptural basis. Many church leaders admit having no clear understanding of what the Bible precisely teaches about the Rightness and wrongness of divorce.

Only four basic interpretations of the biblical data on divorce and remarriage are possible, and all four are found to be held in various

Christian circles. The strictest view is that divorce is not permissible under any circumstance or for any reason. The opposite position contends that both divorce and remarriage are permissible for any reason or none. The other two views lie between those extremes. One is that divorce is permitted under certain circumstances but remarriage is never permitted. The other is that both divorce and remarriage are permitted under certain circumstances.

The Bible, of course, actually teaches only one of those four possibilities, and that view is taught by Jesus here in Matthew 5:31-32. Like many people today, the Jews of Jesus' day, typified by the scribes and Pharisees, had developed their own standards for divorce and remarriage—which they taught as God's standards. In this passage Jesus continues to correct the erroneous doctrines and practices of the rabbinic traditions and to replace them with the truth.

THE TEACHING OF THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES

And it was said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of dismissal.” (5:31)

It was said continues to refer to “the ancients” mentioned in verse 21, the rabbis and scribes who had developed the commonly accepted Jewish traditions over the previous centuries—primarily during and after the Babylonian Exile. This is our Lord's way of setting in place what is antithetical to the teaching of God.

In Jesus' day the dominant rabbinic position on divorce, and by extension on remarriage, was the most liberal of the four views mentioned above: permissibility on any grounds. The only requirement was the giving of **a certificate of dismissal**.

By that period of Jewish history divorce had become so easy and casual that a man could dismiss his wife for such trivial things as burning his meal or embarrassing him in front of his friends. Often the husband did not bother to give a reason, since none was required.

The rabbinic justification for such easy divorce was based on an erroneous interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, the Bible's first mention of **a certificate of dismissal**.

When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house, and she leaves his house and goes and becomes another man's wife, and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife, then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance.

The focus of that passage is not the question of whether or not divorce is permitted. It does not provide for divorce, much less command it. It is rather the statement of a very narrow, specific law that was given to deal with the matter of adultery. It shows how improper divorce leads to adultery, which results in defilement. Through Moses, God recognized and permitted divorce under certain circumstances when it was accompanied by a certificate, but He did not thereby condone or command divorce. God's permission for divorce was but another accommodation of His grace to human sin (see Matt. 19:18). "Because of your hardness of heart," Jesus explained to the Pharisees on another occasion, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way" (Matt. 19:8).

The certificate did not make the divorce right, but only gave the woman some protection. It protected her reputation from slander and provided proof of her legal freedom from her former husband and her consequent right to remarry.

A literal rendering of the Hebrew word translated "indecency" in Deuteronomy 24:1 is "the nakedness of a thing." Some interpreters say it refers to repeated indecent exposure, but Alfred Edersheim (*Sketches of Jewish Social Life* [(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 157-58] says that

the word includes every kind of impropriety and describes a generally poor reputation.

The only other place in the entire Bible where that Hebrew term is used is in the previous chapter of Deuteronomy: “And you shall have a spade among your tools, and it shall be when you sit down outside, you shall dig with it and shall turn to cover up your excrement. Since the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp to deliver you and to defeat your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy; and He must not see anything indecent among you lest He turn away from you” (23:13-14). “Anything indecent” comes from the same Hebrew word as “indecency” in 24:1.

The meaning of the word in Deuteronomy 24 includes every kind of improper, shameful, or indecent behavior unbecoming to a woman and embarrassing to her husband. It cannot refer to adultery, because death was the penalty for that, even if it occurred during the engagement period (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22-24).

What kind of indecency, then, would lead to the **certificate of dismissal**? It must have been sins of unfaithfulness and promiscuity that stopped just short of actual adultery. At any rate, Deuteronomy 24 is clear that if the woman remarried and was divorced again, or even if her second husband died, she could not be remarried to her first husband, because she had been “defiled.”

The Lord’s primary purpose in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 was not to give an excuse for divorce but to show the potential evil of it. His intention was not to provide for it but to prevent it. Verses 1-3 are a series of conditional clauses that culminate in the prohibition of a man ever remarrying a woman he has divorced if she marries someone else and is separated from that second husband either by another divorce or by death. Because her first divorce had no sufficient grounds, her second marriage would be adulterous. Even if her second husband died, she could not go back to her first, “since she [had] been denied” (v. 4). She was defiled (more literally, “disqualified”) because of the adultery brought about by her second marriage—which is the primary point of the passage. Moses is saying, then, that the divorce for indecency or promiscuity creates an adulterous situation.

In God’s eyes, therefore, the granting of a certificate did not in itself make a divorce legitimate. Far from approving divorce,

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is a strong warning about it. The passage suggests, or perhaps assumes, that a divorce on proper grounds, accompanied by a certificate, was permitted. It does not offer a divine provision for divorce, but rather shows that divorce often leads to adultery. Even on the grounds of adultery, divorce was tolerated in the law of Moses only as a gracious alternative to the capital punishment that adultery justly deserved (Lev. 20:10-14).

The most popular school of rabbinic tradition in Jesus' day, as reflected in the Targum of Palestine (written in the first century A.D.), interpreted Moses' words in Deuteronomy 24:1 as a command. What God had provided as reluctant permission had been turned into a legal right.

THE TEACHING OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Bible's teaching on divorce cannot be understood apart from its teaching on marriage. Immediately after woman was created, God declared, "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). Marriage was God's plan, not man's, and in the deepest sense every couple that has ever been married, whether believers or not, participates in a union established by the Creator Himself. Marriage is God's institution.

From the beginning, God intended monogamous, life-long marriage to be the only pattern of union between men and women. "Cleave to" carries the idea of firm, permanent attachment, as in gluing. In marriage a man and woman are so closely joined that they become "one flesh," which involves spiritual as well as physical oneness. In marriage God brings a husband and wife together in a unique physical and spiritual bond that reaches to the very depths of their souls. As God designed it, marriage is to be the welding of two people together into one unit, the blending of two minds, two wills, two sets of emotions, two spirits. It is a bond the Lord intends to be indissoluble as long as both partners are alive. The Lord created sex and procreation to be the fullest expression of that oneness, and the intimacies of marriage are not to be shared with any other human being.

One of the most immediate and damaging consequences of the Fall was the destruction of the blissful, loving, and caring relationship between husband and wife. In the garden, Adam and Eve had ruled together, with him as the head and her as his helper. Adam's headship was a loving, caring, understanding provision of leadership. Eve's role was that of loving, willing submission and support. Both were totally devoted to the Lord and to each other.

But problems in marriage, like problems in every other area of earthly existence, began with the Fall. Man's first sin brought a separation from God, a separation of man and nature, and a separation of husband and wife. God's curse on Eve and all women after her was, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, in pain you shall bring forth children; yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16). The curse on Adam and every man after him was, "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you" (v. 17).

The Fall distorted and perverted the marriage relationship. Henceforth the wife's "desire" for her husband would no longer be the desire to help but the desire to control—the same desire that sin had for Cain (see Gen. 4:7, where the identical Hebrew construction is used). For the man's part, his "rule" over his wife henceforth would be one of stern control, in opposition to her desire to control him. At the Fall the battle of the sexes began, and women's liberation and male chauvinism have ever since been clouding and corrupting the divine plan for marriage.

One of the most tragic consequences of that battle is the propensity to divorce. But in light of God's perfect plan for marriage—the plan followed but for a brief while in the Garden of Eden—it is clear that divorce is like a person cutting off an arm or leg because he has a splinter in it. Instead of dealing with whatever trouble arises between husband and wife, divorce tries to solve the problem by destroying the union.

On an even deeper level, divorce destroys a union that God Himself has made. That is why Jesus said unequivocally, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (Matt. 19:6). The union of marriage is one which God, as its Creator, *never* desires to be broken. Divorce is a denial of His will and a destruction of His work.

The seriousness with which God takes marriage is seen in the penalty for adultery. All sexual intercourse outside of marriage is sinful

and defiling, but any illicit sexual activity that involved married persons was punishable by death (Lev. 20:10-14). Two of the Ten Commandments relate to the sanctity of marriage. Not only is the act of adultery forbidden but even the intent of it in coveting another man's wife (Ex. 20:14, 17).

In fact, nowhere is God's high view of the sanctity of marriage more clearly emphasized than in the last of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (Ex. 20:17). For a married person even to desire another partner was a grievous sin. As Jesus affirms in Matthew 5:28, adultery is forbidden to both the body and the mind. In Leviticus 18:18 God went a step further and forbade polygamy. Every violation of lifelong, faithful, monogamous marriage was forbidden by the divine law.

God established marriage as the physical, spiritual, and social union of one man with one woman, a life-long, indivisible union that is never to be violated and never to be broken. He confirms His absolute hatred of divorce in Malachi 2:13-16.

And this is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. Yet you say, "For what reason?" Because the Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly offspring? Take heed then, to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. "For I hate divorce," says the Lord, the God of Israel, "and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the Lord of hosts. "So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously."

The man who puts away his wife does what God hates. He "covers his garment with wrong," a literal rendering of which would be, "he covers his garment with violence." It brings to mind the picture of a man who murders someone and is caught with the blood of his victim spattered on his clothes. "Not one has done so [divorced] who has a remnant of the Spirit," Malachi tells us. That sentence represents a Hebrew phrase that is

difficult to translate, but I believe that rendering gives the right sense of it. God's Holy Spirit is never a party to divorce.

Many people today claim to be led of the Lord to get a divorce and to have" His peace after they leave their spouses. But, "I hate divorce," God continues to declare through Malachi, "so take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously" (v. 16). Without exception, divorce is a product of sin, and God hates it. He never commands it, endorses it, or blesses it.

The Pharisees used an erroneous interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 to defend their idea of divorce, conveniently interpreting that passage as a command for divorce (Matt. 19:7). In fact, the passage neither commands nor condones divorce. It simply recognizes it as a reality, as do other Old Testament passages. In Isaiah 50:1, for example, God challenges the nation of Israel for their spiritual fornication: "Thus says the Lord, 'Where is the certificate of divorce, by which I have sent your mother away? Or to whom of My creditors did I sell you? Behold, you were sold for your iniquities, and for your transgressions your mother was sent away.'"

Jeremiah 3:1 contains a similar reference: "God says, 'If a husband divorces his wife, and she goes from him, and belongs to another man, will he still return to her? Will not that land be completely polluted? But you are a harlot with many lovers; yet you turn to Me,' declares the Lord."

Far from encouraging divorce, most references to divorce in the Old Testament put restrictions on it. For example, Deuteronomy says about a husband who falsely accuses his bride of "shameful deeds" that "they shall fine him a hundred shekels of silver and give it to the girl's father, because he publicly defamed a virgin of Israel. And she shall remain his wife; he cannot divorce her all his days" (22:14, 19). In the same chapter we read: "If a man finds a girl who is a virgin, who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her and they are discovered, then the man who lay with her shall give to the girl's father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall become his wife because he has violated her; he cannot divorce her all his days" (vv. 28-29).

Divorce was clearly taught to be a defilement for a priest. "They [priests] shall not take a woman who is profaned by harlotry, nor shall they take a woman divorced from her husband; for he is holy to his God. . . . A widow, or a divorced woman, or one who is profaned by harlotry, these he

may not take; but rather he is to marry a virgin of his own people” (Lev. 21:7, 14).

In the Old Testament God does not condone or bless divorce. In one unique case (Ezra 10:3-5) God actually commanded divorce through His priest, Ezra, because the existence of His covenant people was threatened (cf. Deut. 7:1-5); but that single exception did not negate His hatred of divorce. Ezra’s call for divorce is an extreme historical example of following the lesser of two evils, and it applied only to the covenant nation of Israel in that one situation.

The entire book of Hosea is a picture of God’s forgiving and patient love for Israel, dramatized by Hosea’s forgiving and patient love for his wife, Gomer. Gomer prostituted herself, forsook Hosea, and was unfaithful to him in every possible way. But the heart of the story is that Hosea was faithful and forgiving no matter what she did, just as God is faithful and forgiving no matter what His people do. God looks on the union of husband and wife in the same way He looks on the union of Himself with believers. And the way of God should be the way of His people—to love, forgive, draw back, and seek to restore the partner who is willing to be restored.

Although Hosea’s and Gomer’s marriage is primarily a symbol of God’s relationship to His people Israel, it is also an apt illustration of how to deal with a wayward marriage partner. God’s forgiving love seeks to hold the union together. That is certainly Christ’s attitude in His relationship to the church, as He repeatedly forgives His bride and never casts her away (Eph. 5:22-23).

There must be forgiving love and restoring grace in a marriage. That alone makes marriage a proper symbol of God’s forgiving love and restoring grace. That is the magnificence of marriage. To pursue divorce is to miss the whole point of God’s dramatization in the story of Hosea and Gomer, the whole point of our Lord’s love for His church, and thus the whole point of marriage. God hates divorce.

THE TEACHING OF JESUS

but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (5:31-32)

Jesus affirms exactly what Moses taught in Deuteronomy 24:1-4—that unjustified divorce inevitably leads to adultery. To the legalistic, self-righteous scribes and Pharisees Jesus was saying, “You consider yourselves to be great teachers and keepers of the law, but by allowing no-fault divorce you have caused a great blight of adultery to contaminate God’s people. By lowering God’s standards to meet your own, you have led many people into sin and judgment.”

The Pharisees interpreted Moses’ instructions to mean, “If you find something distasteful about your wife, divorce her.” They saw the paperwork as the only issue. Jesus knew their warped interpretation and thus confronted them.

The error in their thinking is highlighted in 5:27-30. They prided themselves on the fact that they did not commit adultery. But Jesus said, “I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart” (v. 28). In verses 29-30 He showed them that no sacrifice is too great to maintain moral purity. Then in these present verses (31-32), He again indicts them for adultery because they were committing it by putting away their wives. The ease of divorce made it possible to avoid open adultery. Only a little paperwork was required to legalize their lust.

But Jesus confronted them with a proper interpretation of God’s law. He said that every time a man without proper cause turned his wife loose to remarry, he forced her into adultery, which made him guilty also. In addition, the man who married the former wife and the woman who married the former husband were likewise guilty of adultery. The result was multiplied adultery! Jesus’ whole point is that divorce leads to adultery.

Some interpreters maintain that *apoluō* (**divorces**), which has the basic meaning of let loose, or let go free, refers only to separation, broken engagement, or desertion. A common view of this passage is that Jesus is referring only to divorce during the betrothal period, such as that mentioned in Matthew 1:18-19. But when used in the context of a man and

wife, the common meaning of *apoluō* was always divorce—not merely separation or the breaking of an engagement (cf. Matt. 19:3, 7-9; Mark 10:2, 4, 11-12; Luke 16:18).

The term cannot refer only to a broken betrothal for several reasons. First, the background of the passage is Deuteronomy 24, which does not deal with broken betrothal but with broken marriage. To take the betrothal period as a limiting factor in a passage that deals strictly with marriage and divorce (based on its Old Testament roots) gives an illegitimate and nonhistorical restriction. If Christ has in mind the betrothal period He would then be adding something to the Old Testament standard, rather than commenting on and affirming it—which would have been out of step with His stated purpose for this section of the Sermon on the Mount (see 5:17-18).

Second, the indissoluble union in a Hebrew marriage began at betrothal, not consummation, as illustrated by Joseph and Mary. He was her “husband” during the betrothal period. The Old Testament punishment of death for adultery was the same for both participants, and it applied whether the adultery was committed during betrothal or after consummation of the marriage. Prior to betrothal, a man and woman who committed fornication were only required to marry each other (Deut. 22:28-29). In that cultural context betrothal was clearly an element of marriage.

Third, it is clear that the Jews who heard Jesus use the term understood Him to mean divorce, because there was never any need to clarify what was meant. Deuteronomy 24:1-4, to which Jesus refers in Matthew 5:31, had to do strictly with marriage and divorce, not betrothal, mere separation, or desertion. Jesus was not adding to or modifying what Moses had said, but simply clarifying it.

By divorcing his wife on grounds other than adultery, a husband **makes** his innocent former wife **commit adultery** if she remarries—as it is assumed she would. Further, as Jesus makes explicit in Mark 10:11-12, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery.” Jesus’ statement that **whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery** (cf. Luke 16:18) completes the picture. A man or woman who has no right to divorce has no right to remarry. To do so initiates a whole chain of adultery, because remarriage

after illegitimate divorce results in illegitimate and adulterous relationships for all parties involved.

When the detrimental effects on children, other relatives, and society in general are added, we see that few practices match divorce for destructiveness. It not only causes further sin but also confusion, resentment, hatred, bitterness, despair, conflict, and hardships of every sort.

In Matthew 19 Jesus quotes God's declaration in Genesis 2:24 that "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh" (Matt. 19:5). "Consequently," He goes on to say, "they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (v. 6). The Pharisees' response, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate and divorce her?" (v. 7) again betrayed their misinterpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Jesus had to explain, "Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way" (v. 8). God never "commanded" divorce but only "permitted" it as a concession to sinful, self-willed mankind. It is true that in Mark 10:5 Jesus speaks of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 as a commandment. But the teaching there is not a command to divorce but a command not to remarry the defiled person who has been divorced.

The condition **except for unchastity** is not a way out that God provides, but is the only grounds for divorce that He will recognize. Some say that this "exception clause" allows divorce for Jews only, and only in the case of the sin of consanguinity (marrying a near relative, a practice forbidden in Lev. 18). This view is propounded by those who wish to believe that there are no biblical grounds at all for divorce by Christians. They point out that the exception clause appears only in Matthew and maintain that to interpret it otherwise would be to contradict or add to the law governing the sin of adultery.

Of course, God has only to say a thing once for it to be true, so the fact that the exception clause appears only in Matthew has no bearing on proper interpretation. In fact, the exception clause would have been inappropriate in the contexts of Mark 10 and Luke 16. In Matthew 5 and 19 the clause is included to correct the Pharisees' misrepresentation of God's law regarding adultery. The exception clause in those passages

amplifies Jesus' teaching on divorce in Mark 10 and Luke 16—it does not contradict it.

Jesus gives no more approval for divorce than did Moses. The Old Testament ideal has not been changed. The permissions for divorce in the Old Testament economy were designed to meet the unique, practical problems of an imperfect, sinful people. God never condoned divorce, because what He joins together is not to be separated by man (Matt. 19:6). Adultery, another reality that God never intended, is the only thing that can break the bond of marriage. In fact, under the Old Testament law, adultery would necessarily dissolve a marriage, because the guilty party was put to death (Lev. 20:10).

Because Jesus specifically mentions divorce being permissible on the ground of adultery (Matt. 5:32; 19:9), and because He also specifically says that He did not come to contradict or annul the least part of the law (5:18-19), it seems evident that sometime during Israel's history divorce was allowed to take the place of execution as legitimate penalty for adultery. No Old Testament passage specifically authorizes divorce, but that does not mean God did not give specific revelation about it. Based on His own recognition and regulation of divorce, and His divorce of Israel and Judah (Jer. 3:8), we can assume that divine instructions for divorce had been given orally or by written revelation not preserved in Scripture. God divorced Israel and Judah for spiritual adultery rather than put them to death. Also Joseph, a righteous man, was prepared to divorce Mary rather than stone her for her presumed adultery (Matt. 1:19).

Why did God allow divorce to replace the death penalty? The answer may be that Israel had so completely immersed herself in immorality that there was not sufficient desire for righteousness left in the people to carry out executions for that offense. Ultimately, God in His mercy chose Himself not to enforce the death penalty. That is consistent with the divine nature revealed in Jesus, who challenged the Pharisees who were about to stone a woman for adultery and then forgave her Himself (John 8:7). Apart from the death penalty, divorce became the divine alternative, tolerated only because of the hardness of the human heart, as Jesus states in Matthew 19:8.

Divorce was never *commanded*, even for adultery. Otherwise God would have given His notice of divorce to Israel and Judah long before He did. A legitimate bill of divorce was allowable for adultery, but it was

never commanded or required. It was a last resort—to be used only when unrepentant immorality had exhausted the patience of the innocent spouse, and the guilty one would not be restored.

If God permitted divorce rather than death as a merciful concession to man's sinfulness, why would He not also permit remarriage, since remarriage would be perfectly allowable under the original law of death for the adulterer? After all, the purpose of divorce was to show mercy to the guilty party, not to sentence the innocent party to a life of loneliness and misery.

Unchastity (*porneia*) refers to any illicit sexual intercourse, whether or not either of the parties is married. It was a broad term that included adultery, as other texts using a form of *porneia* indicate (“immorally,” 1 Cor. 10:8; “immorality,” Rev. 2:14; cf. 1 Cor. 5:1). Because Matthew 5:31-32 focuses on marriage and divorce, the primary **unchastity** involved here would be adultery. But *porneia* also included incest, prostitution, homosexuality, and bestiality—all of the sexual acts for which the Old Testament demanded the death penalty (Lev. 20:10-14). In other words, any of those corrupt and perverted sexual activities was a permissible ground for divorce.

Jesus does not advocate divorce in such cases, much less demand it. He simply says that divorce and remarriage on any other grounds always leads to adultery. As God, Jesus hates divorce (Mal. 2:16), but by implication He acknowledges that there are times when it does not result in adultery. The innocent party who has made every effort to maintain the marriage is free to remarry if his or her spouse insists on continued adultery or divorce.

Jesus sets the record straight that God still hates divorce and that His ideal is still monogamous, life-long marriage. But as a concession to sin and as a gracious provision for those who are innocent of defiling the marriage, He allows divorce on the single ground of **unchastity**.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul adds one more legitimate ground for divorce and subsequent remarriage. “But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away” (7:12-13). After giving the reason for that instruction, he adds, “Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under

bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace” (v. 15). The Greek word translated “leave” (*chōrizō*) was often used for divorce. Thus if an unbelieving spouse deserts or divorces a believer, the believer is no longer bound and is free to remarry. (For further study on this passage, see the author’s commentary *First Corinthians* [Chicago: Moody, 1984], pp. 164-68.)

The Spiritual Credibility Gap

(5:33-37)

Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, “You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.” But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, “Yes, yes” or “No, no”; and anything beyond these is of evil. (5:33-37)

Credibility gaps are not a creation of modern times. They have existed since the Fall and have continually been one of the major marks of the world system. Satan is the prince of this world, and since he not only is a liar himself but also “the father of lies” (John 8:44), it should not be surprising that the system he heads is characterized by lying. Because all men are born in sin, all men are born liars (see Ps. 58:3; 62:4; Jer. 9:3-5).

The natural credibility gap is widened even further by popular novels, movies, television, music, and advertising—in which truth, fantasy, and outright falsehood are blended into mixtures impossible to unscramble. Truth is so scarce that nearly everyone is suspect. Business people, advertisers, commentators, clerks, salesmen, lawyers, doctors, tradesmen, teachers, writers, politicians, and even many, if not most, preachers are suspect. Our whole society is largely built on a network of fabrication, of manufactured “truth.” We shade the truth, we cheat, we exaggerate, we misrepresent income tax deductions, we make promises we have no intention of keeping, we make up excuses, and betray confidences—all as a matter of normal, everyday living.

So much of business, politics, government, the educational system, science, religion, and even family life is built on falsehoods and half-truths that a sudden revelation of the whole truth would cause society as we know it to disintegrate. It would be too devastating to handle.

Yet even the most corrupt and deceptive societies have always realized that, in certain areas at least, the “real truth” is necessary. Courts of law require witnesses to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Without truth, even a semblance of justice would be impossible. Because of the extreme importance of truthful testimony to justice, perjury itself is a crime that can bring severe penalties. Even gangs of criminals and conspirators, who use lying and cheating as their stock-in-trade, demand the truth among themselves, because it is necessary to their own survival.

Individually men are inclined to the truth only when it benefits them, yet collectively they have always known something of its importance and rightfulness—even outside courts of law. The great Roman orator Cicero said, “Truth is the highest thing a man may experience.” Sadly, with most people it is an infrequent experience. Daniel Webster wrote, “There is nothing as powerful as truth and often nothing as strange.”

Even the ancient Jewish rabbis, whose unbiblical traditions and flippancy with the truth Jesus challenges in the Sermon on the Mount, moralistically considered lying—along with scoffing, hypocrisy, and slander—to be one of the four great sins that would shut a person out of God’s presence. In their consciences men know that truth is right and essential. That is one reason they go to such lengths to make what they say *appear* to be truthful. Our problem is in *being* truthful.

The Jews of Jesus’ day revered the idea of truth in principle, but in practice it was buried under their system of tradition, which over the centuries had continually cut God’s law down to fit their own sinful perspectives and purposes. In Matthew 5:33-37 the Lord proceeds to expose their convenient distortion and contradiction of the divine revelation they claimed to love and teach. In these five verses Jesus sets forth the original Mosaic teaching, the traditional perversion of that teaching, and His own reemphasis of what God’s standard for truth has always been.

THE PRINCIPLE OF MOSAIC LAW

Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, “You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.” (5:33)

The traditional teaching that Jesus quotes here was a composite of ideas based on Leviticus 19:12, Numbers 30:2, and Deuteronomy 23:21. The two **vows** mentioned here are from two different, but related, Greek terms. The first is from the verb *epiorkeō*, which means to perjure oneself, to swear falsely, to **make false vows**. The second is from the noun *horkos*, which literally means to enclose, as with a fence, or to bind together. The truth of an oath or vow is enclosed, bound, and therefore strengthened by that which is invoked on its behalf.

A clear description of an oath is given in the book of Hebrews: “For men swear by one greater than themselves, and with them an oath given as confirmation is an end of every dispute” (6:16). The name of something or someone greater than the person making the oath is invoked to give greater credibility to what is said. Any oath calling on God invites Him to witness the truthfulness of what is said or to avenge if it is a lie. An oath was therefore generally taken to be the absolute truth, which made “an end of every dispute,” because it invited judgment on the one who violated his word. The Jews who returned from the Babylonian Exile to Israel took “on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God’s laws” (Neh. 10:29).

God provided for making oaths by His name (Lev. 19:12) and many Old Testament saints, both before and after the giving of the law, followed the practice. Abraham confirmed his promises to the king of Sodom (Gen. 14:22-24) and to Abimelech (21:23-24) with oaths in the name of God. He also made his servant Eliezer “swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth” that he would not take a wife for Isaac from among the pagan Canaanites around them but from among relatives in Abraham’s homeland of Mesopotamia (24:1-4, 10). A similar oath is related involving Isaac (26:31). Jacob and Laban, his father-in-law, called on God as their witness when they made a covenant with each other at Mizpah (31:44-53).

David and Jonathan did likewise when they covenanted together (1 Sam. 20:16). David himself “swore to the Lord, and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob” (Ps. 132:2). All those great men of God, and many others, made oaths and covenants calling on God as witness to their truthfulness and sincerity (see Gen. 47:31; 50:25; Josh. 9:15; Judg. 21:5; Ruth 1:16-18; 2 Sam. 15:21; 2 Chron. 15:14-15).

Even God Himself made oaths on certain occasions. To Abraham He said, “By Myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies” (Gen. 22:16-17). As the writer of Hebrews explains, since God “could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself” (Heb. 6:13-14, cf. v. 17). Obviously the Lord’s promises made with an oath were no more truthful or binding than anything else He promised. It is not that God makes an oath because His word would otherwise be questionable or unreliable, but because He wishes to impress upon men a special importance or urgency related to the promise. (More references to divine oaths are mentioned in Ps. 89:3, 49; 110:4; Jer. 11:5; and Luke 1:73.)

Jesus many times used the phrase “Truly I say to you” (Matt. 5:18, 26; 6:2, 5,16; etc.), and the even more emphatic “Truly, truly, I say to you” (John 1:51; 3:3, 5; 5:19, 24; etc.), to call attention to a teaching of special importance. As with God’s oaths, the words Jesus introduces with “truly” are no more truthful than anything else He said, but emphasize the unique importance of certain of His teachings. It is important to note that Jesus Himself swore an oath before Caiaphas that He was the Christ, the Son of God (Matt. 26:63-64).

God provided for proper oath-giving in His name as an accommodation to sinful human nature, which is so prone to deceit and lying. Without any prohibition, Hebrews 6:16 affirms the place of proper oaths. He knows that men’s inclination to lie causes them to distrust each other, and in serious situations an oath is permissible to give greater motivation to tell the truth or to keep a pledge. To make the wedding vow, with God as a witness, to love and cherish our mates for as long as we both live is to recognize and make a firm commitment to honor the special sanctity that God places on marriage. The psalmist, in describing the kind

of person who may enter God's holy presence, makes clear that one mandatory requirement is that such a person be one who "swears to his own hurt, and does not change" (Ps. 15:1, 4). His word is more important than his welfare. Keeping oaths made to God is the mark of a true worshiper. To put it another way, true sons of the kingdom hate lies (Ps. 119:29,163; 120:2).

Obviously an oath, no matter how strong the words used, is only as reliable as the one who makes it. As Peter sat in the courtyard outside the Sanhedrin while Jesus was being tried, a servant-girl said, "You too were with Jesus the Galilean"—to which Peter replied, "I do not know what you are talking about." When another servant-girl made a similar statement a short while later, Peter "denied it with an oath." Still later, when other bystanders made the same assertion, Peter "began to curse and swear, 'I do not know the man!'" (Matt. 26:69-74). That swearing was not profanity, but an oath given with special vehemence. Peter increased the strength of his oath, but that did not increase the truth of what he said. It was bad enough to have lied; it was even worse to call God as a witness to the lie. In addition to denying His Lord, Peter used God's name in vain. It is small wonder that he "went out and wept bitterly" (v. 75).

Sometimes oaths are made sincerely but foolishly, without considering their seriousness and possible consequences. Such rash oaths were made by Joshua (Josh. 9:15), Jephthah (Judg. 11:30-31), Saul (1 Sam. 14:24), and Herod (Matt. 14:7).

By Old Testament law, oaths were to be made only in God's name. "You shall fear only the Lord your God; and you shall worship Him, and swear by His name" (Deut. 6:13; cf. 10:20). "He who is blessed in the earth shall be blessed by the God of truth; and he who swears in the earth shall swear by the God of truth" (Isa. 65:16). Even Gentiles were to swear only by God's name. Of Israel's wicked neighbors, the Lord said, "Then it will come about that if they will really learn the ways of My people, to swear by My name, 'As the Lord lives,' . . . then they will be built up in the midst of My people" (Jer. 12:16).

God established the seriousness of keeping an oath. Even "if a person swears thoughtlessly with his lips to do evil or to do good, in whatever matter a man may speak thoughtlessly with an oath, and it is hidden from him, and then he comes to know it, . . . he shall confess that in which he has sinned. He shall also bring his guilt offering to the Lord for

his sin which he has committed” (Lev. 5:4-6). Joshua 9:20 punctuates how essential keeping an oath is:”... lest wrath be upon us for the oath which we swore.”

THE PERVERSION OF RABBINIC TRADITION

The tradition Jesus mentions in verse 33 seemed to be biblical, but it had several flaws that made it fall short of what the Old Testament actually taught. First, it had a missing ingredient, and second, it had a misplaced emphasis.

The missing ingredient was a proper circumstance for making an oath. Virtually any kind of oath, used for almost any kind of purpose, was acceptable—just as long as it was not **false** and the person would **fulfill** it. The missing ingredient of a serious circumstance led to frivolous, meaningless oath-making that completely vitiated the legitimate purpose of oaths. People would declare anything and promise anything with an oath, while having no qualms about providing means by which lying or breaking their word could still be done. Indiscriminate and insincere vows became so commonplace that no one took them seriously. Instead of being a mark of integrity they became a mark of deceit. Instead of prompting confidence they prompted skepticism.

The misplaced emphasis was in limiting the honest oaths to **vows to the Lord**, to oaths made directly to Him or in His name. The keeping of those oaths was mandatory, whereas the keeping of others they made optional.

The system of oaths between one person and another was like a giant game of King’s X. People would swear by heaven, by the earth, by the Temple, by the hairs on their heads, and by any other thing they thought would impress those they wanted to take advantage of. That kind of routine oath-making was usually lie-making; and it was considered by those who practiced it to be perfectly acceptable as long as it was not in the name of the Lord.

The command “You shall not swear falsely by My name” (Lev. 19:12) was conveniently interpreted to mean that swearing falsely by any other name was allowed. The command “If a man makes a vow to the

Lord, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth” (Num. 30:2) was interpreted as permitting the renegeing on oaths made to anyone but God.

Thus, through rabbinic tradition, God’s standard of absolute truthfulness was contradicted and lowered to a level that accommodated the sinful, selfish capacities and purposes of the people. They wanted to lie, and they did not want to be hampered by God’s absolute standard of truth. Instead of calling on the Lord to help them live up to the divine standard, they reduced that standard to suit their own carnal abilities and interests.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF DIVINE TRUTH

But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, “Yes, yes” or “No, no”; and anything beyond these is of evil. (5:34-37)

In contrast to those alterations of the divine will, Jesus simply reasserts the Old Testament standard that had been misconstrued and perverted by tradition: **make no oath at all**. Oaths are to be used only on important occasions and are to be given only in the name of the Lord. Though the Greek construction here is an unconditional negative (*mē . . . holōs*), that does not preclude all oaths. Commentator William Hendriksen’s explanation is helpful: “What we have here in Matthew 5:33-37 (cf. James 5:12) is the condemnation of the flippant, profane, uncalled for, and often hypocritical oath, used in order to make an impression or to spice daily conversation. Over against that evil Jesus commends simple truthfulness in thought, word and deed” (*Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973], p. 309).

In light of specific Old Testament teaching approving oaths, in light of Jesus' use of such phrases as "truly, truly," and in light of God Himself's making oaths that correspond to men's (Heb. 6:13-17; cf. Luke 1:73; Acts 2:30; etc.), it can hardly be correct, as many interpret this passage, that Jesus here forbids the making of any oath under any circumstance. (See Meredith G. Kline, *The Treaty of the Great King* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963]; and *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.], p. 478, for a discussion of oaths.) He had just said that He did not come to destroy the smallest part of the law (Matt. 5:17-18), a law that taught proper oath-making by both precept and example. Additionally, in the early days of the church, even the apostle Paul gave a type of oath in saying to the Romans, "I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 9:1). He called on Christ and the Holy Spirit as witnesses with his own conscience to the truthfulness of what he was about to say. That is swearing by God.

So, in accordance with the Old Testament standard, we are to swear by no other name but God's—not **by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.** Appealing to **heaven, earth, Jerusalem,** and other such things was considered by most Jews to make their oaths less binding. Those were grand and great things, things that gave an aura of power, importance, and veracity to what was said or promised in their name. But because those things were far less than God, they made oaths given in their names far less binding than an oath made in His name. Still less binding would be an oath made merely **by your head.**

The common attitude toward oaths is also seen in Jesus' great series of woes in Matthew 23 against the hypocritical Jewish leaders. "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obligated.' . . . And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering upon it, he is obligated'" (vv. 16,18). First, Jesus exposed the utter illogic of their practice. "You fools and blind men; which is more important, the gold, or the temple that sanctified the gold? . . . You blind men, which is more important, the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore he who swears, swears both by the altar

and by everything on it” (vv. 17,19-20). By what twisted logic, He asks, should that which is *less* valuable make an oath *more* binding?

But the greatest error in the system was not in its illogic but in its basic deceptiveness and dishonesty. As a matter of accepted policy, some oaths were used to undermine the very purpose they purportedly were meant to serve: the truth. In spite of the fact that an oath is given to reinforce and emphasize the truthfulness of a statement or the reliability of a promise, over the years an intricate system of duplicity had been devised that virtually promoted the use of oaths for deception.

Jesus therefore went on to condemn the system still further: “He who swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And he who swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it” (vv. 21-22). However and whenever the truth is profaned, God’s name is profaned.

Jesus’ point was that God is the Creator and Lord of everything and is the God of truth in everything. To carelessly and dishonestly call any part of His creation as witness to a false oath was to dishonor God Himself, whether or not His name was invoked. To dishonor and compromise any truth is to dishonor and compromise His truth. **Heaven** is God’s, the **earth** is God’s, **Jerusalem** is God’s, and every person’s **head** is God’s. It is therefore wicked and sinful to use anything of God’s, whether His name or a part of His creation, as witness to anything that is dishonest, deceitful, insincere, or in the least way knowingly false. God has no separate categories of sacred and secular. Everything that pertains to Him is sacred, and all truth is His truth, just as all creation is His creation. Every lie is against God, and therefore *every* false oath dishonors His name.

Comments William Barclay, “Here is a great eternal truth. Life cannot be divided into compartments in some of which God is involved and in others of which he is not involved; there cannot be one kind of language in the Church and another kind of language in the shipyard or the factory or the office; there cannot be one kind of conduct in the Church and another kind of conduct in the business world. The fact is that God does not need to be invited into certain departments of life, and kept out of others. He is everywhere, all through life and in every activity of life. He hears not only the words which are spoken in his name; he hears all words; and there cannot be any such thing as a form of words which evades

bringing God into any transaction. We will regard all promises as sacred if we remember that all promises are made in the presence of God” (*The Gospel of Matthew*, 2 vols. [rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 1:160).

Truth has no degrees or shades. A half truth is a whole lie, and a white lie is really black. God has never had any standard lower than absolute truthfulness. Of every person He desires “truth in the innermost being” (Ps. 51:6). Among the things He especially hates is “a lying tongue” (Prov. 6:16-17), and “Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord” (12:22). And just as God hates lying, so do those who are faithful to Him (Ps. 119:163). Those “who speak lies go astray from birth. They have venom like the venom of a serpent” (Ps. 58:3-4). Jeremiah wept over Israel because “lies and not truth prevail in the land” (Jer. 9:3). The destiny of liars is the lake of fire (Rev. 21:8).

God’s absolute, unchanging standard is truth and sincerity in *everything*. Not only should oaths be totally truthful and dependable, but even the most routine conversations should be truthful in every detail. **Let your statement be, “Yes, yes” or “No, no”; anything beyond these is of evil.** **Statement** is from *logos*, the basic meaning of which is simply “word.” Every normal word in the course of daily speech should be a truthful word, unadorned and unqualified in regard to its truthfulness. A person’s words, message, or speech (as *logos* is used in Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 2:1; 4:19; and Titus 2:8) should be as good as his bond and as good as his oath or vow. “But above all, my brethren,” James counsels, “do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but let your yes be yes, and your no, no; so that you may not fall under judgment” (James 5:12).

God is a holy God, His kingdom is a holy kingdom, and the people of His kingdom are to be a holy people. His righteousness is to be their righteousness, and anything less than His righteousness, including anything less than absolute truth, is unacceptable to Him, because it **is of evil**. So our Lord shatters the fragile glass of their hypocritical oaths, which they used to cover lies.

[An Eye for an Eye](#) (5:38-42)

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. (5:38-42)

One element of the great American philosophy of life is that we all have certain inalienable rights. Among the most important privileges that our Declaration of Independence espouses are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In our day the number of rights claimed has greatly expanded. Movements have developed for civil rights, women’s rights, children’s rights, workers’ rights, prisoners’ rights, and so on. Never has a society been more concerned about rights.

We idolize the hero who stands up for what is his no matter who it may offend. That self-interested, self-protecting spirit characterizes fallen human nature. Above all else, sinful man wants what he thinks is his own. And in the process of protecting what is his own, he is also inclined to wreak considerable trouble on anyone who takes what is his. Retaliation, usually with interest, is a natural extension of selfishness.

Inordinate concern for one’s own rights comes from inordinate selfishness and leads to inordinate lawlessness. When our supreme concern is getting and keeping what we think is rightfully ours, then whoever or whatever gets in our way—including the law—becomes expendable. Since it is not possible for everyone to have everything he wants, to insist on our own way invariably tramples on the rights and

welfare of others. Respect for law and for the welfare of others is always among the first and major casualties of self-assertion. When self is in the foreground, everything else and everyone else is pushed to the background.

When self-interest dominates, justice is replaced by vengeance. Impartial concern for justice becomes partial concern for personal revenge. Concern for protecting society becomes concern for protecting self-interest. As James points out, that perversion is the source of wars and every other human conflict. “What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel” (James 4:1-2). When rights are first, righteousness suffers.

Few people have had their legitimate rights trampled on more than Paul. Yet to the selfish, indulgent Corinthians he wrote,

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? . . . Do we not have a right to eat and drink? Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles, and the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas? Or do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working? . . . If others share the right over you, do we not more? Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things, that we may cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ. (1 Cor. 9:1, 4-6,12)

Paul willingly set aside his rights for the sake of the gospel and the welfare of others.

But Paul did not always win the fight against his innate fallenness. When he was brought before the Sanhedrin during his last imprisonment in Jerusalem, he began his testimony by saying, “Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day.” At that, “the high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, ‘God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! And do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?’” When Paul was informed that he was speaking to the high priest, he apologized and said, “I was not

aware, brethren, that he was high priest; for it is written, ‘You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people’” (Acts 23:1-5). Because Paul’s anger momentarily got the best of him, he retaliated with harsh words.

Ananias perhaps was not dressed in the customary high priestly garments, and therefore Paul failed to recognize him. But had he known he was speaking to Ananias, Paul would have had all the more justification, from a human standpoint, to righteously deride the one who ordered him struck. Ananias was an unusually vile, arrogant, and immoral man who continually profaned his high office. And, as Paul reminded him, to order a prisoner struck before he was convicted was against the very Jewish law Ananias was sworn to administer. Yet Paul acknowledged that his angry retort was wrong. In God’s eyes he had no right to speak disparagingly of any ruler, and he condemned his own actions by Scripture.

Probably no part of the Sermon on the Mount has been so misinterpreted and misapplied as 5:38-42. It has been interpreted to mean that Christians are to be sanctimonious doormats. It has been used to promote pacifism, conscientious objection to military service, lawlessness, anarchy, and a host of other positions that it does not support. The Russian writer Tolstoy based one of his best-known novels on this passage. The thesis of *War and Peace* is that the elimination of police, the military, and other forms of authority would bring a Utopian society.

But Jesus already had made plain that He did not come to eliminate even the smallest part of God’s law (5:17-19), which includes respect for and obedience to human law and authority.

Among the many unrighteous things that the religion of the scribes and Pharisees (see Matt. 5:20) included was their insistence on personal rights and vengeance. In His fifth illustration contrasting their righteousness with God’s, Jesus again shows how rabbinic tradition had twisted God’s holy law to serve the selfish purposes of unholy men.

THE PRINCIPLE OF MOSAIC LAW

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” (5:38)

This quotation is taken directly from the Old Testament (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21) and reflects the principle of *lex talionis*, one of the most ancient law codes. Simply put, it required that punishment exactly match the crime. The same idea is carried in the expressions *tit for tat* and *quid pro quo*. The earliest record of *lex talionis* is in the Code of Hammurabi, the great Babylonian king who lived a hundred or so years before Moses. It is likely, however, that the principle was in wide use long before that time.

In the Pentateuch **an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth** are part of longer lists that include “hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise” (see Ex. 21:24-25) and “fracture for fracture” (Lev. 24:20). In both the law of Moses and the Code of Hammurabi the principle of punishment to match the crime had two basic purposes. The first was to curtail further crime. When a person is punished for his wrongdoing, “the rest will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such an evil thing among you” (Deut. 19:20). The second purpose was to prevent excessive punishment based on personal vengeance and angry retaliation of the type of which Lamech boasted: “For I have killed a man for wounding me; and a boy for striking me; if Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold” (Gen. 4:23-24). Punishment was to match, but not exceed, the harm done by the offense itself.

It is of the utmost significance that each of the three Pentateuch accounts that prescribe the **eye for an eye** principle has to do with the civil justice system. Exodus 21-23 deals entirely with God’s provision for Israel’s civil law, as do the similar teachings in Leviticus 24 and Deuteronomy 19. Punishment was sometimes carried out by the victim, but the trial and sentencing were always the responsibility of duly appointed judges or of a large, representative body of citizens (see Ex. 21:22; Deut. 19:18; Lev. 24:14-16).

The law of **an eye for an eye** was a just law, because it matched punishment to offense. It was a merciful law, because it limited the innate propensity of the human heart to seek retribution beyond what an offense deserved. It was also a beneficent law, because it protected society by restraining wrongdoing.

Selfish overreaction is the natural response of sinful human nature. We are tempted to get more than just even. Anger and resentment demand the sort of retaliation Lamech glorified. Human vengeance is never satisfied with justice; it wants a pound of flesh for an ounce of offense. That is one reason why God restricts vengeance to Himself. “Vengeance is Mine, and retribution” (Deut. 32:35; cf. Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30).

God’s command for the individual has always been, “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink” (Prov. 25:21; cf. Matt. 5:44; Rom. 12:20). No individual has the right to say, “Thus I shall do to him as he has done to me; I will render to the man according to his work” (Prov. 24:29). In no instance did the Old Testament allow an individual to take the law into his own hands and apply it personally.

THE PERVERSION OF RABBINIC TRADITION

Yet that is exactly what rabbinic tradition had done. Each man was permitted, in effect, to become his own judge, jury, and executioner. God’s law was turned to individual license, and civil justice was perverted to personal vengeance. Instead of properly acknowledging the law of **an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth** as a limit on punishment, they conveniently used it as a mandate for vengeance—as it has often been wrongly viewed throughout history.

What God gave as a restriction on civil courts, Jewish tradition had turned into personal license for revenge. In still another way, the self-centered and self-asserted “righteousness” of the scribes and Pharisees had made a shambles of God’s holy law.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF DIVINE TRUTH

But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone wants to

sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. (5:39-42)

In the command **do not resist him who is evil** Jesus rebuts the Pharisees' misinterpretation and forbids retaliation in personal relationships. He does not teach, as many have claimed, that no stand is to be taken against evil and that it should simply be allowed to take its course. Jesus and the apostles continually opposed evil with every means and resource. Jesus resisted the profaning of God's Temple by making a scourge of cords and physically driving out the sacrifice sellers and moneychangers (Matt. 21:12; John 2:15). We are to "resist the devil" (James 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:9) and all the evil that he stands for and inspires (Matt. 6:13; Rom. 12:9; 1 Thess. 5:22; 2 Tim. 4:18).

A proper resisting of evil includes resisting it in the church. When Peter compromised with the Judaizers, Paul "opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned" (Gal. 2:11). When there is immorality in the congregation, God says, "Remove the wicked man from among yourselves" (1 Cor. 5:13; cf. Deut. 13:5). Jesus said that a believer who sins should first be reproved in private, and then before two or three other church members if he does not repent. "And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer" (Matt. 18:15-17). Paul echoes Jesus' teaching when he says that those in the church who continue in sin should be rebuked "in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful of sinning" (1 Tim. 5:20).

That the principle of nonresistance does not apply to governmental authorities is clear from many passages in the New Testament. Civil government "is a minister of God to you for good," Paul says. "But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil" (Rom. 13:4). Peter commands, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right" (1 Pet. 2:13-14).

For the sake of God's righteousness, as well as for the sake of human justice, believers are obligated not only to uphold the law themselves but to insist that others do so as well. To report crime is an act of compassion, righteousness, and godly obedience as well as an act of civil responsibility. To belittle, excuse, or hide the wrongdoing of others is not an act of love but an act of wickedness, because it undermines civil justice and divine righteousness.

As long as the natural human heart exists, evil will have to be restrained by law. Our crime-wrecked society would do well to reexamine—and reapply—biblical law. When God is forsaken, His righteous standards are forsaken, and His law is forsaken. Antinomianism, the doing away with law, is as much an enemy of the gospel as legalism and works righteousness. The Old and New Testaments are never at odds in regard to law and grace, justice and mercy. The Old Testament teaches nothing of a righteous and just God apart from a merciful and loving God, and the New Testament teaches nothing of a merciful and loving God apart from a righteous and just God. The revelation of God is unchanging in regard to moral law.

When the church stopped preaching God's righteousness, justice, and eternal punishment of the lost, it stopped preaching the fullness of the gospel, and both society and the church have suffered greatly for it. And when the church stopped holding its own members accountable to God's standards and stopped disciplining its own ranks, a great deal of its moral influence on society was sacrificed. One of the legacies of theological liberalism is civil as well as religious lawlessness.

Not to restrain evil is neither just nor kind. It fails to protect the innocent and has the effect of encouraging the wicked in their evil. Proper restraint of evil, however, not only is just but is beneficent as well.

Arthur Pink says,

Magistrates and judges were never ordained by God for the purpose of reforming reprobates or pampering degenerates, but to be His instruments for preserving law and order by being a terror to evil. As Romans chapter 13 says, they are to be “a revenger to execute wrath on him that doeth evil.” . . .

Conscience has become comatose. The requirements of justice are stifled; maudlin concepts now prevail. As eternal punishment was repudiated—either tacitly or in many cases openly—ecclesiastical punishments are shelved. Churches refuse to enforce sanctions and wink at flagrant offenses. The inevitable outcome has been the breakdown of discipline in the home and the creation of ‘public opinion,’ which is mawkish and spineless. School teachers are intimidated by foolish parents and children so that the rising generation are more and more allowed to have their own way without fear of consequences. And if some judge has the courage of his convictions, and sentences a brute for maiming an old woman, there is an outcry against the judge. (*An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974], p. 112-13)

To lower God’s standard of justice is to lower God’s standard of righteousness—which Jesus came to fulfill and clarify, not to obviate or diminish.

Anthistēmi (resist) means to set against or oppose, and in this context obviously refers to harm done to us personally by someone **who is evil**. Jesus is speaking of personal resentment, spite, and vengeance. It is the same truth taught by Paul when he said, “Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.... Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Rom. 12:17, 19). Vengeful retaliation has no place in society at large, and even less place among those who belong to Christ. We are called to overcome someone’s evil toward us by doing good to them (Rom. 12:21).

After establishing the basic principle in Matthew 5:39*a*, in verses 39*b*-42 Jesus picks out four basic human rights that He uses to illustrate the principle of nonretaliation: dignity, security, liberty, and property.

DIGNITY

but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also.
(5:39b)

As human beings we have the right to be treated with basic dignity, respect, and consideration. Because every person is created in His image, God demands that we treat one another with respect. But he knows that we will not always be so treated. Often for the very reason that we belong to God and go by the name of His Son, we will be mistreated, ridiculed, and held in contempt (see Matt. 10:16-23; John 15:18—16:3; 1 Pet. 2:20-21; 3:13-17; 4:12-19; cf. 2 Tim. 3:12). It is the way we react to mistreatment and insult that Jesus is talking about here.

Among Jews, a slap or other striking in the face was among the most demeaning and contemptuous of acts (cf. Matt. 26:67-68; Mark 14:65; John 18:22). To strike someone elsewhere on the body might cause more physical harm, but a slap in the face was an attack on one's honor and was considered to be a terrible indignity. It was to be treated with disdain, as being less than a human. Even a slave would rather have been stuck across the back with a whip than be slapped in the face by his master's hand.

To strike someone on the **right cheek** would then be a vicious angry reaction, indicating an act of insult. Yet when we are insulted, maligned, and treated with contempt—literally or figuratively struck on the cheek by someone—we are to **turn to him the other also**. But Jesus' point pertains more to what we are not to do than what we are to do. Turning the other cheek symbolizes the nonavenging, nonretaliatory, humble, and gentle spirit that is to characterize kingdom citizens (cf. vv. 3, 5).

Jesus strongly resisted evil that was directed against others, especially His Father—as when He cleansed the Temple of those who defiled His Father's house. But He did not resist by personal vengeance any evil directed at Himself. When the leaders of the Sanhedrin, and later the soldiers, physically abused Him and mocked Him, He did not retaliate either in words or in actions (Matt. 26:67-68). As Isaiah had predicted of Him, Christ gave His back to those who struck Him and His cheeks to those who plucked out His beard (Isa. 50:6). As Jesus hung from the cross, He prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are

doing” (Luke 23:34). Peter sums up our Lord’s example: “But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Pet. 2:20-23).

When someone attacks our right to dignity, we too are not to defend that right by retaliation. We are to leave the protection and defense of our dignity in God’s hands, knowing that one day we will live and reign with him in His kingdom in great glory.

SECURITY

And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. (5:40)

The **shirt** mentioned here was a type of tunic worn as an undergarment, and the **coat** was an outer garment that also served as a blanket at night. Most people of that day owned only one coat and probably only one or two shirts. It was the outer garment, the **coat**, that Mosaic law required be returned to its owner “before the sun sets, for that is his only covering; it is his cloak for his body” (Ex. 22:26-27).

Jesus is not speaking of a robbery, in which a person tries to steal your clothes, but of the legitimate claim of **anyone who wants to sue you**. When a person had no money or other possessions, the court often would require the fine or judgment be paid by clothing. The attitude of a kingdom citizen, one who is truly righteous, should be willingness to surrender even one’s **coat**, his extremely valuable outer garment, rather than cause offense or hard feelings with an adversary. The court could not demand the **coat**, but it could be voluntarily given to meet the required debt. And that is precisely what Jesus says we should be willing to do.

If a legal judgment is fairly made against us for a certain amount, we should be willing to offer even more in order to show our regret for any wrong we did and to show that we are not bitter or resentful against the one who has sued us. In so doing we will show the love of Christ and that we are “sons of [our] Father who is in heaven” (v. 45). It is better even to be defrauded than to be resentful and spiteful. (Paul later instructs Christians regarding lawsuits in 1 Cor. 6:1-8, emphasizing a similar principle of willingness to forfeit one’s due rather than be vengeful.)

LIBERTY

And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. (5:41)

The third right the Lord indicates kingdom citizens are to be willing to sacrifice is that of liberty. God’s original intention was for everyone made in His image to live in freedom. Human bondage and slavery are consequences of the Fall and have no part in God’s original plan for His creation. The best of human governments have always tried to protect the freedom of their citizens, and sometimes even of foreigners. In light of God’s will and proper human justice, men have the right to certain freedoms. But like all other rights, freedom is not to be cherished and protected at the expense of righteousness or even of faithful witness.

Roman law gave a soldier the right to **force** a civilian to carry his pack for a *milion*, a Roman **mile**, which was slightly shorter than our modern mile. The law, designed to relieve the soldier, not only caused great inconvenience to civilians but was made even more despicable by the fact that the oppressed were made to carry the equipment and weapons of their oppressors. Outside of combat the Roman soldier was probably never more hated than when he forced someone to carry his pack.

Yet even so despised a burden should be carried willingly, Jesus says—not only willingly but with magnanimity. When we are forced to go **one mile**, we should willingly go **two**. When we are robbed of some of our cherished liberty, we should surrender even more of it rather than retaliate. In so doing we are obedient to our Lord and testify to His righteousness,

knowing that in Him we have a dearer freedom that the world cannot take from us.

PROPERTY

Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. (5:42)

The fourth right we are to surrender is that of property. Possessiveness is another characteristic of fallen human nature. We dislike giving up, even temporarily, that which belongs to us. Even as Christians, we often forget that nothing truly belongs to us and that we are only stewards of what belongs to God. But as far as other people are concerned, we *do* have a right to keep that which we possess. By right it is ours to use or dispose of as we see fit.

But that right, too, should be placed on the altar of obedience to Christ if required. When someone asks to **borrow** something from us, we should **not turn away from him**. In other words, we should give him what he wants. The implication is that the person who asks has a genuine need. We are not required to respond to every foolish, selfish request made of us. Sometimes to give a person what he wants but does not need is a disservice, doing him more harm than good.

Also implied is the principle that we should offer to give what is needed as soon as we know of the need, whether or not we are asked for help. Jesus is not speaking of begrudging acquiescence to a plea for help, but willing, generous, and loving desire to help others. He is speaking of generosity that genuinely wants to meet the other person's need, not tokenism that does a good deed to buy off one's own conscience.

Jesus does not undercut civil justice, which belongs in the courtroom. He undercuts personal selfishness (characteristic of the false religionists listening to Him on the mountain), which belongs nowhere and especially not in the hearts of His kingdom people.

A biographer of William Gladstone, the great British prime minister, wrote of him, "Of how few who have lived for more than sixty

years in the full light of their countrymen and have, as party leaders, been exposed to angry and sometimes spiteful criticism, can it be said that there stands against them no malignant word and no vindictive act. This was due not perhaps entirely to Gladstone's natural sweetness of disposition but rather to self-control and a certain largeness of soul which would not condescend to anything mean or petty."

The only person who is nondefensive, nonvengeful, never bears a grudge, and has no spite in his heart is the person who has died to self. To fight for one's rights is to prove that self is still on the throne of the heart. The believer who is faithful to Christ lives for Him and, if necessary, dies for Him (Rom. 14:8). It is impossible to live for self and for Christ at the same time.

George Mueller wrote, "There was a day when I died, utterly died to George Mueller and his opinions, his preferences, and his tastes and his will. I died to the world, to its approval and its censure. I died to the approval or the blame of even my brethren and friends. And since then I have studied only to show myself approved unto God."

That is the spirit Jesus teaches in this passage, a spirit all men fail to possess apart from saving grace. It is the spirit Abraham manifested when he gave the best land to his nephew Lot. It is the spirit of Joseph when he embraced and kissed the brothers who had so terribly wronged him. It is the spirit that would not let David take advantage of the opportunity to take the life of Saul, who was then seeking to take David's life. It is the spirit that led Elisha to feed the enemy Assyrian army. It is the spirit that led Stephen to pray for those who were stoning him to death. It is the spirit of every believer who, by the Holy Spirit's power, seeks to be perfect even as our heavenly Father is perfect (v. 48).

Love Your Enemies

(5:43-48)

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (5:43-48)

In His sixth, and last, illustration contrasting the false righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees with the true righteousness of God, Jesus contrasts their kind of love with God's. Nowhere did their humanistic, self-centered system of religion differ more from God's divine standards than in the matter of love. Nowhere had God's standard been so corrupted as in the way the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees viewed themselves in relation to others. Nowhere was it more evident that they lacked the humility, mourning over their own sin, meekness, yearning for true righteousness, mercy, purity of heart, and peacemaking spirit that are to belong to God's kingdom citizens.

As with the previous illustrations, we will look at the teaching of the Old Testament, the perversion of rabbinic tradition, and the perspective of Jesus Christ.

You shall love your neighbor. (5:43b)

That phrase is the only part of the tradition that was adapted from the Old Testament. Leviticus 19:18 requires that “you shall love your neighbor as yourself,” a command often repeated in the New Testament (Matt. 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; James 2:8). Love for others, shown in sympathetic concern and actual care for them, had always been God’s standard for human relations.

In Deuteronomy the Israelites were commanded to help their fellow countrymen by returning a lost ox, sheep, donkey, or other such animal to its owner. If the owner was not known, the animal was to be kept and cared for until the owner was discovered. Likewise, a countryman was to be helped when his animal fell down or was injured (Deut. 22:1-4). But God’s people were also commanded to do the same favors for an enemy. “If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release it with him” (Ex. 23:4-5).

As in all the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is speaking here about personal standards of righteousness, not civil law. The “enemy” spoken of in Exodus 23 is not the enemy soldier met on the battlefield, but an individual—whether fellow countryman or foreigner—who in some way or another is antagonistic. God has never had a double standard of righteousness. His “commandment is exceedingly broad” (Ps. 119:96), and in the fullest sense an Israelite’s **neighbor** was anyone in need whom he might come across in his daily living. (See our Lord’s answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” in Luke 10:30-37.)

Job testified, “Have I rejoiced at the extinction of my enemy, or exulted when evil befell him? No, I have not allowed my mouth to sin by asking for his life in a curse” (Job 31:29-30). He did nothing himself to harm his enemies and he did not rejoice when harm came to them from any other source. In other words, he did nothing, said nothing, and thought nothing against his enemies. Job did more than simply refrain from doing others harm; he gave them help. “Have the men of my tent not said, ‘Who

can find one who has not been satisfied with his meat'? The alien has not lodged outside, for I have opened my doors to the traveler" (vv. 31-32).

Job lived in the patriarchal period, perhaps during the time of Abraham and certainly hundreds of years before God gave his written law to Moses. Yet at that time God's standard of righteousness included merciful, kind, and loving care for others, a trait that characterized Job, who "was blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil" (Job. 1:1).

David prayed, "If I have rewarded evil to my friend, or have plundered him who without cause was my adversary, let the enemy pursue my soul and overtake it; and let him trample my life down to the ground, and lay my glory in the dust" (Ps. 7:4-5). David knew it was wrong to do evil against someone who had wronged him, just as it was wrong to do evil against a friend. In another psalm he said, "They repay me evil for good, to the bereavement of my soul. But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer kept returning to my bosom. I went about as though it were my friend or brother; I bowed down mourning, as one who sorrows for a mother. But at my stumbling they rejoiced" (Ps. 35:12-15). David grieved over and prayed for his enemies when they were sick and in need, despite the fact that they repaid him "evil for good" and rejoiced when he himself was in trouble.

Those were not mere words for David, because we know he lived out that spirit of love. When Saul was seeking to kill him, David had an easy opportunity to take Saul's life. To relieve himself, Saul went into a cave near Engedi where David and his men were hiding and became unknowingly at David's mercy. David stealthily cut off a piece of Saul's robe, but he was so sensitive about doing Saul any harm that "it came about afterward that David's conscience bothered him because he had cut off the edge of Saul's robe." His men interpreted the situation as a fulfillment of God's prophecy to give David's enemies into his hands; but David knew better. "So he said to his men, 'Far be it from me because of the Lord that I should do this thing to my lord, the Lord's anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, since he is the Lord's anointed.' And David persuaded his men with these words and did not allow them to rise up against Saul" (1 Sam. 24:3-7). David would not harm Saul directly, and he would not let anyone else do so in his behalf. David's conviction was

deep and sincere. Though he had every human reason to hate Saul, David refused to return evil for evil. He would not hate his enemy.

On another occasion, after David had become king, a relative of Saul named Shimei threw rocks at David and cursed him. Again David would not retaliate or allow his men to do so on his behalf. Shimei was not God's anointed, and yet David refused to harm him or even give an angry retort. As king he had the legal right to kill Shimei on the spot, but his devotion to a higher law prevented him. In amazing humility he said instead, "If he curses, and if the Lord has told him, 'Curse David,' then who shall say, 'Why have you done so?'" (2 Sam. 16:5-10). David gave Shimei the benefit of any doubt, suggesting that Shimei may even have been acting on the Lord's behalf.

In Proverbs we read, "He who rejoices at calamity will not go unpunished" (Prov. 17:5). "Do not say, 'Thus I shall do to him as he has done to me'" (24:29); but, "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink" (25:21). Throughout the Old Testament, God's standard for His people was to treat even their enemies like their friends and families.

THE PERVERSION OF RABBINIC TRADITION

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy." (5:43)

As in each of the five preceding illustrations, Jesus repeats the essence of the contemporary traditional teaching, in this case the teaching about love. Love, said the ancients, was to be reserved for those you get along with. Enemies were to be hated.

Satan's perversions of God's revelation almost always touch on the truth at some point. A little truth makes deception more believable and acceptable. The rabbis and scribes had kept a part of God's truth about love. As already indicated, **You shall love your neighbor** is a clear teaching of the Old Testament. "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any

grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord” (Lev. 19:18).

In spite of such clear revelation, rabbinic tradition had perverted Old Testament teaching both by what was omitted and by what was added.

PERVERSION BY OMISSION

Omitted in the tradition was the phrase “as yourself,” which was a key part of the Leviticus text but could not possibly fit into their scheme of proud self-righteousness. It simply was inconceivable that they should care for any other person as much as they cared for themselves.

The complete text of Leviticus 19:18 obviously was well known to the scribes and Pharisees. They were the supreme students, preservers, and interpreters of the law; and when copying or reading directly from Scripture they were meticulously accurate. The scribe who asked Jesus which was the greatest commandment confirmed Jesus’ answer. “Right, Teacher,” he said, “You have truly stated that . . . to love one’s neighbor as himself is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices” (Mark 12:32-33). On another occasion, when Jesus asked a certain lawyer, “What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?” the lawyer accurately quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 and the end of Leviticus 19:18, including “and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:26-27).

The words of Scripture were fully known but only partially taught and practiced; frequently they were even contradicted by rabbinic tradition. As with other scriptural standards that seemed too demanding, the one concerning love of neighbor was reduced to a humanly acceptable level.

The scribes and Pharisees knew how well they loved themselves. They loved to be honored, praised, and respected (Matt. 6:2, 5, 16; etc.), and believed they deserved it. The Pharisee who thanked God that he was “not like other people” (Luke 18:11) was typical of most Pharisees.

He was also typical of most people throughout history. For the natural man, and unfortunately for some Christians, self-love is real, active, and quite noticeable. Most people spend their lives doing and

seeking things that are primarily in their own interest—their safety, comfort, income, pleasure, health, personal interests, and so on.

But the standard God had given the Jews was supernatural rather than natural, and they must have chafed under it, because they knew they could not live up to it in their own power. Besides that, they did not *want* to live up to it, and therefore simply excised “as yourself” from God’s standard of love.

Along with that significant omission, tradition had narrowed the meaning of **neighbor** to include only those people they preferred and approved of—which amounted basically to their own kind. Such obviously profane people as tax-gatherers and ordinary sinners were despised as outcasts and as not being worthy even to be considered Jews.

Tax-gatherers were renegade Jews who had sold out to the Roman oppressors and made lucrative livings by extorting excessive taxes from their fellow citizens. “Sinners” were those such as criminals and prostitutes who were publicly known for their immorality. They were the “swindlers, unjust, adulterers,” and such that the Pharisee thanked God for not being like (Luke 18:11). One of the things about Jesus that disgusted Jewish leaders the most was His open willingness to associate with, eat with, and even forgive such obviously unrighteous people (Matt. 9:11).

But even that restriction of **neighbor** was not narrow enough. The scribes and Pharisees also despised and looked down on the common people. They dismissed those who believed in Jesus by saying, “No one of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in Him, has he? But this multitude which does not know the Law is accursed” (John 7:48-49). Ironically, the proud and arrogant religious leaders who knew, but perverted, the law disdained as “accursed” the common people who they felt did not know it.

PERVERSION BY ADDITION

Rabbinic tradition also perverted the Old Testament teaching about love by adding something to it: **hate your enemy**. Their addition was even more perverse than their omission, but it was the logical extension of their all-consuming self-interest.

It goes without saying that Gentiles were not considered neighbors. A saying of the Pharisees has been discovered that reads, “If a Jew sees a Gentile fallen into the sea, let him by no means lift him out, for it is written, ‘Thou shalt not rise up against the blood of thy neighbor,’ but this man is not thy neighbor.” It is little wonder that the Romans charged Jews with hatred of the human race.

One excuse the Jews may often have made to justify hatred of Gentiles was based on God’s command for their forefathers to drive out the Canaanites, Midianites, Moabites, Ammonites, and other pagan peoples as they conquered and possessed the Promised Land under Joshua (Josh. 3:10; cf. Ex. 33:2; Deut. 7:1; etc.). But those ancient inhabitants of Palestine were among the most vile, corrupt, and depraved known to history. They were unbelievably immoral, cruel, and idolatrous. Human sacrifice was common among them, and even one’s own children were sometimes burned alive as an offering to their pagan deities. They were a cancer that had to be cut out in order to save God’s people from utter moral and spiritual corruption.

“The wars of Israel,” writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “were the only ‘holy wars’ in history, for they were the wars of God against the world of idols. It is not this enmity which Jesus condemns, for then He would have condemned the whole history of God’s dealing with His people. On the contrary, He affirms the Old Covenant” (*The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller [2d rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960], p. 163).

Israel’s harsh dealing with those people was entirely as the instrument of God’s judgment. God’s people were never to return evil for evil, cruelty for cruelty, hatred for hatred. The idea that Gentiles, even wicked ones, were to be personally despised and hated originated from the heretical Jews’ own pride and self-righteousness, not from God’s Word.

Rabbinic tradition no doubt also tried to justify hatred of enemies on the basis of the imprecatory psalms. David wrote, “May their table before them become a snare; and when they are in peace, may it become a trap. May their eyes grow dim so that they cannot see, and make their loins shake continually. Pour out Thine indignation on them, and may Thy burning anger overtake them” (Ps. 69:22-24).

Such words did not represent David’s personal vendetta but his concern for God’s holiness and justice to be executed on those who despised the Lord’s glorious name and persecuted the Lord’s people. The

basis for David's imprecations is found in verse 9 of that same psalm: "For zeal for Thy house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach Thee have fallen on me." David was angered because of what was done against God. When Jesus cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem, "His disciples remembered" David's words, "that it was written, 'Zeal for Thy house will consume me'" (John 2:17). David and Jesus shared the same righteous indignation.

When David's own son Absalom raised an army and rebelled against his father, David prayed, "Arise, O Lord; save me, O my God! For Thou hast smitten all my enemies on the cheek; Thou hast shattered the teeth of the wicked" (Ps. 3:7; see also the superscription at the beginning of the psalm). David loved his son dearly and wept bitterly when he learned of his death (2 Sam. 18:33), but he knew Absalom was ungodly and the enemy of God's people and of His anointed king. As such, Absalom deserved defeat—and to that end his father David prayed.

The apostle John experienced similar tension of feelings when he "took the little book out of the angel's hand and ate it." "It was in my mouth sweet as honey," he said, "and when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter" (Rev. 10:10). He was glad because he knew the Lord would be absolutely victorious over His enemies; but he was sad because of the millions who would be destroyed because they would not turn to God.

It is one thing to defend the honor and glory of God by seeking the defeat of His detracting enemies, but quite another to hate people personally as our own enemies. Our attitude toward even the worst pagans or heretics is to love them and pray that they will turn to God and be saved. But we also pray that, if they do not turn to Him, God will judge them and remove them in order to prepare the way for His Son Jesus Christ as the rightful ruler of this world.

We are to share God's own balance of love and justice. God loved Adam, but He cursed him. God loved Cain, but He punished him. God loved Sodom and Gomorrah, but He destroyed them. God loved Israel, but He allowed her to be conquered and exiled, and He set her aside for a while.

The scribes and Pharisees had no such balance. They had no love for justice, but only for vengeance. And they had no love for their enemies, but only for themselves. After David declared of God's enemies, "I hate them with the utmost hatred; they have become my enemies," he

also prayed, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way” (Ps. 139:22-24).

The scribes and Pharisees, by contrast, knew nothing either of righteous indignation or righteous love. Their only indignation was that of personal hatred, and their only love was that of self-esteem.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF JESUS CHRIST

But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (5:44-48)

In five ascending statements Jesus proclaims the kind of love that God has always required of His people and that must characterize everyone who goes by the name of the Lord.

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

But I say to you, love your enemies. (5:44a)

Here is the most powerful teaching in Scripture about the meaning of love. The love that God commands of His people is **love** so great that it even embraces **enemies**.

William Hendriksen comments,

All around him were those walls and fences. He came for the very purpose of bursting those barriers, so that love—pure, warm, divine, infinite—would be able to flow straight down from the heart of God, hence from his own marvelous heart, into the hearts of men. His love overleaped all the boundaries of race, nationality, party, age, sex. . . .

When he said, “I tell you, love your enemies,” he must have startled his audience, for he was saying something that probably never before had been said so succinctly, positively, and forcefully. (*The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973], p. 313)

The scribes and Pharisees were proud, prejudiced, judgmental, spiteful, hateful, vengeful men who masqueraded as the custodians of God’s law and the spiritual leaders of Israel. To them, Jesus’ command to **love your enemies** must have seemed naive and foolish in the extreme. They not only felt they had the right but the duty to hate their enemies. Not to hate those who obviously deserve to be hated would be a breach of righteousness.

Jesus again sets His divine standard against the perverted human standards of that heretical Jewish tradition and reinforces it with the emphatic **I**. In Greek verbs a pronominal suffix indicates the subject, as here with *lēgo* (I **say**), and the separate pronoun **I** would not have been necessary had Jesus intended simply to give information.

But here, as in each preceding instance in the sermon (w. 22, 28, 32, 34, 39), the emphatic form (*egō ... lēgo*) gives not only grammatical but theological emphasis. In placing what He said above what tradition said, He placed His word on a par with Scripture—as His hearers well understood. Jesus not only placed emphasis on what was said but on who said it. It was not just that His teaching was the standard of truth, but that He Himself was the standard of truth. “Your great rabbis, scribes, and scholars have taught you to love only those of your own preference and to hate your enemies,” Jesus was saying. “But by My own authority, I declare that they are false teachers and have perverted God’s revealed truth. The divine truth is My truth, which is that **you shall love your enemies.**”

As we have noted, the Old Testament concept of neighbor included even personal enemies. That is the truth Jesus expands in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The point of the parable is not primarily to answer the lawyer's question, "And who is my neighbor?" though it does that, but to show that God's requirement is for us to *be* neighbors to anyone who needs our help (Luke 10:29, 36-37).

The human tendency is to base love on the desirability of the object of our love. We love people who are attractive, hobbies that are enjoyable, a house or a car because it looks nice and pleases us, and so on. But true love is need-oriented. The Good Samaritan demonstrated great love because he sacrificed his own convenience, safety, and resources to meet another's desperate need.

The Greek language has four different terms that are usually translated "love." *Philia* is brotherly love and the love of friendship; *storgē* is the love of family; and *erōs* is desiring, romantic, sexual love. But the **love** of which Jesus speaks here, and which is most spoken of in the New Testament, is *agapē*, the love that seeks and works to meet another's highest welfare.

Agapē love *may* involve emotion but it *must* involve action. In Paul's beautiful and powerful treatise on love in 1 Corinthians 13, all fifteen of the characteristics of love are given in verb form. Obviously love must involve attitude, because, like every form of righteousness, it begins in the heart. But it is best described and best testified by what it does.

Above all, *agapē* love is the love that God is, that God demonstrates, and that God gives (1 John 4:7-10). "The love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us...[and] God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:5, 8). Because of His love, we can love, and "if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:11-12).

When Jesus told the disciples, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you" (John 13:34), He had just finished washing their feet as an example of humble, self-giving love. The disciples had done nothing to inspire Jesus' love. They were self-centered, quarrelsome, jealous of each other, and sometimes even argued with and contradicted the One whom they confessed to be their God,

Savior, and Lord. Yet everything that Jesus said to them and did for them was completely and without exception for their good. That was the kind of love He commanded them to have for Him and for each other. And that is the kind of love He commands all of His followers to have even for their enemies.

The commentator R. C. H. Lenski writes,

[Love] indeed, sees all the hatefulness and the wickedness of the enemy, feels his stabs and his blows, may even have something to do toward warding them off; but all this simply fills the loving heart with the one desire and aim, to free its enemy from his hate, to rescue him from his sin, and thus to save his soul. Mere affection is often blind, but even then it thinks that it sees something attractive in the one toward whom it goes out; the higher love may see nothing attractive in the one so loved,... its inner motive is simply to bestow true blessing on the one loved, to do him the highest good.... I cannot like a low, mean criminal who may have robbed me and threatened my life; I cannot like a false, lying, slanderous fellow who, perhaps, has vilified me again and again; but I can by the grace of Jesus Christ love them all, see what is wrong with them, desire and work to do them only good, most of all to free them from their vicious ways. (*The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964], p. 247)

Love's question is never who to love—because we are to love everyone—but only how to love most helpfully. We are not to love merely in terms of feeling but in terms of service. God's love embraces the entire world (John 3:16), and He loved each of us even while we were still sinners and His enemies (Rom. 5:8-10). Those who refuse to trust in God are His enemies; but He is not theirs. In the same way, we are not to be enemies of those who may be enemies to us. From their perspective, we are their enemies; but from our perspective, they should be our neighbors.

In 1567 King Philip II of Spain appointed the Duke of Alba as governor of the lower part of the nation. The Duke was a bitter enemy of the newly-emerging Protestant Reformation. His rule was called the reign of terror, and his council was called the Bloody Council, because it had

ordered the slaughter of so many Protestants. It is reported that one man who was sentenced to die for his biblical faith managed to escape during the dead of winter. As he was being pursued by a lone soldier, the man came to a lake whose ice was thin and cracking. Somehow he managed to get safely across the ice, but as soon as he reached the other side he heard his pursuer screaming. The soldier had fallen through the ice and was about to drown. At the risk of being captured, tortured, and eventually killed—or of being drowned himself—the man went back across the lake and rescued his enemy, because the love of Christ constrained him to do it. He knew he had no other choice if he was to be faithful to His Lord (Elon Foster, *New Cyclopaedia of Prose Illustrations: Second Series* [New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1877], p. 296).

The Scottish Reformer George Wishart, a contemporary and friend of John Knox, was sentenced to die as a heretic. Because the executioner knew of Wishart's selfless ministering to hundreds of people who were dying of the plague, he hesitated carrying out the sentence. When Wishart saw the expression of remorse on the executioner's face, he went over and kissed him on the cheek, saying, "Sir, may that be a token that I forgive you" (John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, ed. W. Grinton Berry [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978], p. 252).

Our "enemies," of course, do not always come in such life-threatening forms. Often they are ordinary people who are mean, impatient, judgmental, self-righteous, and spiteful—or just happen to disagree with us. In whatever personal relationships we have, God wants us to love. Whether a conflict is with our marriage partner, our children or parents, our friends and fellow church members, a devious business opponent, spiteful neighbor, political foe, or social antagonist, our attitude toward them should be one of prayerful love.

PRAY FOR YOUR PERSECUTORS

and pray for those who persecute you. (5:44b)

All men live with some sense of sin and guilt. And guilt produces fear, which in its ultimate form is fear of death and of what is beyond death. In various ways, therefore, most people have devised religious beliefs, rituals, and practices they are convinced will offer them some relief from guilt and judgment. Some people try to get rid of guilt simply by denying it or by denying the existence of a God who holds men accountable for sin.

Throughout history the worst persecutions have been religious. They have been the strongest against God's people, because the divine standards He has given to them and which are seen in them are a judgment on the wickedness and corruption of false religion. God's Word unmasks people at their most sensitive and vulnerable point, the point of their self-justification—whether that justification is religious, philosophical, or even atheistic.

Because persecution is so often the world's response to God's truth, the Lord assures us that, just as He was persecuted, so will we be (John 15:20). Therefore His command for us to pray for our persecutors is a command that every faithful believer may in some way have opportunity to obey. It is not reserved for believers who happen to live in pagan or atheistic lands where Christianity is forbidden or severely restricted.

Jesus taught that every disciple who makes his faith known is going to pay some price for it, and that we are to pray for those who exact that price from us. Spurgeon said, "Prayer is the forerunner of mercy," and that is perhaps the reason why Jesus mentions prayer here. Loving enemies is not natural to men and is sometimes difficult even for those who belong to God and have His love within them. The best way to have the right attitude, the *agapē* love attitude, toward those who **persecute** us is to bring them before the Lord in prayer. We may sense their wickedness, their unfairness, their ungodliness, and their hatred for us, and in light of those things we could not possibly love them for *what* they are. We must love them because of *who* they are—sinners fallen from the image of God and in need of God's forgiveness and grace, just as we were sinners in need of His forgiveness and grace before He saved us. We are to **pray** for them that they will, as we have done, seek His forgiveness and grace.

Our persecutors may not always be unbelievers. Christians can cause other Christians great trouble, and the first step toward healing those broken relationships is also prayer. Whoever persecutes us, in whatever

way and in whatever degree, should be on our prayer list. Talking to God about others can begin to knit the petitioner's heart with the heart of God.

Chrysostom said that prayer is the very highest summit of self-control and that we have most brought our lives into conformity to God's standards when we can pray for our persecutors. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the pastor who suffered and eventually was killed in Nazi Germany, wrote of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:44, "This is the supreme demand. Through the medium of prayer we go to our enemy, stand by his side, and plead for him to God" (*The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller [2d rev. ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1960], p. 166).

MANIFEST YOUR SONSHIP

in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (5:45)

To love our enemies and to pray for our persecutors shows that we are **sons of [our] Father who is in heaven**. The aorist tense of *genēsthe* (**may be**) indicates a once and for all established fact. God Himself is love, and the greatest evidence of our divine sonship through Jesus Christ is our love. "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). "God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 John 4:16). In fact, "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (v. 20).

Loving as God loves does not *make* us **sons of the Father**, but gives evidence that we already are His children. When a life reflects God's nature it proves that life now *possesses* His nature by the new birth.

One of the commonest and most damaging criticisms of Christianity is the charge that Christians do not live up to their faith. Even though the world has a limited and often distorted idea of what the gospel is, they know enough about the teachings of Christ and the life of Christ to

realize that most people who go by His name do not do all that He commanded and do not live as He lived.

But even a person who has never heard of Christ or the teachings of the New Testament would suspect there is divine power behind a life that loves and cares even to the point of loving enemies—simply because such a life is so utterly uncharacteristic of human nature. A life of self-giving love gives evidence of sonship of the **Father who is in heaven**. That phrase emphasizes the heavenly realm in which the Lord dwells, the realm that is the source of this kind of love.

Those who are God’s children should show impartial love and care similar to what God shows. **He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous**. Those blessings are given without respect to merit or deserving. If they were, no one would receive them. In what theologians traditionally have called common grace, God is indiscriminate in His benevolence. His divine love and providence in some forms benefit everyone, even those who rebel against Him or deny His existence.

An old rabbinic saying tells of the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea. As the story goes, when the Egyptians were destroyed the angels began to rejoice; but God lifted up His hand and said, “The work of My hands are sunk in the sea and you would sing?” (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 2 vols. [rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 1:176).

“The eyes of all look to Thee, and Thou dost give them their food in due time,” the psalmist testifies. “Thou dost open Thy hand, and dost satisfy the desire of every living thing” (Ps. 145:15-16). There is no good thing—physical, intellectual, emotional, moral, spiritual, or of any other sort—that *anyone* possesses or experiences that does not come from the hand of God. If God does that for everyone, His children should reflect that same generosity.

EXCEED YOUR FELLOW MEN

For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (5:46-47)

If the scribes and Pharisees were certain of any one thing it was that they were far better than everyone else. But Jesus again cuts through their blind hypocrisy and shows that their type of love is nothing more than the ordinary self-centered love that was common even to **tax-gatherers** and **Gentiles**—to whom the scribes and Pharisees thought they were most undeniably superior.

Those were probably the most devastating and insulting words these religious leaders had ever heard, and they must have been enraged. **Tax-gatherers** were traitorous extortioners, and almost by definition were dishonest, heartless, and irreligious. In the eyes of most Jews, **Gentiles** were outside the pale of God's concern and mercy, fit only for destruction as His enemies and the enemies of those who thought they were His people.

But the love of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus said, was no better than the love of those whom they despised above all other people. **You love those who love you**, and that is **the same** type of love that **even the tax-gatherers** and **the Gentiles** exhibit. "Your righteousness," He charged, "is therefore no better than theirs."

The citizens of God's kingdom are to have a much higher standard of love, and of every other aspect of righteousness, than does the rest of the world. Christians should be noticed on the job because they are more honest and more considerate. Christians should be noticed in their communities because they are more helpful and caring. Christians should be noticed anywhere in society they happen to be because the love they exhibit is a divine love. "Let your light shine before men," Jesus had already said, "in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). As J. Oswald Sanders comments, "The Master expects from His disciples such conduct as can be explained only in terms of the supernatural."

BE LIKE YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER

Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.
(5:48)

The sum of all that Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount—in fact, the sum of all He teaches in Scripture—is in those words. The great purpose of salvation, the goal of the gospel, and the great yearning of the heart of God is for all men to become like Him.

Teleios (**perfect**) basically means to reach an intended end or a completion and is often translated “mature” (1 Cor. 2:6; 14:20; Eph. 4:13; etc.). But the meaning here is obviously that of perfection, because the **heavenly Father** is the standard. The “sons of [the] Father” (v. 45) are to be **perfect, as [their] heavenly Father is perfect**. That perfection is absolute perfection.

That perfection is also utterly impossible in man’s own power. To those who wonder how Jesus can demand the impossible, He later says, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). That which God demands, He provides the power to accomplish. Man’s own righteousness is possible, but is so imperfect that it is worthless; God’s righteousness is impossible for the very reason that it is perfect. But the impossible righteousness becomes possible for those who trust in Jesus Christ, because He gives them His righteousness.

That is precisely our Lord’s point in all these illustrations and in the whole sermon—to lead His audience to an overpowering sense of spiritual bankruptcy, to a “beatitude attitude” that shows them their need of a Savior, an enabler who alone can empower them to meet God’s standard of perfection.

Giving Without Hypocrisy (6:1-4)

Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

When therefore you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you. (6:1-4)

Matthew 5:21-48 focuses on the teaching of the law, on what men believe, and 6:1-18 focuses on the practice of the law, what men do. The first section emphasizes inner moral righteousness—giving six representative illustrations regarding murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, revenge, and love. This second section emphasizes outward formal righteousness—giving three representative illustrations of religious activity. The first has to do with giving, our religion as it acts toward others (vv. 2-4); the second with praying, our religion as it acts toward God (vv. 5-15); and the third with fasting, our religion as it acts in relation to ourselves (vv. 16-18).

THE DANGER OF FALSE RIGHTEOUSNESS

Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. (6:1)

This verse introduces the section on the forms of religious righteousness and applies to each of the three illustrations in 6:2-18.

The story is told of an eastern ascetic holy man who covered himself with ashes as a sign of humility and regularly sat on a prominent street corner of his city. When tourists asked permission to take his picture, the mystic would rearrange his ashes to give the best image of destitution and humility.

A great deal of religion amounts to nothing more than rearranging religious “ashes” to impress the world with one’s supposed humility and devotion. The problem, of course, is that the humility is a sham, and the devotion is to self, not to God. Such religion is nothing more than a game of pretense, a game at which the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day were masters. Because their religion was mostly an act, and a mockery of God’s true revealed way for His people, Jesus’ most blistering denunciations were reserved for them.

But they were not the original or the last hypocrites. Since the fall of man there have been hypocrites. Hypocrites are mentioned in Scripture from Genesis through Revelation. Cain was the first hypocrite, feigning worship by offering a kind of sacrifice that God did not want. When his hypocrisy was unmasked, he killed his brother Abel out of resentment (Gen. 4:5-8). Absalom hypocritically vowed allegiance to his father, King David, while plotting the overthrow of his regime (2 Sam. 15:7-10).

The supreme hypocrite was Judas Iscariot, who betrayed the Lord with a kiss. Ananias and Sapphira hypocritically claimed to have given the church all the proceeds from the sale of some property, and lost their lives for lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-10).

Hypocrites are found in paganism, in Judaism, and in Christianity. There were hypocrites in the early church, the medieval church, and the Reformation church. There are still hypocrites in the church today, and Paul assures us there will be hypocrites at the end of the age. “But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of

the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron” (1 Tim. 4:1-2). Hypocrisy is endemic to fallen man, an integral part of his fleshly nature. Persecution of the church helps to diminish the number of hypocrites, but even that cannot completely eliminate them.

Hypocrisy is never treated lightly in Scripture. Through Amos, God said, “I hate, I reject your festivals, nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; and I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:21-24). All of those religious acts had been prescribed by God; but because they were performed insincerely and were not accompanied by righteous living they were not acceptable to God. The sacrifices, offerings, and songs were not given to God’s glory but to the people’s own glory and self-satisfaction.

Outside of idolatry, the greatest sin both in Judah and Israel was hypocritical religion. The Jews were conquered and taken into captivity in large measure because they turned true worship of God into phoney mockery. In regard to that truth Isaiah says, “What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?” says the Lord. “I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed cattle. And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs, or goats” (Isa. 1:11). The Lord continued by declaring His displeasure also with worthless offerings, incense, new moon and sabbath festivals, and hypocritical prayers (vv. 13-15). God wanted purity and righteousness, not perfunctory rituals. “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean,” He said; “remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless; defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together.... Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool” (vv. 16-18).

Similar calls to replace superficial ceremony with genuine righteousness are found in the other literary prophets (Jer. 11:19-20; Amos 4:4-5; Mic. 6:6-8; etc.), as well as in the book of Job (8:13; 15:34; 36:13).

An Aesop’s fable tells of a wolf who wanted to have a sheep for his dinner and decided to disguise himself as a sheep and follow the flock into the fold. While the wolf waited until the sheep went to sleep, the shepherd

decided he would have mutton for his own meal. In the dark he picked out what he thought was the largest, fattest sheep; but after he had killed the animal he discovered it was a wolf. What that shepherd did inadvertently to a wolf in sheep's clothing, God does intentionally. The Lord judges hypocrisy.

Speaking to the scribes and Pharisees on one occasion, Jesus said, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men'" (Mark 7:6-7).

Jesus used many figures to describe hypocrisy. He compared it to leaven (Luke 12:1), to whitewashed tombs (Matt. 23:27), concealed tombs (Luke 11:44), tares amidst the wheat (Matt. 13:25), and to wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15).

In New Testament times some people made their living as professional mourners who were paid to weep, wail, and tear their garments at funerals and on other occasions of sadness (cf. Matt. 9:23). It is said that some mourners were careful to tear their clothing at a seam, so that the material could easily be sown back together for the next mourning. Both the professional mourners and those who hired them were hypocrites, hiring and being hired to put on a display of mourning that was entirely pretense.

Prosechō (**beware**) means to hold, or take hold of, something and pay attention to it, especially in the sense of being on guard. The scribes, Pharisees, and other hypocrites are warned by Jesus to **beware** of the religious activities in which they had such pride and confidence. He was about to show them again how worthless, meaningless, and unacceptable to God those activities were.

Theaomai (**to be noticed**) is related to the term from which we get theater. It has in mind a spectacle to be gazed at. In other words, Jesus is warning about **practicing** a form of **righteousness** (*dikaïosunē*, acts of religious devotion in general) whose purpose is to show off **before men**. Such religion is like a play; it is not real life but acting. It does not demonstrate what is in the minds and hearts of the actors, but is simply a performance designed to make a certain impression on those who are watching.

Such practices amount to theatrical **righteousness**, performed to impress rather than serve and to magnify the actors rather than God. The purpose is to please **men**, not God, and the activities are not real life but an exhibition. Such false righteousness, Jesus assures us, will never qualify a person for God's kingdom (Matt. 5:20).

False righteousness such as that does have a reward—the recognition and applause of other hypocrites and of ignorant people. That, however, is the limit of the honor, because Jesus tells those who practice such hypocritical righteousness, **you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven**. God does not reward men-pleasers (cf. Matt. 5:16), because they rob Him of glory. It should be noted that **your Father** is used in the same sense as in 5:16, as a reference to the Old Testament sense in which God was Israel's Father (Isa. 63:16), not in the New Testament sense of personal relationship by salvation (see Matt. 6:9).

The reference to God's dwelling **in heaven** distinguishes the eternal character of divine reward from the transient, shallow praise that hypocrites receive from other men.

THE PRACTICE AND REWARD OF FALSE GIVING

When therefore you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. (6:2)

A *hupokritēs* (**hypocrite**) originally was a Greek actor who wore a mask that portrayed in an exaggerated way the role that was being dramatized. For obvious reasons the term came to be used of anyone who pretended to be what he was not.

John Calvin believed that in all virtues the entrance of [hypocrisy] was to be avoided, there being no work so praiseworthy as not to be in many instances corrupted and polluted by it (*A Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 1 [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], pp. 308-9).

One of Satan's most common and effective ways of undermining the power of the church is through hypocrisy. Hypocrisy, therefore, is a great peril to the church, and it comes in two forms. The first is that of nonbelievers masquerading as Christians. The second is that of true believers who are sinful but pretend to be spiritual. The warning Jesus gives here applies to both groups.

Augustine said, "The love of honor is the deadly bane of true piety. Other vices bring forth evil works but this brings forth good works in an evil way." Hypocrisy is so dangerous because it is so deceptive. It uses things that are basically good for purposes that are basically evil. "Hypocrisy," he goes on to say, "is the homage that vice pays to virtue."

Eleēnosunē (**alms**) literally refers to any act of mercy or pity, but came to be used primarily of giving money, food, or clothing to the poor. It is the term from which we get the English eleemosynary, a synonym for charitable.

Jesus does not introduce this teaching with *if* but **when**, indicating it is something He expects us to do. To **give alms** refers to actual giving, not good intentions or warm feelings of pity that never find practical expression. When done in the right spirit it not only is permissible but obligatory for believers.

God has always delighted in acts of mercy and generosity. "Now in case a countryman of yours becomes poor and his means with regard to you falter, then you are to sustain him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you" (Lev. 25:35). When Israelites freed a slave they were told, "You shall not send him away empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your wine vat; you shall give to him as the Lord your God has blessed you" (Deut. 15:13-14). God's people were continually reminded in the Psalms, Proverbs, and prophetic writings to be considerate of and generous to the poor, whether fellow Israelites or Gentile strangers.

Jesus and the disciples had their own money bag from which they gave offerings to the poor (John 13:29). It is obvious, therefore, that it is only giving **alms** in the wrong spirit that is evil. The scribes and Pharisees gave them primarily to bring honor to themselves, not to serve others or to honor God.

The giving of alms had been carried to absurd extremes by rabbinic tradition. In the Jewish apocryphal books we read such things as, "It is

better to give to charity than to lay up gold. For charity will save a man from death; it will expiate any sin” (Tobit 12:8) and, “As water will quench a flaming fire, so charity will atone for sin” (The Wisdom of Sirach 3:30). Consequently, many Jews believed that salvation was much easier for the rich, because they could buy their way into heaven by giving to the poor. The same mechanistic and unbiblical principle is seen in traditional Roman Catholic dogma. Pope Leo the Great declared, “By prayer we seek to appease God, by fasting we extinguish the lust of the flesh, and by alms we redeem our sins.”

But just as a sympathetic feeling for someone in need does not help them unless something is given to meet their need, giving them money provides no spiritual benefit or blessing unless it is given from the heart. In any case, no act of charity or any other good work can atone for sin.

There seems to be no evidence from history or archaeology that a literal **trumpet** or other instrument was used by Jews to announce their giving. The figure was used by Jesus to describe the attention **in the synagogues and in the streets** that many wealthy **hypocrites**, not just scribes and Pharisees, purposely attracted to themselves when they presented their gifts.

The reward they wanted was recognition and praise, to **be honored by men**, and that became **their reward in full. They have their reward** was a form of a technical expression used at the completion of a commercial transaction, and carried the idea of something being paid for in full and receipted. Nothing more was owed or would be paid. Those who give for the purpose of impressing others with their generosity and spirituality will receive no other reward, especially from God. The Lord owes them nothing. When we give to please men, our only **reward** will be that which men can give. Seeking men’s blessings forfeits God’s.

There are many more subtle trumpets people can use to call attention to their good works. When they make a point of doing publicly what they could easily do privately, they behave like the **hypocrites**, not like God’s children.

A man came into my office one Sunday and told me it was his first time to worship with us and that he intended to make our church his church home. He then handed me a generous check, with the promise that I would receive one just like it every week. I told him I did not want to receive his checks personally and suggested that he should give

anonymously as the rest of the church family did. If he had continued to give a large amount every Sunday, there was no good reason for him to have announced his generosity to me or to anyone else. How much better for him simply to have put the check in the offering during a service.

Sometimes, of course, the pretense does not show. Knowing that it is wrong to give ostentatiously and that fellow Christians are likely to resent it, we sometimes try to make our good works “accidentally” noticed. But even if we only *want* people to notice, and do nothing to attract their attention, our heart motive is to **be honored by men**. The real trumpet blowing, the basic hypocrisy, is always on the inside, and that is where God judges. Hypocritical righteousness, just as true righteousness, begins in the heart.

Unfortunately, many Christian organizations use un-Christian methods to motivate support of their ministries. When framed certificates, published names of generous supporters, and other such recognitions are offered to stimulate giving, hypocrisy is promoted in the name of Christ. It is just as wrong to appeal to wrong motives as to have wrong motives. “It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come,” Jesus said; “but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!” (Matt. 18:7).

THE PRACTICE AND REWARD OF TRUE GIVING

But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you. (6:3-4)

To **not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing** was possibly a proverbial expression that simply referred to doing something spontaneously, with no special effort or show. The right hand was considered the primary hand of action, and in a normal day’s work the right hand would do many things as a matter of course that would not involve the left hand. Giving to help those in need should be a normal

activity of the Christian, and he should do it as simply, directly, and discreetly as possible.

The most satisfying giving, and the giving that God blesses, is that which is done and forgotten. It is done in love out of response to a need, and when the need is met the giver goes on about his business, not waiting for or wanting recognition. What has been done should even be a **secret** to our **left hand**, not to mention to other people. Whether the person we help is grateful or ungrateful should not matter as far as our own purpose is concerned. If he is ungrateful, we are sorry for his sake, not our own.

It is said that there was a special, out-of-the-way place in the Temple where shy, humble Jews could leave their gifts without being noticed. Another place nearby was provided for the shy poor, who did not want to be seen asking for help. Here they would come and take what they needed. The name of the place was the Chamber of the Silent. People gave and people were helped, but no one knew the identities of either group. (Cf. Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol. 2 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972], p. 387; Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969], p. 133; and William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 2 vols. [rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 1:171, 188.)

Matthew 6:3 has often been interpreted to mean that all good works are to be done in absolute secrecy. But true righteousness cannot be kept entirely secret, and should not be. “How blessed are those who keep justice, who practice righteousness at all times!” (Ps. 106:3). Isaiah says, “Yet they seek Me day by day, and delight to know My ways, as a nation that has done righteousness, and has not forsaken the ordinance of their God” (Isa. 58:2). John tells us, “If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him” (1 John 2:29).

Earlier in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus had specifically commanded, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). The question is not whether or not our good works should be seen by others, but whether they are done for that end. When they are done “in such a way” that attention and glory are focused on our “Father who is in heaven” rather than on ourselves, God is pleased. But if they are done to be noticed by men (6:1), they are done self-righteously and hypocritically

and are rejected by God. The difference is in purpose and motivation. When what we do is done in the right spirit and for the right purpose, it will almost inevitably be done in the right way.

The teachings of Matthew 5:16 and 6:1 are often thought to conflict with each other because it is not recognized that they relate to different sins. The discrepancy is only imaginary. In the first passage Jesus is dealing with cowardice, whereas in the second He is dealing with hypocrisy. A. B. Bruce gives the helpful explanation, “We are to show when tempted to hide and hide when tempted to show.”

Never in the history of the church have Christians been so bombarded with appeals to give money, many of them to legitimate and worthwhile causes. Knowing how and where to give is sometimes extremely difficult. Christians are to give regularly and systematically to the work of their local church. “On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper” (1 Cor. 16:2). But we are also called to give directly to those in need when we have opportunity and ability. Both the Old and New Testaments make it clear that willing, generous giving has always characterized the faithful people of God.

God does not need our gifts, because He is entirely sufficient in Himself. The need is on our part and on the part of those we serve in His name. Paul told the Philippian church, “Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account” (Phil. 4:17).

Giving is described in the Old Testament as a part of God’s cycle of blessing. “The generous man will be prosperous, and he who waters will himself be watered” (Prov. 11:25). As we give, God blesses, and when God blesses us we give again out of what He has given. “You shall celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the Lord your God with a tribute of a freewill offering of your hand, which you shall give just as the Lord your God blesses you” (Deut. 16:10). We are to give freely out of what God has given freely.

The cycle applies not only to material giving but to every form of giving that is done sincerely to honor God and to meet need. The way of God’s people has always been the way of giving.

From Scripture we learn of at least seven principles to guide us in nonhypocritical giving. First, giving from the heart is investing with God. “Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return” (Luke 6:38). Paul echoes

Jesus' words: "Now this I say, he who sows sparingly shall also reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully shall also reap bountifully" (2 Cor. 9:6).

Second, genuine giving is to be sacrificial. David refused to give to the Lord that which cost him nothing (2 Sam. 24:24). Generosity is not measured by the size of the gift itself, but by its size in comparison to what is possessed. The widow who gave "two small copper coins" to the Temple treasury gave more than all the "many rich people [who] were putting in large sums" because "they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on" (Mark 12:41-44).

Third, responsibility for giving has no relationship to how much a person has. A person who is not generous when he is poor will not be generous if he becomes rich. He might then give a larger amount, but he will not give a larger proportion. "He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much" (Luke 16:10). It is extremely important to teach children to give generously to the Lord with whatever small amounts of money they get, because the attitudes and patterns they develop as children are likely to be the ones they follow when they are grown. Giving is not a matter of how much money one has but of how much love and care is in the heart.

Fourth, material giving correlates to spiritual blessings. To those who are not faithful with mundane things such as money and other possessions, the Lord will not entrust things that are of far greater value. "If therefore you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous mammon, who will entrust the true riches to you? And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?" (Luke 16:11-12).

Many young men have dropped out of seminary because they could not handle money, and the Lord did not want them in His ministry. Others have begun in the ministry but later dropped out for the same reason. Still others remain in the ministry but produce little fruit because God will not commit the care of eternal souls to them when they cannot even manage their own finances. Spiritual influences and effectiveness have a lot to do with how well finances are handled.

Fifth, giving is to be personally determined. “Let each one do just as he has purposed in his heart; not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). Righteous giving is done from a righteous and generous heart, not from legalistic percentages or quotas. The Macedonian Christians gave abundantly out of their deep financial poverty because spiritually they were rich in love (2 Cor. 8:1-2). The Philippian believers gave out of the spontaneous generosity of their hearts, not because they felt compelled (Phil. 4:15-18).

Sixth, we are to give in response to need. The early Christians in Jerusalem shared their resources without reservation. Many of their fellow believers had become destitute when they trusted in Christ and were ostracized from their families and lost employment because of their faith. Years later Paul collected money from the Galatian churches to help meet the great needs that continued to exist among the saints in Jerusalem and that had been intensified by famine.

There have always been charlatans who manufacture needs and play on the sympathy of others. And there have always been professional beggars, who are able to work but would rather not. A Christian has no responsibility to support such people and should take reasonable care to determine if and when real need exists before giving his money. “If anyone will not work,” Paul says, “neither let him eat” (2 Thess. 3:10). Encouraging indolence weakens the character of the one who is indolent and also wastes the Lord’s money. But where real need does exist, our obligation to help meet it also exists.

Seventh, giving demonstrates love, not law. The New Testament contains no commands for specified amounts or percentages of giving. The percentage we give will be determined by the love of our own hearts and the needs of others.

All of the previous principles point to the obligation to give generously because we are investing in God’s work, because we are willing to sacrifice for Him who sacrificed Himself for us, because it has no bearing on how much we have, because we want spiritual riches more than financial riches, because we have personally determined to give, because we want to meet as much need as we can, and because our love compels us to give.

As in every area of righteousness, the key is the heart, the inner attitude that motivates what we say and do. Public righteousness is not to

be rejected, but it is to be done in the spirit of humility, love, and sincerity. “For we are [God’s] workmanship,” Paul reminds us, “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

Also as in every area of righteousness, Jesus Himself is our supreme and perfect example. He preached His messages in public, He performed His miracles of healing, compassion, and power over nature in public. Yet He continually focused attention on His heavenly Father, whose will alone He came to do (John 5:30; cf. 4:34; 6:38). Even though He was one with the Father, while He lived on earth as a man Jesus did not seek His own glory but that of His Father (John 8:49-50).

When we give our **alms ... in secret**, lovingly, unpretentiously, and with no thought for recognition or appreciation, our **Father who sees in secret will repay** us. The principle is this: if we remember, God will forget; but if we forget, God will remember. Our purpose should be to meet every need we are able to meet and leave the bookkeeping to God, realizing that “we have done only that which we ought to have done” (Luke 17:10).

God will not miss giving a single reward. “There is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do” (Heb. 4:13). The Lord knows our hearts, our attitudes, and our motives, and every reward that is due us will be given.

It is God’s perfect plan and will to give rewards to those who faithfully trust and obey Him. And it is not unspiritual to expect and anticipate those rewards, if we do so in a spirit of humility and gratitude—knowing that God’s rewards manifest His grace to the undeserving. We can meet His merciful requirements for rewards, but we can never truly earn them.

The greatest reward a believer can have is the knowledge that he has pleased his Lord. Our motive for looking forward to His rewards should be the anticipation of casting them as an offering at His feet, even as the twenty-four elders one day “will cast their crowns before the throne, saying, ‘Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power’” (Rev. 4:10-11).

Praying Without Hypocrisy (6:5-8)

And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you. And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him. (6:5-8)

None of us can comprehend exactly how prayer functions within the infinite mind and plan of God. The Calvinistic view emphasizes God's sovereignty, and in its extreme application holds that God will work according to His perfect will regardless of the way men pray or even whether they pray or not. Prayer is nothing more than tuning in to God's will. At the opposite extreme, the Arminian view holds that God's actions pertaining to us are determined largely on the basis of our prayers. On the one hand, prayer is seen simply as a way of lining up with God regarding what He has already determined to do, and on the other it is beseeching God to do what He otherwise would not do.

Scripture supports both of those views and holds them, as it were, in tension. The Bible is unequivocal about God's absolute sovereignty. But it is equally unequivocal in declaring that within His sovereignty God calls on His people to beseech Him in prayer—to implore His help in guidance, provision, protection, mercy, forgiveness, and countless other needs.

It is neither required nor possible to fathom the divine working that makes prayer effective. God simply commands us to obey the principles of prayer that His Word gives. Our Lord's teaching in the present passage contains some of those principles.

Jesus continues His contrast of true and false righteousness, in particular the false righteousness typified by the scribes and Pharisees. As 6:2-4 exposes their hypocritical giving and verses 16-18 their hypocritical fasting, verses 5-8 expose their equally hypocritical praying. The prayers were defective in their intended audience and in their content.

THE AUDIENCE OF PRAYER

THE FALSE AUDIENCE: OTHER MEN

And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. (6:5)

No religion has ever had a higher standard and priority for prayer than Judaism. As God's chosen people the Jews were the recipients of His written Word, "entrusted with the oracles of God" (Rom. 3:2). God spoke directly to Abraham and to many of his descendants, and they had spoken directly to Him. No other people, as a race or as a nation, has ever been so favored by God or had such direct communication with Him. Of all people, they should have known how to pray. But they did not. Like every other aspect of their religious life, their praying had been corrupted and perverted by rabbinic tradition. Most Jews were completely confused about how to pray as God wanted.

William Barclay, in a most helpful discussion of this passage in *The Gospel of Matthew* ([Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958], 1:191-98), points out that over the years a number of faults had crept into Jewish prayer life. For one thing, prayer had become ritualized. The wording and forms of prayers were set, and were then simply read or repeated from memory. Such prayers could be given with almost no attention being paid to what was said. They were a routine, semiconscious religious exercise.

A faithful Jew would repeat the Shema early in the morning and again at night. That prayer, which began, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord,” was a composite of selected phrases from Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41. Often an abbreviated version (Deut. 6:4 only) was used.

Another formalized prayer Barclay refers to was the Shemonēh ‘esray, (“The Eighteen”), which embodied eighteen prayers for various occasions. Faithful Jews prayed all eighteen each morning, afternoon, and evening. It, too, had an abbreviated version.

Both the Shema and the Shemonēh ‘esray were to be said every day, regardless of where one might be or what one was doing. Wherever one was—whether at home, in the field, at work, on a journey, in the synagogue, or visiting friends—at the appointed time the devout Jew stopped what he was doing and offered the appropriate prayer. The most common times were at the third, sixth, and ninth hours (9:00 A.M., 12:00 noon, and 3:00 P.M., according to the Palestinian mode of time).

The ritual prayers could be given with three basic attitudes: sincerity, indifference, or pride. Those Jews whose hearts were right used the times of prayer to worship and glorify God. They thought about the words and sincerely believed what they prayed. Others went through the words perfunctorily, mumbling the syllables as fast as possible in order to finish. Others, such as the scribes and Pharisees, recited the prayers meticulously, making sure to enunciate every word and syllable properly. Three times a day they had a ready-made opportunity to parade their piety.

A second fault that had crept into Jewish prayer life was the development of prescribed prayers for every object and every occasion. There were prayers for light, darkness, fire, rain, the new moon, traveling, good news, bad news, and so on. No doubt the original intent was to bring

every aspect of life into the presence of God; but by making the prayers prescribed and formalized that purpose was undermined.

A third fault, already mentioned, was the practice of limiting prayer to specific times and occasions. Prayer was offered when the given time came or situation arose, with no relation to genuine desire or need. As with prescribed wording, prescribed times did not prevent true prayer from being offered. Many faithful Jews like Daniel (Dan. 6:10) used those times as reminders to open their hearts to the Lord. Even in the early church, because most Christians were Jews and still worshiped at the Temple and in the synagogues, the traditional hours of prayer were often observed (see Acts 3:1; cf. 10:3, 30).

A fourth fault was in esteeming long prayers, believing that a prayer's sanctity and effectiveness were in direct proportion to its length. Jesus warned of the scribes who, "for appearance's sake offer long prayers" (Mark 12:40). A long prayer, of course, is not necessarily an insincere prayer. But a long public prayer lends itself to pretense, repetition, rote, and many other such dangers. The fault is in praying "for appearance's sake," to impress others with our religiosity.

Ancient rabbis maintained that the longer the prayer, the more likely it would be heard and heeded by God. Verbosity was confused with meaning, and length was confused with sincerity.

A fifth fault, singled out by Jesus in Matthew 6:7, was that of meaningless repetitions, patterned after those of pagan religions. In their contest with Elijah on Mt. Carmel, the pagan prophets "called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, 'O Baal, answer us,'" and they "raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice" (1 Kings 18:26, 29). Hour after hour they repeated the same phrase, trying by the very quantity of their words to make their god hear and respond.

Through the centuries the Jews had been influenced by such pagan practices. They often added adjective after adjective before God's name in their prayers, apparently trying to outdo one another in mentioning His divine attributes.

By far the worst fault, however, was that of wanting to be seen and heard by other people, especially their fellow Jews. Most of the other faults were not necessarily wrong in themselves, but were carried to extremes and used in meaningless ways. But this fault was intrinsically evil, because it both came from and was intended to satisfy pride.

Whatever form the prayer may have taken, the motive was sinful self-glory, the ultimate perversion of this sacred means of glorifying God (John 14:13).

It is that despicable fault that Jesus zeroes in on. **And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites.** Prayer that focuses on self is always hypocritical, because, by definition, the focus of every prayer should be on God. As mentioned in the last chapter, the term *hypocrite* originally referred to actors who used large masks to portray the roles they were playing. **Hypocrites** are actors, pretenders, persons who play a role. What they say and do does not represent what they themselves feel or believe but only the image they hope to create.

The hypocritical scribes and Pharisees prayed for the same purpose they did everything else—to attract attention and bring honor to themselves. That was the essence of their “righteousness,” which Jesus said had no part in His kingdom (5:20).

An old commentator observed that the greatest danger to religion is that the old self simply becomes religious. The **hypocrites** of whom Jesus speaks had convinced themselves that by performing certain religious acts, including various types of prayer, they became acceptable to God. People today still deceive themselves into thinking they are Christians, when all they have done is dress their old nature in religious trappings.

Nothing is so sacred that Satan will not invade it. In fact, the more sacred something is, the more he desires to profane it. Surely few things please him more than to come between believers and their Lord in the sacred intimacy of prayer. Sin will follow us into the very presence of God; and no sin is more powerful or destructive than pride. In those moments when we would come before the Lord in worship and purity of heart, we may be tempted to worship ourselves.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes,

We tend to think of sin as we see it in rags and in the gutters of life. We look at a drunkard, poor fellow, and we say, there is sin. But that is not the essence of sin. To have a real picture and a true understanding of sin, you must look at some great saint, some unusually devout and devoted man, look at him there on his knees in the very presence of God. Even there self is intruding itself, and the temptation is for him to think about

himself, to think pleasantly and pleurably about himself and to really be worshipping himself rather than God. That, not the other, is the true picture of sin. The other is sin, of course, but there you do not see it at its acme, you do not see it in its essence. Or to put it in another form, if you really want to understand something about the nature of Satan and his activities, the thing to do is not to go to the dregs or the gutters of life. If you really want to know something about Satan, go away to that wilderness where our Lord spent forty days and forty nights. That's the true picture of Satan, where you see him tempting the very Son of God. (*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 2:22-23)

From what we know in the scriptural record, Jesus' two most intense times of spiritual opposition were during His forty days of solitude in the wilderness and during His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night He was betrayed and arrested. On both occasions He was alone praying to His Father. It was in the most private and holy place of communion that Satan presented his strongest temptations before the Son of God.

The hypocrites loved to stand and pray. Standing was a normal position for prayer among the Jews. In the Old Testament we see God's faithful praying while kneeling, while lying prostrate, and while standing. In New Testament times standing was the most common position and did not necessarily indicate a desire to be noticed.

The synagogues were the most appropriate and likely places for public prayers to be offered. It was the place where Jews worshiped most often, especially those who lived great distances from the Temple. The synagogue was the local place of assembly, not only for worship but for various civic and social gatherings. If done sincerely, prayer at any of those functions was appropriate.

The street corners were also a normal place for prayer, because devout Jews would stop wherever they were at the appointed hour for prayer, even if they were walking down the street or visiting at the corner. But the word used here for **street** is not the same as that in verse 2, which refers to a narrow street (*rhumē*). The word used here (*plateia*) refers to a wide, major street, and therefore to a major street corner, where a crowd

was most likely to be. The implied fault here is that the **hypocrites** loved to pray where they would have the largest audience. There was nothing wrong with praying at a major intersection if that was where you happened to be at the time for prayer. But something was very much wrong if you planned to be there at prayer time for the specific purpose of praying where the most people could see you.

The real evil of those hypocritical worshipers, whether in **the synagogues** or **on the street corners**, was the desire to display themselves **in order to be seen of men**. It was not wrong to pray in those places, but they happened to afford the largest audiences, and were therefore the places where the hypocrites preferred to pray.

As always, the sin began in the heart. It was pride, the desire to exalt themselves before their fellow Jews, that was the root of the sin. Like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, those hypocrites ended up praying to themselves (see Luke 18:11) and before other people. God had no part.

Some overly reactionary believers have used these warnings of Jesus as a reason to renounce all public prayer. But the Lord taught no such thing. He Himself often prayed in the presence of His disciples (Luke 11:1) and in public, as when He blessed food before feeding the multitudes (Matt. 14:19). Scripture records many public prayers that were entirely appropriate and sincere. At the dedication of the Temple, Solomon prayed an extended, detailed prayer before all the priests, Levites, and leaders of Israel (2 Chron. 6:1-42; cf. 5:2-7). When, under Ezra's leadership, the covenant was renewed after the Exile, a group of eight Levites offered a heartfelt, moving prayer of repentance before all the people (Neh. 9:5-38). After Peter and John were arrested, questioned, and then released by the Sanhedrin shortly after Pentecost, the whole group of their companions rejoiced and "lifted their voices to God with one accord" (Acts 4:24).

But the public prayers of the typical scribe or Pharisee were ritualistic, mechanical, inordinately long, repetitious, and above all ostentatious. Like the hypocrites who gave for the sake of men's praise (Matt. 6:2), those who prayed for the sake of men's praise also had **their reward in full**. They were concerned only about the reward men could give, and that is all the reward they received.

THE TRUE AUDIENCE: GOD

But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you. (6:6)

The basic definition of prayer is “communion with God,” and if He is not involved there is only the pretense of prayer. Not only must He be involved, but centrally involved. Prayer is God’s provision; it is God’s idea, not man’s. There could be no prayer if God did not condescend to speak with us, and we could not know how to pray had He not chosen to instruct us.

Jesus’ teaching here is simple, in contrast to the complicated and difficult traditions. The phrase **when you pray** implies great latitude. No prescribed time or occasion is given by the Lord. The *tameion* (**inner room**) could be any sort of small room or chamber, even a storage closet. Such rooms were often secret and used to store valued possessions for protection. The idea is that of going to the most private place available.

As already mentioned, Jesus does not forbid or condemn public prayer as such (cf. 1 Tim. 2:1-4). His purpose here seems to have been to make as great a contrast as possible to the practices of the scribes, Pharisees, and other hypocritical religionists. The primary point Jesus makes does not have to do with location but with attitude. If necessary, Jesus says, go to the most secluded, private place you can find so you will not be tempted to show off. Go there and **shut the door**. Shut out everything else so that you can concentrate on God and **pray to your Father**. Do whatever you have to do to get your attention away from yourself and others and on Him and Him alone.

Much of our prayer life should be literally **in secret**. Jesus regularly went away from His disciples to pray entirely alone. Our family members or friends may know that we are praying, but what we say is not meant for them to hear. Chrysostom commented that in his day (the fourth century A.D.) many Christians prayed so loud in their rooms that everyone down the hall heard what they said. If people sometimes happen to overhear our private prayers, it should not be by our intention. (Cf. John A. Broadus, *Matthew* [Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson, 1886], p. 140.)

But the **Father** being **in secret** does not mean He is not present when we pray in public, or with our families or other small groups of believers. He is very much present whenever and wherever His children call on Him. Jesus' point has to do with the singleness of intention. True prayer is always intimate. Even prayer in public, if the heart is right and concentrated on God, will in a real and profound way shut one up alone in the presence of God.

In the pattern of prayer Jesus taught His disciples, He begins with "Our Father" (Matt. 6:9), indicating that other believers may be present and that the prayer is corporate. But even when prayer represents the feelings and needs of others who are present, the supreme attention is to be on God. In that sense, even the most public prayer is **in secret**. Even if the whole world hears what we say, there is an intimacy and focus on God in that communion that is unaffected.

God also **sees in secret** in the sense that He never betrays a confidence. Many things we share with God in our private prayers are for Him alone to know. Confidences we share even with our dearest loved ones or closest friends may sometimes be betrayed. But we can be sure our secrets with God will forever be just that, and that one believer praying **in secret** with a pure heart has the full attention of the **Father**.

Furthermore, when our prayer is as it should be, **our Father who sees in secret will repay** us. The most important **secret** He **sees** is not the words we say in the privacy of our room, but the thoughts we have in the privacy of our heart. Those are the secrets about which He is supremely concerned, and about which only He can know with certainty (cf. 1 Cor. 4:3-5). Those secrets sometimes are hidden even from ourselves, because it is so easy to be deceived about our own motives.

When God is genuinely the audience of our prayer, we will have the reward only He can give. Jesus gives no idea in this passage as to what God's reward, or repayment, will be. The important truth is that God will faithfully and unfailingly bless those who come to Him in sincerity. Without question, the Lord **will repay**. Those who pray insincerely and hypocritically will receive the world's reward, and those who pray sincerely and humbly will receive God's.

THE CONTENT OF PRAYER

A second area in which much prayer of Jesus' day fell short was that of content. The hypocritical prayers of the scribes and Pharisees not only were given in the wrong spirit but were given in meaningless words. They had no substance, no significant content. To be acceptable to God, Jesus declared, prayers must be genuine expressions of worship and of heartfelt requests and petitions.

FALSE CONTENT: MEANINGLESS REPETITION

And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. (6:7)

The particular fault Jesus singles out here is that of **meaningless repetition**, which has already been discussed. This practice was common in many pagan religions of that day, as it is in many religions today, including some branches of Christendom.

Use meaningless repetition is one word (from *battalogeō*) in the Greek and refers to idle, thoughtless chatter. It was probably onomatopoeic, mimicking the sounds of meaningless jabber.

Those who used repetitious prayers were not necessarily hypocrites, at least not of the ostentatious type. The scribes and Pharisees used a great deal of repetition in their public displays of piety; but many other Jews used it even in private prayers. Some may have used repetition because their leaders had taught them to use it. Others, however, resorted to repetition because it was easy and demanded little concentration. To such people, prayer was simply a matter of required religious ceremony, and they could be entirely indifferent to its content. As long as it was officially approved, one pattern was as good as another.

Although this problem did not always involve hypocrisy, it always involved a wrong attitude, a wrong heart. The proud hypocrites tried to use

God to glorify themselves, whereas those who used **meaningless repetition** were simply indifferent to real communion with God.

The Jews had picked up the practice from **the Gentiles**, who believed that the value of prayer was largely a matter of quantity. The longer the better. **They suppose they will be heard for their many words**, Jesus explained. Those who prayed to pagan gods thought their deities first had to be aroused, then cajoled, intimidated, and badgered into listening and answering—just as the prophets of Baal did on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:26-29). In the New Testament we see a similar practice. Aroused against Paul and his companions by Demetrius and other silversmiths of Ephesus, a great crowd began chanting, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” and continued incessantly for two hours (Acts 19:24-34).

Many Buddhists spin wheels containing written prayers, believing that each turn of the wheel sends that prayer to their god. Roman Catholics light prayer candles in the belief that their requests will continue to ascend repetitiously to God as long as the candle is lit. Rosaries are used to count off repeated prayers of Hail Mary and Our Father, the rosary itself coming to Catholicism from Buddhism by way of the Spanish Muslims during the Middle Ages. Certain charismatic groups in our own day repeat the same words or phrases over and over until the speaking degenerates to unintelligible confusion (John A. Broadus, *Matthew* [Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson, 1886], p. 130).

All of us, of course, have been guilty of repeating the same prayers meal after meal and prayer meeting after prayer meeting—with little or no thought of what we are saying or of the One to whom we are supposedly speaking. Prayer that is thoughtless and indifferent is offensive to God, and should also be offensive to us.

Again we must not jump to wrong conclusions. Jesus did not forbid the repetition of genuine requests. In the parable about the midnight visit to his neighbor, the persistent man was praised by Jesus as a model of our persistence before God. In His parable of the importunate widow, Jesus praised her persistence before the ungodly judge, saying, “Now shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them?” (Luke 18:2-7). Paul “entreated the Lord three times” that the thorn in his flesh might be removed (2 Cor. 12:7-8). In the Garden of Gethsemane, as He faced the agony of the cross, Jesus cried out, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not

as I will, but as Thou wilt.” After rebuking the disciples for their sleep, He prayed the prayer again, and then, after a short while, He “prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more” (Matt. 26:39-44).

It is not honest, properly motivated repetition of needs or praise before God that is wrong, but the mindless, indifferent recital of spiritual-sounding incantations or magical formulas over and over. Not only must our hearts be right before God will hear our prayer, but also our minds. Thoughtless prayer is almost as offensive to God as heartless prayer. In most instances they go together.

TRUE CONTENT: SINCERE REQUESTS

Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him. (6:8)

God does not have to be badgered and cajoled. Our **Father knows what [we] need, before [we] ask Him.** Martin Luther said, “By our praying . . . we are instructing ourselves more than we are him.” The purpose of prayer is not to inform or persuade God, but to come before Him sincerely, purposely, consciously, and devotedly (John Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1978], p. 145).

Prayer is sharing the needs, burdens, and hunger of our hearts before our heavenly **Father**, who already **knows what [we] need** but who wants us to ask Him. He wants to hear us, He wants to commune with us, more than we could ever want to commune with Him—because His love for us is so much greater than our love for Him. Prayer is our giving God the opportunity to manifest His power, majesty, love, and providence (cf. John 14:13).

To pray rightly is to pray with a devout heart and with pure motives. It is to pray with single attention to God rather than to other men. And it is to pray with sincere confidence that our heavenly Father both hears and answers every request made to Him in faith. He always repays our sincere devotion with gracious response. If our request is sincere but

not according to His will, He will answer in a way better than we want or expect. But He will always answer.

It is reported that D. L. Moody once felt so surfeited with God's blessings that he prayed, "God, stop." That is what God will do with every faithful believer who comes to Him as an expectant child to his father—smother him in more blessings than can be counted or named.

The Disciples' Prayer

--- part 1 (6:9-15)

Pray, then, in this way: “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. [For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.]” For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions. (6:9-15) (For a more detailed study of the Disciples' Prayer, see the author's book *Jesus' Pattern of Prayer* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1981].)

Jesus' earthly ministry was remarkably brief, barely three years long. Yet in those three years, as must have been true in His earlier life, a great amount of time was spent in prayer. The gospels report that Jesus habitually rose early in the morning, often before daybreak, to commune with His Father. In the evening He would frequently go to the Mount of Olives or some other quiet spot to pray, usually alone. Prayer was the spiritual air that Jesus breathed every moment of His life.

Someone has said that many Christians offer their prayers like sailors use their pumps—only when the ship leaks. But to be obedient disciples of Christ, to experience the fullness of communion with God, and to open the floodgates of heaven's blessings, believers must pray as Jesus prayed. In addition to that, we must know *how* to pray. If we do not know how to pray and what to pray for, it does little good to go through the motions. But if we know how to pray, and then pray that way, every other

part of our lives will be strengthened and put in proper perspective. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones has beautifully expressed it *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, “Man is at his greatest and highest when upon his knees he comes face to face to God” (2 vols. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 2:45).

The Bible teaches a great deal about the importance and power of prayer. Prayer is effective; it makes a difference. “The effective prayer of a righteous man,” James says, “can accomplish much” (James 5:16). Abraham’s servant prayed, and Rebekah appeared. Jacob wrestled and prayed, and Esau’s mind was turned from twenty years of revenge. Moses prayed, and Amalek was struck. Hannah prayed, and Samuel was born. Isaiah and Hezekiah prayed, and in twelve hours one hundred eighty-five thousand Assyrians were slain. Elijah prayed, and there were three years of drought; he prayed again, and rain came. Those are but a small sampling of answered prayer just from the Old Testament. The Jews to whom Jesus preached should have had unlimited confidence in the power of prayer.

Prayer is vital to every other aspect of kingdom living. We cannot, for example, give (see Matt. 6:2-4) or fast (see 6:16-18) properly unless we are in constant communion with God. The only giving that God wants is that which is sincere, willing, and done to His glory—giving that comes from a life of personal communion with Him. Fasting is meaningless apart from prayer, because apart from prayer it is apart from God. It will be a meaningless religious ritual. The greatest emphasis in this passage (6:1-18), therefore, is given to prayer.

GOD’S PURPOSE

God’s supreme purpose for prayer, the purpose beyond all other purposes, is to glorify Himself. Although nothing benefits a believer more than prayer, the purpose in praying must first of all be for the sake of God, not self. Prayer is, above all, an opportunity for God to manifest His goodness and glory. An old saint said, “True prayer brings the mind to the immediate contemplation of God’s character and holds it there until the believer’s soul is properly impressed.” Jesus affirmed the purpose of

prayer when He said, “And whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified” (John 14:13).

Contrary to much emphasis in the evangelical church today, true prayer, like true worship, centers on God’s glory, not on man’s needs. It is not simply to lay claim on God’s promises, much less make demands of Him, but to acknowledge His sovereignty, to see the display of His glory, and to obey His will.

Because prayer is so absolutely important and because we often do not have the wisdom to pray as we ought or for what we ought, God has commissioned His own Holy Spirit to help us. “We do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26). That is surely what Paul means when he urges believers to “pray at all times in the Spirit” (Eph. 6:18).

In the few words of Matthew 6:9-15 our Lord gives a succinct but marvelously comprehensive outline of what true prayer should be. As we will discuss later, the second part of verse 13, a doxology, was possibly not a part of the original text. The prayer proper has two sections; the first section deals with God’s glory (vv. 9-10) and the second with man’s need (vv. 11-13*a*). Each section is composed of three petitions. The first three are petitions in behalf of God’s name, His kingdom, and His will. The second three are petitions for daily bread, forgiveness, and protection from temptation.

It is significant that Jesus makes no mention of where prayer should take place. As pointed out in the previous chapter, Jesus’ instruction to “go into your inner room” (6:6) was to stress the single-mindedness of prayer, the need to block out every other concern but God. Jesus Himself had no inner room to call His own during His earthly ministry, and we see Him praying in many places and in many situations, both public and private. Paul’s desire was for believers to pray “in every place” (1 Tim. 2:8).

Nor does Jesus specify a time to pray. Jesus, as well as saints of both the Old and New Testaments, prayed at every hour of the day and night. They can be seen praying at regular, habitual times, on special occasions, when in special danger, when specially blessed, before meals and after meals, when arriving at a destination and when leaving, and in every other conceivable circumstance and for every other conceivable good purpose.

Neither are attire or posture specified. As Jesus had already emphasized (6:5-8), it is the attitude and content of prayer that are of supreme importance, and those two things are central to the pattern He now prescribes.

In any posture, in any attire, at any time, in any place, and under any circumstance prayer is appropriate. Prayer is to be a total way of life, an open and constant communion with God (Eph. 6:18; 1 Thess. 5:17). Because it is to be a way of life, we need to understand how to pray; and that is precisely why Jesus gave His followers this model prayer.

As with all of the Sermon on the Mount, what Jesus says about prayer was not essentially new. The Old Testament, and even Jewish tradition, taught all of the basic principles that Jesus presents here. Many faults and perversions—such as praying to be seen of men and meaningless repetitions (6:5, 7)—had crept into Jewish prayer life. But rabbinic tradition was truer to Scripture in its teaching about prayer than perhaps about anything else. Both the Talmud and the Midrash contain many lofty and helpful teachings about prayer.

From their knowledge of Scripture, Jews rightly believed God wanted them to pray, that He heard and responded to their prayers, and that praying should be continual. From Scripture they also knew that prayer should incorporate certain elements—such as adoration, praise, thanksgiving, a sense of awe at God’s holiness, the desire to obey His commands, confession of sin, concern for others, perseverance, and humility.

But something had gone wrong, and by Jesus’ day most Jews had forgotten the teachings of Scripture and even the sound, biblical teachings of their tradition. Most prayer had become formalized, mechanical, rote, and hypocritical.

After warning against those perversions that had so corrupted Jewish prayer life, our Lord now gives a divine pattern by which kingdom citizens can pray in a way that is pleasing to God.

That the prayer Jesus is about to give was not meant to be repeated as a prayer itself is clear for several reasons. First, in the present passage it is introduced with the words, **Pray, then, in this way.** In the account in Luke the disciples did not ask Jesus to teach them a prayer but to teach them *how* to pray (Luke 11:1). *Houtōs oun* (**then, in this way**) means literally, “Thus therefore,” and frequently carried the idea of “along these

lines” or “in the following manner.” Second, Jesus had just warned His followers *not* to pray with “meaningless repetition” (v. 7). To then give a prayer whose primary purpose was to be recited verbatim would have been an obvious contradiction of Himself. Third, nowhere in the New Testament—gospels, Acts, or epistles—do we find an instance of that or any other prayer being repeated by anyone or used in a repetitious, ritualistic manner by a group.

The Lord’s Prayer, or more accurately, the Disciples’ Prayer, is not a set group of words to repeat. It is fine to recite it, as we recite many parts of Scripture. It is certainly fine to memorize it and to rehearse it in our minds and meditate on it in our hearts. But it is not so much a prayer in itself as it is a skeleton which believers are to flesh out with their own words of praise, adoration, petitions, and so on. It is not a substitute for our own prayers but a guide for them.

In fewer than seventy words we find a masterpiece of the infinite mind of God, who alone could compress every conceivable element of true prayer into such a brief and simple form—a form that even a young child can understand but the most mature believer cannot fully comprehend.

Another indication of the prayer’s divine comprehensiveness is seen in the seemingly endless schemes by which it can be outlined. When outlined from the perspective of our relationship to God, we see: **Our Father** showing the father/child relationship; **hallowed be Thy name**, the deity/worshiper; **Thy kingdom come**, the sovereign/subject; **Thy will be done**, the master/servant; **give us this day our daily bread**, the benefactor/beneficiary; **forgive us our debts**, the Savior/sinner; and **do not lead us into temptation**, the guide/pilgrim.

From the perspective of the attitude and spirit of prayer, **Our** reflects unselfishness; **Father** reflects family devotion; **hallowed be Thy name**, reverence; **Thy kingdom come**, loyalty; **Thy will be done**, submission; **give us this day our daily bread**, dependence; **forgive us our debts**, penitence; **do not lead us into temptation**, humility; **Thine is the kingdom**, triumph; **and the glory**, exultation; and **forever**, hope.

In similar ways the prayer can be outlined to show (1) the balance of God’s glory and our need; (2) the threefold purpose of prayer: to hallow God’s name, bring in His kingdom, and do His will; and (3) the approach

of present (**give us this day our daily bread**), past (**forgive us our debts**), and future (**do not lead us into temptation**).

Those are but a brief sampling of the ways in which Jesus' magnificent diamond of prayer may be cut.

The purpose of prayer is seen more in the overall thrust of these five verses than in any particular word or phrase. From beginning to end the focus is on God, on His adoration, worthiness, and glory. Every aspect of true righteousness, the righteousness that characterizes God's kingdom citizens, focuses on Him. Prayer could hardly be an exception. Prayer is not trying to get God to agree with us or to provide for our selfish desires. Prayer is affirming God's sovereignty, righteousness, and majesty and seeking to conform our desires and our purposes to His will and glory.

Every facet of the Disciples' Prayer focuses on the Almighty. Here Jesus gives a comprehensive view of all the essential elements of righteous prayer, every one of which centers on God—acknowledging His paternity, priority, program, plan, provision, pardon, protection, and preeminence. Each element is overloaded with meaning, its truths being impossible to exhaust.

GOD'S PATERNITY

Our Father who art in heaven. (6:9b)

God is **Father** only of those who have come to His family through His Son, Jesus Christ. Malachi wrote, "Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us?" (Mal. 2:10), and Paul said to the Greek philosophers on Mars Hill, "As even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His offspring'" (Acts 17:28). But Scripture makes it unmistakably clear that God's fatherhood of unbelievers is only in the sense of being their Creator. Spiritually, unbelievers have another father. In His severest condemnation of the Jewish leaders who opposed and rejected Him, Jesus said, "You are of your father the devil" (John 8:44). It is only to those who receive Him that Jesus gives "the right to become children of

God, even to those who believe in His name” (John 1:12; cf. Rom. 8:14; Gal. 3:26; Heb. 2:11-14; 2 Pet. 1:4; etc.). Because believers belong to the Son, they can come to God as His beloved children.

Faithful Jews had known of God as their Father in several ways. They saw Him as Father of Israel, the nation He chose to be His special people. Isaiah declared, “For Thou art our Father,... Thou, O Lord, art our Father” (Isa. 63:16; cf. Ex. 4:22; Jer. 31:9). They also saw Him in an even more intimate and personal way as their spiritual Father and Savior (Ps. 89:26; 103:13).

But over the centuries, because of their disobedience to the Lord and their repeated flirting with the pagan gods of the peoples around them, most Jews had lost the sense of God’s intimate fatherhood. They saw God as Father only in a remote, distant, faded figure who had once guided their ancestors.

Jesus reaffirmed to them what their Scripture taught and what faithful, godly Jews had always believed: God is the **Father... in heaven** of those who trust in Him. He used the title **Father** in all of His prayers except the one on the cross when He cried “My God, My God” (Matt. 27:46), emphasizing the separation He experienced in bearing mankind’s sin. Though the text uses the Greek *Patēr*, it is likely that Jesus’ used the Aramaic *Abba* when He gave this prayer. Not only was Aramaic the language in which He and most other Palestinian Jews commonly spoke, but *Abba* (equivalent to our “Daddy”) carried a more intimate and personal connotation than *Patēr*. In a number of passages the term *Abba* is used even in the Greek text, and is usually simply transliterated in English versions (see Mark 14:36; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6).

To be able to go to God as our heavenly **Father** first of all means the end of fear, the fear that pagans invariably had for their deities. Second, knowledge of God’s fatherhood settles uncertainties and gives hope. If an earthly father will spare no effort to help and protect his children, how much more will the heavenly Father love, protect, and help His children (Matt. 7:11; John 10:29; 14:21)?

Third, knowing God as our Father settles the matter of loneliness. Even if we are rejected and forsaken by our family, friends, fellow believers, and the rest of the world, we know that our heavenly Father will never leave us or forsake us. “He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My

Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him” (John 14:21; cf. Ps. 68:5-6).

Fourth, knowing God’s fatherhood should settle the matter of selfishness. Jesus taught us to pray, **Our Father**, using the plural pronoun because we are fellow children with all the rest of the household of God. There is no singular personal pronoun in the entire prayer. We pray holding up to God what is best for all, not just for one.

Fifth, knowing God as our Father settles the matter of resources. He is **our Father who [is] in heaven**. All the resources of heaven are available to us when we trust God as our heavenly Supplier. Our Father “has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3).

Sixth, God’s fatherhood should settle the matter of obedience. If Jesus, as God’s true Son, came down from heaven not to do His own will but His Father’s (John 6:38), how much more are we, as adopted children, to do only His will. Obedience to God is one of the supreme marks of our relationship to Him as His children. “For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother” (Matt. 12:50).

Yet in His grace, God loves and cares even for His children who are disobedient. The story of Luke 15 should be called the parable of the loving father rather than the prodigal son. It is first of all a picture of our heavenly Father, who can forgive a self-righteous child who remains moral and upright and also forgive one who becomes dissolute, wanders away, and returns.

Our Father, then, indicates God’s eagerness to lend His ear, His power, and His eternal blessing to the petitions of His children if it serves them best and further reveals His purpose and glory.

GOD’S PRIORITY

hallowed be Thy name. (6:9c)

At the beginning Jesus gives a warning against self-seeking prayer. God is to have priority in every aspect of our lives, and certainly in our times of deepest communion with Him. Praying is not to be a casual routine that gives passing homage to God, but should open up great dimensions of reverence, awe, appreciation, honor, and adoration. This phrase introduces a protection against any sentimentalism or overuse and abuse of **Father**, which is prone to being sentimentalized.

God's **name** signifies infinitely more than His titles or appellations. It represents all that He is—His character, plan, and will. When Moses went up on Mount Sinai to receive the commandments for the second time, he “called upon the name of the Lord. Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin’” (Ex. 34:5-7). The characteristics of God given in verses 6-7 are the equivalent of “the name of the Lord” mentioned in verse 5.

It is not because we simply know God's titles that we love and trust Him, but because we know His character. “Those who know Thy name will put their trust in Thee,” David said, “for Thou, O Lord, hast not forsaken those who seek Thee” (Ps. 9:10). God's name is seen in His faithfulness. In another psalm David declared, “I will give thanks to the Lord according to His righteousness, and will sing praise to the name of the Lord Most High” (Ps. 7:17; cf. 113:1-4). In the typical form of Hebrew poetry, God's righteousness and His name are paralleled, showing their equivalence. When the psalmist said, “Some boast in chariots, and some in horses; but we will boast in the name of the Lord, our God” (20:7), he had much more in mind than the title by which God is called. He spoke of the fullness of God's person.

Each of the many Old Testament names and titles of God shows a different facet of His character and will. He is called, for example, *Elohim*, the Creator God; *El Elyon*, “possessor of heaven and earth”; *Jehovah-Jireh*, “the Lord will provide”; *Jehovah-Shalom*, “the Lord our peace”; *Jehovah-Tsidkenu*, “the Lord our righteousness”; and many others. All of those names speak of God's attributes. His names not only tell who He is but what He is like.

But Jesus Himself gives the clearest teaching about what God's name means, because *Jesus Christ* is God's greatest name. "I manifested Thy name to the men whom Thou gavest Me out of the world" (John 17:6). Everything the Son of God did on earth manifested God's name. As the perfect manifestation of God's nature and glory (John 1:14), Jesus was the perfect manifestation of God's name.

Hallowed is an archaic English word used to translate a form of *hagiazō*, which means to make holy. Words from the same root are translated "holy, saint, sanctify, sanctification," etc. God's people are commanded to *be* holy (1 Pet. 1:16), but God is acknowledged as *being* holy. That is the meaning of praying **hallowed be Thy name**: to attribute to God the holiness that already is, and always has been, supremely and uniquely His. To hallow God's name is to revere, honor, glorify, and obey Him as singularly perfect. As John Calvin observed, that God's name should be hallowed was nothing other than to say that God should have His own honor, of which He was so worthy, that men should never think or speak of Him without the greatest veneration (cited in *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], p. 318).

Hallowing God's name, like every other manifestation of righteousness, begins in the heart. "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts," Peter tells us (1 Pet. 3:15), using a form of the word that **hallowed** translates.

When we sanctify Christ in our hearts we will also sanctify Him in our lives. We hallow His name when we acknowledge that He exists. "He who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" (Heb. 11:6). To the honest and open mind, God is self-evident. Immanuel Kant had many strange ideas about God, but he was absolutely right when he said, "The law within us and the starry heavens above us drive us to God." (See William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 2 vols. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 1:208.)

We also hallow God's name by having true knowledge about Him. False ideas about the Sovereign One are irreverent. Origen said, "The man who brings into his concept of God ideas that have no place there takes the name of the Lord God in vain." Discovering and believing truth about God demonstrate reverence for Him; and willing ignorance or wrong doctrine demonstrate irreverence. We cannot revere a God whose character and will we do not know or care about. But acknowledging God's existence and

having true knowledge about Him are not enough to hallow His name. We must have a constant awareness of His presence. Spasmodic thinking of God does not hallow His name. To truly hallow His name is to consciously draw Him into every daily thought, every daily word, and every daily action. David put the focus of his life where it should always be—"I have set the Lord continually before me" (Ps. 16:8).

The Father's **name** is most **hallowed** when we behave in conformity to His will. For Christians to live in disobedience to God is to take His name in vain, claiming as Lord someone whom we do not follow as Lord. "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' " Jesus warned, "will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). When we eat, drink, and do everything else to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31), that is hallowing His name. Finally, to hallow God's name is to attract others to Him by our commitment, to "let [our] light shine before men in such a way that they may see [our] good works, and glorify [our] Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Psalm 34:3 sums up the teaching in this phrase with a lovely exhortation: "O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together."

GOD'S PROGRAM

Thy kingdom come. (6:10a)

Frances Havergal wrote these beautiful words of tribute to her Lord in her hymn "His Coming in Glory:"

Oh, the joy to see Thee reigning,
Thee, my own beloved Lord.
Every tongue Thy name confessing,
Worship, honor, glory, blessing,
Brought to Thee with glad accord.
Thee, my Master and my Friend,
Vindicated and enthroned,

Unto earth's remotest end,
Glorified, adored, and owned.

Our greatest desire should be to see the Lord reigning as King in His **kingdom**, to have the honor and authority that have always been His but that He has not yet come to claim. The King is inseparable from His kingdom. To pray **Thy kingdom come** is to pray for the program of the eternal Deity to be fulfilled, for Christ to come and reign as King of kings and Lord of lords. His program and His plan should be the preoccupation of our lives and of our prayers.

But how self-centered our prayers usually are, focused on our needs, our plans, our aspirations, our understandings. We are often like tiny infants, who know no world but the world of their own feelings and wants. One of the greatest struggles of the Christian life is to fight the old sinful habits, with their constant and unrelenting focus on self.

Even problems and issues outside of ourselves can cloud our supreme concern for God's **kingdom**. It is our responsibility to pray for our families, pastors, missionaries, national and other leaders, and for many other people and things. But our prayers in every case should be that God's will be done in and through those people, that they would think, speak, and act in accordance with God's will. The best we can pray for any person or for any cause is that God's kingdom be advanced in that person or that cause.

The holy purpose of the divine Father is to exalt Christ in the consummation of history when the Son rules and reigns in His kingdom. The Talmud is right in saying that if a prayer does not name the kingdom of God, it is not a prayer (*Berakoth 21a*).

The greatest opposition to Christ's kingdom, and the greatest opposition to Christian living, is the kingdom of this present world, which Satan rules. The essence of Satan's kingdom is opposition to God's kingdom and God's people.

Basileia (**kingdom**) does not refer primarily to a geographical territory but to sovereignty and dominion. Therefore when we pray **Thy kingdom come**, we are praying for God's rule through Christ's enthronement to come, His glorious reign on earth to begin. **Come** translates the aorist active imperative of *erchomai*, indicating a sudden, instantaneous coming (cf. Matt. 24:27). It is the coming millennial

kingdom (Rev. 20:4) of which the Lord is speaking, not an indirect effort to create a more godly society on earth through the progressive, human-oriented work of Christians.

To pray **Thy kingdom come** is to pray for *God's* kingdom, the kingdom over which He, and He alone, is Lord and King. It will be a kingdom on earth (v. 10*a*), but it will not be a kingdom of this world—that is, of this present world system. “My kingdom is not of this world,” Jesus told Pilate (John 18:36). No human kingdom could dovetail with God's kingdom, even partially. Sinful man could not be a part of a divine reign. That is why we do not advance God's kingdom by trying to improve human society. Many good and worthy causes deserve the support of Christians, but in supporting those causes we neither build the earthly kingdom of Jesus Christ or bring it closer. Even the best of such things are but holding actions that help retard the corruption that will always and inevitably characterize human societies and human kingdoms—until the Lord returns to establish His own perfect **kingdom**.

The kingdom of God, or of heaven, was the heart of Jesus' message. He came to “preach the kingdom of God” (Luke 4:43). There is no other gospel but the good news of the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. Always and everywhere He went, Jesus preached the message of salvation as entrance to the kingdom. He even stated that He “must preach the kingdom ... for I was sent for this purpose” (Luke 4:43). For the forty days that Jesus remained on earth between His resurrection and ascension He spoke to His disciples “of the things concerning the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).

God's kingdom is past, in the sense that it embodied Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Matt. 8:11). It was present in the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, in the sense that the true divine King was present “in the midst of you” (Luke 17:21, lit.). But the particular focus of our praying is to be on the **kingdom** that is yet to **come**.

God now and always has ruled the kingdom of the universe. He created it, and He controls it, orders it, and holds it together. As James Orr comments, “There is therefore recognized in Scripture ... a natural and universal kingdom or dominion of God embracing all objects, persons, and events, all doings of individuals and nations, all operations and changes of nature and history, absolutely without exception.” ... (cited by Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* [Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH Books,

1980], p. 22). God's is an "everlasting kingdom" (Ps. 145:13), and even now "His sovereignty rules over all" (Ps. 103:19; cf. 29:10; 1 Chron. 29:11-12; etc.).

But the most obvious fact of life is that God is not now ruling on earth as He rules in heaven (Matt. 6:10c)—and it is the divine *earthly* kingdom we are to pray will **come**. Our praying should be for Christ to return and to establish His earthly kingdom, to put down sin and enforce obedience to God's will. The Lord will then "rule them with a rod of iron" (Rev. 2:27; cf. Isa. 30:14; Jer. 19:11). After a thousand years His earthly kingdom will blend into His eternal kingdom, and there will be no distinction between His rule on earth and His rule in heaven (see Rev. 20-21).

The Greek of this verse could be translated "Let **Thy kingdom come** now." There is therefore a sense in which we pray for God's kingdom to come presently. In a present and limited, but real and miraculous way, God's kingdom is coming to earth each time a new soul is brought into the kingdom.

First of all, the kingdom comes in this way by conversion (Matt. 18:1-4). So prayer should be evangelistic and missionary—for new converts, new children of God, new kingdom citizens. Conversion to the kingdom involves an invitation (Matt. 22:1-14), repentance (Mark 1:14-15), and a willing response (Mark 12:28-34; Luke 9:61-62). The present existence of the kingdom on earth is internal, in the hearts and minds of those who belong to Jesus Christ, the King. We should pray for their number to mightily increase. Praying for the kingdom to come, in this sense, is praying for the salvation of souls. Every believer should seek others who can sing, "King of my life, I crown Thee now, Thine shall the glory be" ("Lead Me to Calvary," by Jennie Evelyn Hussey).

The **kingdom** for which we are to pray, and of which we now have a taste, is of infinite value. "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field" or a "pearl of great value" which a person sells all his possessions to buy (Matt. 13:44-46). Its value is so great that each of those parables emphasizes that the procurer sold all he had to purchase salvation (cf. Matt. 10:37).

Second, the kingdom comes now through commitment. The desire of those already converted should be to respond to the rule of the Lord in their lives now so that He rules in them as He rules in heaven. When we

pray as Jesus teaches, we will continually pray that our lives will honor and glorify our Father in heaven.

The call for the kingdom to come is also related to the second coming of the Lord. John says in the last chapter of Revelation: “He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes I am coming quickly.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (22:20).

In that day, our prayers will finally be answered. As the hymn by Isaac Watts begins, “Jesus shall reign where ‘ere the sun does its successive journeys run. His kingdom spread from shore to shore, ‘til moon shall wax and wane no more.” Paul emphasizes that waiting for the kingdom to come in its final form is not so much looking for an event as for a person—the King Himself (1 Thess. 1:10).

GOD’S PLAN

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. (10:b)

Many people wonder how God’s sovereignty can be related to praying for His will to be done. If He is sovereign, is not His will inevitably done? Does our will override His will when we pray earnestly and sincerely? That is one of the great paradoxes of Scripture, a paradox about which Calvinists and Arminians have debated for centuries. It should be evident that this paradox, like those of God’s being three in one and Jesus’ being wholly God and wholly man, must be left to the infinite mind of God, because it is far beyond the finite human mind to comprehend. But what seems a hopeless contradiction to us is no dilemma to God. We hold both truths, seemingly paradoxical, in perfect tension with faith in the infinite mind of God, who resolves all things in perfect, noncontradictory truth (Deut. 29:29).

It is absolutely clear from Scripture that God is sovereign and yet not only allows but commands that man exercise his own volition in certain areas. If man were not able to make his own choices, God’s commands would be futile and meaningless and His punishments cruel

and unjust. If God did not act in response to prayer, Jesus' teaching about prayer would also be futile and meaningless. Our responsibility is not to solve the dilemma but to believe and act on God's truths, whether some of them seem to conflict or not. To compromise one of God's truths in an effort to defend another is the stuff of which heresy is made. We are to accept every part of every truth in God's Word, leaving the resolution of any seeming conflicts to Him. Attempting on a human level to resolve all apparent paradoxes in Scripture is an act of arrogance and an attack on the truth and intent of God's revelation.

When we pray **Thy will be done**, we are praying first of all that God's will become our own will. Second, we are praying that His will prevail all over the **earth as it [does] in heaven**.

WRONG UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S WILL

Many people, including many believers, wrongly understand this part of the Disciples' Prayer. Seeing God's sovereignty simply as the absolute imposition of a dictator's will, some believers are resentful. When, or if, they pray for His will to be done, they pray out of a feeling of compulsion. God's will has to be done, and He is too strong to resist; so what would be the point of praying otherwise? The logical conclusion of most people who look at God in that way is that there is no point to prayer—certainly not to petitions. Why ask for the inevitable?

Other people are more charitable in their feelings about God. But because they, too, believe His will is inevitable, they pray out of passive resignation. They pray for God's will to be done simply because that is what the Lord tells them to do. They are resignedly obedient. They do not pray so much out of faith as out of capitulation. They do not try to put their wills into accord with the divine will, but rather shift their own wills into neutral, letting God's will run its course.

It is easy for Christians to fall into praying that way. Even in the very early days of the church, when faith generally was strong and vital, prayer could be passive and unexpectant. A group of concerned disciples was praying in the house of Mary, John Mark's mother, for the release of Peter from prison. While they were praying, Peter was freed by an angel

and came to the house and knocked on the door. When a servant girl named Rhoda came to the door and recognized Peter's voice, she rushed back inside to tell the others, forgetting to let Peter in. But the praying group did not believe her, and thought she had heard an angel. When Peter was finally admitted, "they saw him and were amazed" (Acts 12:16). They apparently had been praying for what they did not really believe would happen.

Our own prayer lives often are weak because we do not pray in faith; we do not expect prayer to change anything. We pray out of a sense of duty and obligation, subconsciously thinking that God is going to do just as He wants to do anyway. Jesus gave the parable of the importunate widow—who refused to accept the status quo and persisted in begging, despite receiving no response—for the very purpose of protecting us against that sort of passive and unspiritual resignation. "Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart" (Luke 18:1).

The very fact that Jesus tells us to pray **Thy will be done on earth** indicates that God's will is *not* always done on earth. It is not inevitable. In fact, lack of faithful prayer inhibits His will being done. In God's wise and gracious plan, prayer is essential to the proper working of His divine will on earth.

God is sovereign, but He is not independently deterministic. Looking at God's sovereignty in a fatalistic way, thinking "What will be will be," absolutely (destroys faithful prayer and faithful obedience of every sort. That is not a "high" view of God's sovereignty, but a destructive and unbiblical view of it. That is not the divine sovereignty the Bible teaches. It is not God's **will** that people die, or why would Christ have come to destroy death? It is not God's **will** that people go to hell, or why would His only Son have taken the penalty of sin upon Himself so that men might escape hell? "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). That sin exists on earth and causes such horrible consequences is not evidence of God's will but of His patience in allowing more opportunity for men to turn to Him for salvation.

Other people, overemphasizing the importance of man's will, look at prayer as a means of bending God's will to their own. They think of

God's providence as a sort of cosmic vending machine, which they can operate simply by inserting the required claim on one of His promises. As Elton Trueblood observes, "In some congregations the Gospel has been diminished to the mere art of self-fulfillment. Some current religious authors, far from emphasizing what it means to believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, write chiefly of themselves. Egocentricity is all that is left when the objective truth about the revelation of Christ is lost or even obscured."

But Jesus undercuts that notion throughout His model prayer. True prayer focuses on **Thy** name, **Thy** kingdom, **Thy** will. Amy Carmichael wrote, "And shall I pray to change Thy will, my Father, until it accord to mine? But no, Lord, no; that shall never be. Rather I pray Thee blend my human will with Thine."

There is a tension between God's sovereignty and man's will, between God's grace and man's faith, but we dare not try to resolve it by modifying God's truth about either His sovereignty or our will, His grace or our faith. God is sovereign, but He gives us choices. God is sovereign, but He tells us to pray **Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven**. And James reminds us that "the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (5:16).

RIGHT UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S WILL

David sang of the angels who did God's will. "Bless the Lord, you His angels, mighty in strength, who perform His word, obeying the voice of His word!" (Ps. 103:20). That is the way God's **will** is done **in heaven**, and that is the way believers are to pray for God's **will to be done on earth**—unwaveringly, completely, sincerely, willingly, fervently, readily, swiftly, and constantly. Our prayer should be that every person and thing on earth be brought into conformity with God's perfect will.

A part of the right understanding of and attitude toward God's will is what might be called a sense of righteous rebellion. To be dedicated to God's will is, by definition, to be opposed to Satan's. To pray **Thy will be done, on earth as it is heaven** is to rebel against the worldly idea that sin is normal and inevitable and should therefore be acquiesced to or at least

tolerated. It is to rebel against the world system of ungodliness, the dishonoring and rejecting of Christ, and also the disobedience of believers. Impotence in prayer leads us, however unwillingly, to strike a truce with wrong. To accept what is, is to abandon a Christian view of God and His plan for redemptive history.

Jesus knew the end from the beginning, but He did not accept the situation as inevitable or irresistible. He preached against sin and He acted against sin. When His Father's house was profaned, "He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the moneychangers, and overturned their tables; and to those who were selling the doves He said, 'Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a house of merchandise'" (John 2:14-16; cf. Matt. 21:12-13).

To pray for God's will to be done on earth is to rebel against the idea, heard today even among evangelicals, that virtually every wicked, corrupt thing that we do or that is done to us is somehow God's holy will and should be accepted from His hand with thanksgiving. Nothing wicked or sinful comes from the hand of God, but only from the hand of Satan. To pray for righteousness is to pray against wickedness. To pray for God's will to be done is to pray for Satan's will to be undone.

To pray for God's will to be done is to cry with David, "Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered; and let those who hate Him flee before Him" (Ps. 68:1) and with the saints under God's altar, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:10).

To pray rightly is to pray in faith, believing that God will hear and answer our prayers. I think the greatest hindrance to prayer is not lack of technique, lack of biblical knowledge, or even lack of enthusiasm for the Lord's work, but lack of faith. We simply do not pray with the expectation that our prayers will make a difference in our lives, in other people's lives, in the church, or in the world.

There are three distinct aspects of God's will as He reveals it to us in His Word. First, is what may be called His will of purpose—the vast, comprehensive, and tolerating will of God expressed in the unfolding of His sovereign plan that embodies all of the universe, including heaven, hell, and the earth. This is God's ultimate will, of which Isaiah wrote, "The Lord of hosts has sworn saying 'Surely, just as I have intended so it has

happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand” (Isa. 14:24; cf. Jer. 51:29; Rom. 8:28; Eph. 1:9-11; etc.). This is the will of God that allows sin to run its course and Satan to have his way for a season. But in God’s appointed time sin’s course and Satan’s way will end exactly according to God’s plan and foreknowledge.

Second, is what may be called God’s will of desire. This is within His will of purpose and completely consistent with it. But it is more specific and focused. Unlike God’s will of purpose, His will of desire is not always fulfilled; in fact, it is very unfulfilled in comparison to Satan’s will in this present age.

Jesus greatly desired that Jerusalem be saved, and He prayed, preached, healed, and ministered among its people to that end. But few believed in Him; most rejected Him, and some even crucified Him. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” He prayed. “I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it!” (Luke 13:34). That was the repeated experience of God’s Son, who came to earth that men might have life, and have it more abundantly. Like the unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem, most people were not willing to come to Jesus for that abundant life (John 5:40; cf. 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9).

Third, is what may be called God’s will of command. This will is entirely for His children, because only they have the capacity to obey. The will of command is the ardent desire of the heart of God that we who are His children obey Him completely and immediately with a willing heart. “Do you not know,” Paul says, “that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness” (Rom. 6:16-18).

God’s will of purpose embraces the ultimate end of this world, Christ’s second coming and the setting up of His eternal kingdom. His will of desire embraces conversion; and His will of command embraces the commitment and obedience of His children.

The great enemy of God’s will is pride. Pride caused Satan to rebel against God, and pride causes unbelievers to reject God and believers to disobey Him. For God’s will to be accepted and to be prayed for in

sincerity and with faith, self-will must be forsaken in the power of the Holy Spirit. “I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:1-2).

When we pray in faith and in conformity to God’s will, our prayer is a sanctifying grace that changes our lives dramatically. Prayer is a means of progressive sanctification. John Hannah said, “The end of prayer is not so much tangible answers as a deepening life of dependency.... The call to prayer is a call to love, submission, and obedience, ... the avenue of sweet, intimate, and intense fellowship of the soul with the infinite Creator.”

The believer’s call is to bring heaven to earth by hallowing the Lord’s name, letting His kingdom come, and seeking to do His will.

In verses 11-13a Jesus gives three petitions. The first relates to our physical life and the present (**daily bread**), the second to our mental and emotional life and the past (**debts**), and the third to our spiritual life and the future (**temptation and evil**).

The Disciples' Prayer
-- part 2 (6:9-15)

Pray, then, in this way: “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. [For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.]” For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions. (6:9-15)

GOD’S PROVISION

Give us this day our daily bread. (6:11)

Although it may have been a genuine concern in New Testament times, to many Christians in the western world today, such a request may seem needless and inappropriate. Why should we ask God for what we already have in such abundance? Why, when many of us need to consume less food than we do, ask God to supply our **daily bread**? What would be a completely understandable request of a Christian in Ethiopia or Cambodia, seems irrelevant on the lips of a well-fed American.

But this part of the Disciples’ Prayer, like every other part, extends beyond the first century to all believers, in every age and in every situation. In this pattern for prayer our Lord gives all the necessary

ingredients for praying. We can see five key elements in this request for God's provision: the substance, the source, the supplication, the seekers, and the schedule.

THE SUBSTANCE

Bread not only represents food but is symbolic of all of our physical needs. John Stott has observed that to Martin Luther, "everything necessary for the preservation of this life is bread, including food, a healthy body, good weather, house, home, wife, children, good government, and peace" (*Christian Counterculture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1978], p. 149).

It is marvelous to understand that the God who created the entire universe, who is the God of all space and time and eternity, who is infinitely holy and completely self-sufficient, should care about supplying our physical needs—and should be concerned that we receive enough food to eat, clothes to wear, and a place to rest. God obligates Himself to supply our needs.

This part of the prayer is in the form of a petition, but it is also an affirmation—which is why it is as appropriate for those who are well-fed as for those who have little to eat. Above all it is an affirmation that every good thing we have comes from the gracious hand of God (James 1:17).

THE SOURCE

That leads us to the source, who is God. The **Father** is the one addressed throughout the prayer, the One who is praised and petitioned.

When all our needs are met and all is going well in our lives, we are inclined to think we are carrying our own load. We earn our own money, buy our own food and clothes, pay for our own houses. Yet even the hardest-working person owes all that he earns to God's provision (see Deut. 8:18). Our life, breath, health, possessions, talents, and opportunities all originate from resources that God has created and made available to

man (see Acts 17:24-28). After scientists have made all their observations and calculations, there remains the unexplained element of the design, origin, and operation of the universe. It is unexplained, that is, apart from God, who holds it all together (Heb. 1:2-3).

God provided for man even before He created man. Man was God's final creation, and after He made and blessed Adam and Eve He said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you" (Gen. 1:29). Since that time God has continued to provide an abundance of food for mankind, in almost unlimited variety.

Yet Paul tells us that "the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, . . . and advocate abstaining from foods, which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. 4:1, 3-5). The Word of God sanctifies it by way of creation, and we sanctify it when we receive it with grateful prayer.

Every physical thing we have comes from God's provision through the earth. It is therefore the sin of indifference and ingratitude not to daily recognize His gifts in thankful prayer.

SUPPLICATION

Supplication is expressed in the word give. That is the heart of the petition, because it recognizes need. Even though God may already have provided it, we ask Him for it in recognition of His past and present provision as well as in trust for His future provision.

The only thing that could make Jesus' instruction and our petitions valid is the promise of God. We could not expect God to give what He has not promised. We can pray confidently because God has promised abundantly. "Trust in the Lord, and do good," David counsels us; "dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness. Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart.... Yet a little while and the wicked man will be no more;... But the humble will inherit the land, and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity" (Ps. 37:3-4,10-11).

God does not bind Himself to meet the physical needs of everyone, but only of those who trust in Him. In Psalm 37 David is speaking to believers who “trust in the Lord” (v. 3), “delight... in the Lord” (v. 4), “commit [their] way to the Lord” (v. 5), “rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him” (v. 7), “cease from anger,” and “do not fret” (v. 8). He says, “I have been young, and now I am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, or his descendants begging bread” (v. 25).

THE SEEKERS

The **us** of Jesus’ model prayer are those who belong to Him. Speaking to believers, Paul wrote, “Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food, will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness; you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God” (2 Cor. 9:10-11).

Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life” (Luke 18:29-30). God irrevocably commits Himself to meet the essential needs of His own.

The greatest cause of famine and its attendant diseases in the world is not poor agricultural practices or poor economic and political policies. Nor is the root problem lack of scientific and technological resources or even overpopulation. Those problems only aggravate the basic problem, which is spiritual. Only some fifteen percent of the arable land in the world is used for agriculture, and that for only half of the year. There is no major area of the world that with proper technology is not capable of supporting its own population and more.

Those parts of the world that have no Christian roots invariably place a low value on human life. The poverty in India, for example, may be laid at the feet of Hinduism, the pagan religion that spawned a host of other religions. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and *Eerdman’s Handbook to the World’s Religions*, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism come

from Hinduism. Shintoism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, and Taoism do not.

To the Hindu, man is but the incarnation of a soul on its way to *moksha*, a kind of “final emancipation,” during which trip he goes through countless, perhaps unending, cycles of reincarnation in both animal and human form. He works his way up to higher forms by good deeds and regresses to lower forms by sinning. Poverty, disease, and starvation are therefore seen as divine punishments for which the persons involved must do penance in order to be born into a higher form. To help a person in poverty or sickness is to interfere with his karma and therefore do him spiritual harm. (For a discussion of *moksha*, or *moksa*, see *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Micropaedia, VI, p. 972; for a more general discussion, see *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Macropaedia, vol. 8, pp. 888-908. Consult, also, *Eerdman's Handbook to World Religions* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982].)

All animals are considered to be incarnations either of men or deities. Cows are held to be especially sacred because they are incarnated deities—of which Hinduism has some 330 million. Cows not only are not to be eaten but add to the food problem by consuming 20 percent of India's total food supply. Even rats and mice, which eat 15 percent of the food supply, are not killed because they might be one's reincarnated relatives.

Just as paganism is the great plague of India, Africa, and many other parts of the world, Christianity has been the blessing of the West. Europe and the United States, though never fully Christian in any biblical sense, have been immeasurably blessed because of the Christian influence on political, social, and economic philosophy and policy. The great concerns for human rights, care for the poor, orphanages, hospitals, prison reform, racial and slave reform, and a host of other concerns did not come from paganism or humanism but from biblical Christianity. On the other hand, the current degraded view of human life reflected in the low view of the family and growing legal and social approval of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia are the legacy of humanism and practical atheism.

Without a proper view of God there cannot be a proper view of man. Those who have a right view of God and also a right relationship to Him through Jesus Christ are promised the provision of their heavenly Father. “For this reason “Jesus says, “I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your

body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing?... For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you” (Matt. 6:25, 32-33).

God has sometimes provided for His children through miraculous means, but His primary way of provision is through work, for which He has given life, energy, resources, and opportunity. His primary way to care for those who cannot work is through the generosity of those who are able to work. Whether he does so directly or indirectly, God is always the source of our physical well-being. He makes the earth to produce what we need, and He gives us the ability to procure it.

THE SCHEDULE

The schedule of God’s provision for His children is **daily**. The meaning here is simply that of regular, day-by-day supply of our needs. We are to rely on the Lord one day at a time. He may give us vision for work He calls us to do in the future, but His provision for our needs is **daily**, not weekly, monthly, or yearly. To accept the Lord’s provision for the present day, without concern for our needs or welfare tomorrow, is a testimony of our contentment in His goodness and faithfulness.

GOD’S PARDON

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. (6:12)

Opheilēma (**debts**) is one of five New Testament Greek terms for sin. *Hamartia* is the most common and carries the root idea of missing the mark. Sin misses the mark of God’s standard of righteousness. *Paraptōma*, often rendered “trespass,” is the sin of slipping or falling, and results more

from carelessness than from intentional disobedience. *Parabasis* refers to stepping across the line, going beyond the limits prescribed by God, and is often translated “transgression.” This sin is more conscious and intentional than *hamartia* and *paraptōma*. *Anomia* means lawlessness, and is a still more intentional and flagrant sin. It is direct and open rebellion against God and His ways.

The noun *opheilēma* is used only a few times in the New Testament, but its verb form is found often. Of the some thirty times it is used in its verb form, twenty-five times it refers to moral or spiritual debts. Sin is a moral and spiritual debt to God that must be paid. In his account of this prayer, Luke uses *hamartia* (“sins”; Luke 11:4), clearly indicating that the reference is to sin, not to a financial debt. Matthew probably used **debts** because it corresponded to the most common Aramaic term (*hōbā*) for sin used by Jews of that day, which also represented moral or spiritual debt to God.

THE PROBLEM

Sin is that which separates man from God, and is therefore man’s greatest enemy and greatest problem. Sin dominates the mind and heart of man. It has contaminated every human being and is the degenerative power that makes man susceptible to disease, illness, and every conceivable form of evil and unhappiness, temporal and eternal. The ultimate effects of sin are death and damnation, and the present effects are misery, dissatisfaction, and guilt. Sin is the common denominator of every crime, every theft, lie, murder, immorality, sickness, pain, and sorrow of mankind. It is also the moral and spiritual disease for which man has no cure. “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then you also can do good who are accustomed to do evil” (Jer. 13:23). The natural man does not want his sin cured, because he loves darkness rather than light (John 3:19).

Those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ have received God’s pardon for sin and are saved from eternal hell. And since, as we have seen, this prayer is given to believers, the **debts** referred to here are those

incurred by Christians when they sin. Immeasurably more important than our need for daily bread is our need for continual forgiveness of sin.

Arthur Pink writes in *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), pp. 163-64:

As it is contrary to the holiness of God, sin is a defilement, a dishonor, and a reproach to us as it is a violation of His law. It is a crime, and as to the guilt which we contract thereby, it is a debt. As creatures we owe a debt of obedience unto our maker and governor, and through failure to render the same on account of our rank disobedience, we have incurred a debt of punishment; and it is for this that we implore a divine pardon.

THE PROVISION

Because man's greatest problem is sin, his greatest need is forgiveness—and that is what God provides. Though we have been forgiven the ultimate penalty of sin, as Christians we need God's constant forgiveness for the sins we continue to commit. We are to pray, therefore, **forgive us**. Forgiveness is the central theme of this entire passage (vv. 9-15), being mentioned six times in eight verses. Everything leads to or issues from forgiveness.

Believers have experienced once-for-all God's judicial forgiveness, which they received the moment Christ was trusted as Savior. We are no longer condemned, no longer under judgment, no longer destined for hell (Rom. 8:1). The eternal Judge has declared us pardoned, justified, righteous. No one, human or satanic, can condemn or bring any "charge against God's elect" (Rom. 8:33-34).

But because we still fall into sin, we frequently require God's gracious forgiveness, His forgiveness not now as Judge but as Father. "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us," John warns believers. But, he goes on to assure us, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9).

During the Last Supper, Jesus began washing the disciples' feet as a demonstration of the humble, serving spirit they should have as His followers. At first Peter refused, but when Jesus said, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me," Peter went to the other extreme, wanting to be bathed all over. Jesus replied, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, "Not all of you are clean" (John 13:5-11).

Jesus' act of footwashing was therefore more than an example of humility; it was also a picture of the forgiveness God gives in His repeated cleansing of those who are already saved. Dirt on the feet symbolizes the daily surface contamination from sin that we experience as we walk through life. It does not, and cannot, make us entirely dirty, because we have been permanently cleansed from that. The positional purging of salvation that occurs at regeneration needs no repetition, but the practical purging is needed every day, because every day we fall short of God's perfect holiness.

As Judge, God is eager to forgive sinners, and as Father He is even more eager to keep on forgiving His children. Hundreds of years before Christ, Nehemiah wrote, "Thou art a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness" (Neh. 9:17). As vast and pervasive as the sin of man is, God forgiveness is more vast and greater. Where sin abounds, God's grace abounds even more (Rom. 5:20).

THE PLEA

Asking forgiveness implies confession. Feet that are not presented to Christ cannot be washed by Him. Sin that is not confessed cannot be forgiven. That is the condition John makes plain in the text just quoted above: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). To confess means basically to agree with, and when we confess our sins we agree with God about them that they are wicked, evil, defiling, and have no part in those who belong to Him.

It is difficult to confess sins, and both Satan and our prideful nature fight against it. But it is the only way to the free and joyful life. “He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion” (Prov. 28:13). John Stott says, “One of the surest antidotes to the process of moral hardening is the disciplined practice of uncovering our sins of thought and outlook, as well as of word and of deed, and the repentant forsaking of them” (*Confess Your Sins* [Waco, Tex.: Word, 1974], p. 19).

The true Christian does not see God’s promise of forgiveness as a license to sin, a way to abuse His love and presume on His grace. Rather he sees God’s gracious forgiveness as the means of spiritual growth and sanctification and continually gives thanks to God for His great love and willingness to forgive and forgive and forgive. It is also important to realize that confessing sin gives God the glory when He chastens the disobedient Christian because it removes any complaint that God is unfair when He disciplines.

A Puritan saint of many generations ago prayed, “Grant me never to lose sight of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, the exceeding righteousness of salvation, the exceeding glory of Christ, the exceeding beauty of holiness, and the exceeding wonder of grace.” At another time he prayed, “I am guilty but pardoned. I am lost but saved. I am wandering but found. I am sinning but cleansed. Give me perpetual broken-heartedness. Keep me always clinging to Thy cross” (Arthur Bennett, ed., *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975], pp.76, 83).

THE PREREQUISITE

Jesus gives the prerequisite for receiving forgiveness in the words, **as we also have forgiven our debtors.** The principle is simple but sobering: if we have forgiven, we will be forgiven; if we have not forgiven, we will not be forgiven.

We are to forgive because it is the character of righteousness, and therefore of the faithful Christian life, to forgive. Citizens of God’s kingdom are blessed and receive mercy because they themselves are

merciful (Matt. 5:7). They love even their enemies because they have the nature of the loving heavenly Father within them (5:44-45,48). Forgiveness is the mark of a truly regenerate heart. Still we fail to be consistent with that mark and need constant exhortation because of the strength of sinful flesh (Rom. 7:14-25).

We are also to be motivated to forgive because of Christ's example. "Be kind to one another," Paul says, "tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32). John tells us, "The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked" (1 John 2:6).

Because it reflects God's own gracious forgiveness, the forgiving of another person's sin expresses the highest virtue of man. "A man's discretion makes him slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook a transgression" (Prov. 19:11).

Forgiving others also frees the conscience of guilt. Unforgiveness not only stands as a barrier to God's forgiveness but also interferes with peace of mind, happiness, satisfaction, and even the proper functioning of the body.

Forgiving others is of great benefit to the whole congregation of believers. Probably few things have so short-circuited the power of the church as unresolved conflicts among its members. "If I regard wickedness in my heart," the psalmist warns himself and every believer, "the Lord will not hear" (Ps. 66:18). The Holy Spirit cannot work freely among those who carry grudges and harbor resentment (see Matt. 5:23-24; 1 Cor. 1:10-13; 3:1-9).

Forgiving others also delivers us from God's discipline. Where there is an unforgiving spirit, there is sin; and where there is sin, there will be chastening (Heb. 12:5-13). Unrepented sins in the church at Corinth caused many believers to be weak, sick, and even to die (1 Cor. 11:30).

But the most important reason for being forgiving is that it brings God's forgiveness to the believer. That truth is so important that Jesus reinforces it after the close of the prayer (vv. 14-15). Nothing in the Christian life is more important than forgiveness—our forgiveness of others and God's forgiveness of us.

In the matter of forgiveness, God deals with us as we deal with others. We are to forgive others as freely and graciously as God forgives us. The Puritan writer Thomas Manton said, "There is none so tender to

others as they which have received mercy themselves, for they know how gently God hath dealt with them.”

GOD’S PROTECTION

And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. (6:13a)

Peirasmos (**temptation**) is basically a neutral word in the Greek, having no necessary connotation either of good or evil, as does our English *temptation*, which refers to inducement to evil. The root meaning has to do with a testing or proving, and from that meaning are derived the related meanings of trial and temptation. Here it seems to parallel the term **evil**, indicating that it has in view enticement to sin.

God’s holiness and goodness will not allow His leading anyone, certainly not one of His children, into a place or experience in which they would purposely be induced to commit sin. “Let no one say when he is tempted,” says James, “I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone” (James 1:13).

Yet James had just said, “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials (*peirasmos*), knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance” (vv. 2-3). There is an interpretive problem, therefore, as to whether *peirasmos* in Matthew 6:13 is translated temptation or trial. As James tells us, God does not tempt. So why ask Him not to do what He would never do anyway? Yet James also tells us we should rejoice when trials come and not seek to avoid them. So why should we pray, **do not lead us into temptation?**

I affirm with Chrysostom, the early church Father, that the solution to this issue is that Jesus is here not speaking of logic or theology but of a heart desire and inclination that cause a believer to want to avoid the danger and trouble sin creates. It is the expression of the redeemed soul that so despises and fears sin that it wants to escape all prospects of falling into it, choosing to avoid rather than having to defeat temptation.

Here is another paradox of Scripture. We know that trials are a means for our growing spiritually, morally, and emotionally. Yet we have no desire to be in a place where even the possibility of sin is increased. Even Jesus, when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, first asked, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me,” before He said, “yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt” (Matt. 26:39). He was horrified at the prospect of taking sin upon Himself, yet He was willing to endure it in order to fulfill the will of His Father to make possible the redemption of man.

Our proper reaction to times of temptation is similar to Christ’s, but for us it is primarily a matter of self-distrust. When we honestly look at the power of sin and at our own weakness and sinful propensities, we shudder at the danger of temptation or even trial. This petition is another plea for God to provide what we in ourselves do not have. It is an appeal to God to place a watch over our eyes, our ears, our mouth, our feet, and our hands—that in whatever we see, hear, or say, and in any place we go and in anything we do, He will protect us from sin.

Like Joseph we know that what men and Satan mean for evil God will turn to the good of His children (see Gen. 50:20); but we are not certain that, like Joseph, we will be completely submissive to and dependent on God in our trials. The implication of this part of the prayer seems to be: “Lord, don’t ever lead us into a trial that will present such a temptation that we will not be able to resist it.” It is laying claim to the promise that “God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

This petition is a safeguard against presumption and a false sense of security and self-sufficiency. We know that we will never have arrived spiritually, and that we will never be free of the danger of sin, until we are with the Lord. With Martin Luther we say, “We cannot help being exposed to the assaults, but we pray that we may not fall and perish under them.” As our dear Lord prayed for us in His great intercessory prayer, we want, at all costs, to be kept from the evil one (John 17:15).

When we sincerely pray, **do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil**, we also declare that we submit to His Word, which is our protection from sin. “Submit therefore to God,” James says. “Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). Submitting to God is

submitting to His Word. “Thy word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against Thee” (Ps. 119:11). So the believer prays to be kept from overwhelming solicitation to sin, and if he falls into it, to be rescued from it. **Deliver** is actually in the form of a command.

In a cursed world where we are battered by evil all around us, we confess our inadequacy to deal with evil. We confess the weakness of our flesh and the absolute impotency of human resources to combat sin and rescue us from its clutches. Above all we confess our need for the protection and deliverance of our loving heavenly Father.

GOD’S PREEMINENCE

[For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.] (6:13b)

Because they are not found in the most reliable manuscripts, it is likely that these words were not in the original text. In many modern translations they are therefore given in footnotes or, as here, placed in brackets.

Although they may not have been in the original account, the words are perfectly fitting in this passage, and express truths that are thoroughly scriptural. They form a beautiful doxology, declaring the preeminence of God as seen in the greatness of His eternal **kingdom,... power, and ... glory**. They are an echo of 1 Chronicles 29:11 and, to the minds and hearts of Matthew’s Jewish readers, would have been a moving and appropriate climax.

GOD’S POSTSCRIPT

For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions. (6:14-15)

The prayer lesson concludes with a reminder that follows the teaching of forgiveness in verse 12. This is the Savior's own commentary on our petition to God for forgiveness, and the only one of the petitions to which He gives added insight. Thus its importance is amplified.

For if you forgive men for their transgressions puts the principle in a positive mode. Believers should forgive as those who have received judicial forgiveness (cf. Eph. 1:7; 1 John 2:1-2) from God. When the heart is filled with such a forgiving spirit, **your heavenly Father will also forgive you**. Believers cannot know the parental forgiveness, which keeps fellowship with the Lord rich and blessings from the Lord profuse, apart from forgiving others in heart and word. **Forgive** (*aphiēmi*) means literally "to hurl away."

Paul had this in mind when he wrote, "I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost [of sinners], Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience" (1 Tim. 1:16; cf. Matt. 7:11). An unforgiving spirit not only is inconsistent for one who has been totally forgiven by God, but also brings the chastening of God rather than His mercy. Our Lord illustrates the unmerciful response in the parable of Matthew 18:21-35. There a man is forgiven the unpayable debt representing sin and is given the mercy of salvation. He then refuses to forgive another and is immediately and severely chastened by God.

But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions. That states the truth of verse 14 in a negative way for emphasis. The sin of an unforgiving heart and a bitter spirit (Heb. 12:15) forfeits blessing and invites judgment. Even the Talmud taught that he who is indulgent toward others' faults will be mercifully dealt with by the Supreme Judge (*Shabbath 151b*).

Every believer must seek to manifest the forgiving spirit of Joseph (Gen. 50:19-21) and of Stephen (Acts 7:60) as often as needed (Luke 17:3-4). To receive pardon from the perfectly holy God and then to refuse to pardon others when we are sinful men is the epitome of abuse of mercy.

And “judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13).

There are petitions for the believer to ask from God, but there are also conditions for the answers to be received. Even more, our prayers are to be primarily concerned with the exaltation of the name, kingdom, and will of the Lord Jesus Christ. Prayer is primarily worship which inspires thanks and personal purity.

Fasting Without Hypocrisy (6:16-18)

And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you. (6:16-18)

Fasting is the third area—after those of giving (6:2-4) and praying (vv. 5-15)—for which Jesus gives a corrective to the hypocritical religious practices typified by the scribes and Pharisees. In each case the perversion of God’s standard was caused by the overriding desire to be seen and praised by men (v. 1).

Fasting has been practiced for various reasons throughout history. Many ancient pagans believed that demons could enter the body through food. When they felt they were under demonic attack they would fast to prevent more evil spirits from gaining access to their bodies. The yogis of most eastern religions and cults have always been committed to fasting—often for long periods of time, in which mystical visions and insights are claimed to be received. In modern western society fasting has become popular for purely physical and cosmetic reasons, and is recommended in some diet programs.

The Bible records no teaching or practice of fasting for practical reasons. Legitimate fasting always had a spiritual purpose and is never presented as having *any* value in and of itself.

During Old Testament times many faithful believers fasted—Moses, Samson, Samuel, Hannah, David, Elijah, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel, and many others. And the New Testament tells us of the fasting of

Anna, John the Baptist and his disciples, Jesus, Paul, and numerous others. We know that many of the early church Fathers fasted, and that Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Whitefield, and many other outstanding Christian leaders have fasted.

But the only fast commanded in Scripture is the one connected with the Day of Atonement. On that day all the people were to “humble [their] souls” (Lev. 16:29; cf. 23:27), a Hebrew expression that included forsaking food as an act of self-denial. That was a national fast, involving every man, woman, and child in Israel. But it occurred only one time a year, and then only as an integral part of the Day of Atonement.

Because it is not elsewhere commanded by God, fasting is unlike giving and praying, for which there are many commands in both testaments. Both the Old and New Testaments speak favorably of fasting and record many instances of fasting by believers. But except for the yearly fast just mentioned, it is nowhere required. Beyond that, fasting is shown to be an entirely noncompulsory, voluntary act, not a spiritual duty to be regularly observed.

PRETENTIOUS FASTING

And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. (6:16)

The phrase **and whenever you fast** supports the understanding that fasting is not commanded. But when it is practiced it is to be regulated according to the principles Jesus gives here.

Nēsteia (**fast**) literally means not to eat, to abstain from food. Fasts were sometimes total and sometimes partial, and ordinarily only water was drunk.

Two extreme views of eating were held among the Jews of Jesus’ day. Many, like the ones mentioned in this passage, made an obvious display of fasting. Others believed that, because food is a gift from God,

each person would have to give an account to Him on the day of judgment for every good thing he had not eaten. The first group not only was more prevalent but was more self-righteous and proud. Their fasting was not a matter of spiritual conviction but a means of self-gratification.

By the time of Christ, fasting, like almost every other aspect of Jewish religious life, had been perverted and twisted beyond what was scriptural and sincere. Fasting had become a ritual to gain merit with God and attention before men. Like praying and almsgiving, it was largely a hypocritical religious show.

Many Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12), usually on the second and fifth days of the week. They claimed those days were chosen because they were the days Moses made the two separate trips to receive the tablets of law from God on Mount Sinai. But those two days also happened to be the major Jewish market days, when cities and towns were crowded with farmers, merchants, and shoppers. They were, therefore, the two days where public fasting would have the largest audiences.

Those wanting to call attention to their fasting would **put on a gloomy face, and neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men.** They would wear old clothes, sometimes purposely torn and soiled, dishevel their hair, cover themselves with dirt and ashes, and even use makeup in order to look pale and sickly. As we have seen in previous chapters, **hypocrites** comes from a Greek word for the mask used by actors to portray a certain character or mood. In regard to fasting, some Jewish **hypocrites** literally resorted to theatrics.

When the heart is not right, fasting is a sham and a mockery. Those whom Jesus condemned for fasting **in order to be seen by men** were pretentiously self-righteous. Everything they did centered around themselves. God had no place in their motives or their thinking, and He had no part in their reward. The reward they wanted was recognition by men, and that reward, and only that reward, they received **in full.**

Unfortunately, throughout the history of the church fasting has most often been viewed in the two extremes that were common in Judaism. John Calvin said, “Many for want of knowing its usefulness undervalue its necessity. And some reject it all together as superfluous, while on the other hand, where the proper use of fasting is not well understood, it easily degenerates into superstition.”

PROPER FASTING

But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you. (6:17-18)

Fasting is mentioned some thirty times in the New Testament, almost always favorably. It is possible that fasting was even overemphasized in some parts of the early church. At least four times a reference to fasting seems to have been inserted into the original text where it is not found in the earliest and best manuscripts (Matt. 17:21; Mark 9:29; Acts 10:30; 1 Cor. 7:5). The other favorable accounts, however, both in the gospels and in the epistles, show that proper fasting is a legitimate form of spiritual devotion.

Jesus' statement **when you fast** (cf. v. 16) indicates that fasting is normal and acceptable in the Christian life. He assumes His followers will fast on certain occasions, but He does not give a command or specify a particular time, place, or method. Because the validity of the Day of Atonement ceased when Jesus made the once-for-all sacrifice on the cross (Heb. 10:10), the single prescribed occasion for fasting has ceased to exist.

Jesus' disciples did not fast while He was with them because fasting is associated primarily with mourning or other times of consuming spiritual need or anxiety. When the disciples of John the Baptist asked Jesus why His disciples did not fast like they and the Pharisees did, He replied, "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast" (Matt. 9:14-15). Fasting is there associated with mourning.

Fasting is never shown in Scripture to be the means to heightened spiritual experience, visions, or special insight or awareness—as many mystics, including some Christian mystics, claim. Fasting is appropriate in this age, because Christ is physically absent from the earth. But it is appropriate only as a response to special times of testing, trial, or struggle.

Fasting is appropriate during times of sorrow. When God caused the first child born to Bathsheba by David to be taken ill, David fasted while he pleaded for the infant's life (2 Sam. 12:16). He also fasted when Abner died (2 Sam. 3:35). David even fasted on behalf of his enemies. "When they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer kept returning to my bosom" (Ps. 35:13).

On such occasions of deep grief, fasting is a natural human response. Most people do not then feel like eating. Their appetite is gone, and food is the last thing they are concerned about. Unless a person is getting seriously weak from hunger or has some specific medical reason for needing to eat, we do them no favor by insisting that they eat.

Overwhelming danger often prompted fasting. King Jehoshaphat proclaimed a national fast in Judah when they were threatened with attack from the Moabites and Ammonites (2 Chron. 20:3). From a human standpoint they could not possibly win, and they cried out to God for help, forsaking food as they did so. Queen Esther, her servants, and all the Jews in the capital city of Susa fasted for three full days before she went before the king to plead for the Jews to be spared from Haman's wicked scheme against her people (Esther 4:16).

As the exiles were about to leave Babylon for the adventurous return to Jerusalem, Ezra declared a fast, "that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions" (Ezra 8:21). Ezra continues, "For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, 'The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him.' So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter, and He listened to our entreaty" (vv. 22-23).

Penitence was often accompanied by fasting. David fasted after his double sin of committing adultery with Bathsheba and then having her husband Uriah sent to the front of the battle to be killed. Daniel fasted as he prayed for God to forgive the sins of his people. When Elijah confronted Ahab with God's judgment for his great wickedness, the king "tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and fasted, and he lay in sackcloth and went about despondently" (1 Kings 21:27). Because of Ahab's sincerity, the Lord postponed the judgment (v. 29). Centuries later, after the exiles had returned safely to Jerusalem, the Israelites were convicted

of their intermarrying with unbelieving Gentiles. As Ezra confessed that sin in behalf of his people, “he did not eat bread, nor drink water, for he was mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles” (Ezra 10:6).

When the people of Nineveh heard Jonah’s preaching they were so convicted that they believed in God and “called a great fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. . . . By the decree of the king” they would “not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing” (Jonah 3:5, 7). Rather than resent the warning of judgment and damnation, they repentantly turned to God and sought His forgiveness and mercy.

Fasting was sometimes associated with the receiving or proclaiming of a special revelation from God. As Daniel contemplated Jeremiah’s prediction of the seventy year’s desolation of Jerusalem, he gave his “attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes” (Dan. 9:2-3). As he continued “speaking in prayer,” he reports, “then the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision previously, came to me in my extreme weariness about the time of the evening offering. And he gave me instruction and talked with me, and said, ‘O Daniel, I have now come forth to give you insight with understanding’” (vv. 21-22). A short time later, just before receiving another vision, Daniel made a partial fast—by forsaking “any tasty food, . . . meat or wine”—for three weeks (10:3). It is important to note that, though fasting was related to the revelations, it was not a means of achieving them. Daniel’s fasting was simply a natural accompaniment to his deep and desperate seeking of God’s will.

We often fail to understand God’s Word as fully as we ought simply because, unlike those great people of God, we do not seek to comprehend it with their degree of intensity and determination. Skipping a few meals might be the small price we willingly pay for staying in the Word until understanding comes.

Fasting often accompanied the beginning of an important task or ministry. Jesus fasted forty days and nights before He was tempted in the wilderness and then began His preaching ministry. Intensity and zeal over proclaiming God’s Word can so consume the mind and heart that food has no appeal and no place. Though abstaining from food has absolutely no spiritual value in itself, when eating is an intrusion on that which is immeasurably more important, it will be willingly, gladly, and unobtrusively forsaken.

Both before and after the Holy Spirit directed the church at Antioch to set apart Barnabas and Saul for special ministry, the people were praying and fasting (Acts 13:2-3). As those two men of God ministered God's Word they prayed and fasted as they appointed elders in the churches they founded (14:23).

Only the Lord knows how much the leadership of the church today could be strengthened if congregations were that determined to find and follow the Lord's will. The early church did not choose or send out leaders carelessly or by popular vote. Above all they sought and followed God's will. Fasting has no more power to assure godly leadership than it has to assure forgiveness, protection, or any other good thing from God. But it is likely to be a part of sincere dedication that is determined to know the Lord's will and have His power before decisions are made, plans are laid, or actions are taken. People who are consumed with concern before God do not take a lunch break.

In every scriptural account genuine fasting is linked with prayer. You can pray without fasting, but you cannot fast biblically without praying. Fasting is an affirmation of intense prayer, a corollary of deep spiritual struggle before God. It is never an isolated act or a ceremony or ritual that has some inherent efficacy or merit. It has no value at all—in fact becomes a spiritual hindrance and a sin—when done for any reason apart from knowing and following the Lord's will.

Fasting is also always linked with a pure heart and must be associated with obedient, godly living. The Lord told Zechariah to declare to the people, "When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months these seventy years, was it actually for Me that you fasted? ... Thus has the Lord of hosts said, 'Dispense true justice, and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another'" (Zech. 7:5, 9-10). Seventy years of fasting meant nothing to the Lord, because it was done insincerely. Like the hypocrites that Jesus would later condemn, those Israelites lived only for themselves (v. 6).

After chastising the people in a similar way for their pretentious and unrighteous fasting, the Lord declared through Isaiah,

Is this not the fast which I chose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry, and He will say, "Here I am." (Isa. 58:5-9)

There can be no right fasting apart from a right heart, right living, and a right attitude.

But you, when you fast, Jesus tells those who belong to Him, **anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting by men.** To **anoint the head** with oil was commonly done as a matter of good grooming. The oil was often scented and used partly as a perfume. Like washing the **face**, it was associated with day-to-day living, but especially with more formal or important occasions. Jesus' point was that a person who fasts should do everything to make himself look normal and do nothing to attract attention to his deprivation and spiritual struggle.

The one who sincerely wants to please God will studiously avoid trying to impress men. He will determine **not [to] be seen fasting by men, but by God the Father who is in secret.** Jesus does not say we should fast for the purpose of being seen even by God. Fasting is not to be a display for anyone, including God. Genuine fasting is simply a part of concentrated, intense prayer and concern for the Lord, His will, and His work. Jesus' point is that the **Father** never fails to notice fasting that is heart-felt and genuine, and that He never fails to reward it. **Your Father who sees in secret will repay you.**

Treasure in Heaven (6:19-24)

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. The lamp of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. (6:19-24)

Human beings are naturally thing-oriented. We are strongly inclined to be wrapped up in seeking, acquiring, enjoying, and protecting material possessions. In prosperous cultures such as those in which most Westerners live, the propensity to build our lives around things is especially great.

The leading religionists of Jesus' day were preoccupied with things. They were materialistic, greedy, avaricious, covetous, grasping, and manipulative. That "the Pharisees . . . were lovers of money" (Luke 16:14) was not incidental to the other sins for which Jesus rebuked them. Because they did not have a right view of themselves (see Matt. 5:3-12), of their relation to the world (5:13-16), of the Word of God (5:17-20), of morality (5:21-48), and of religious duties (6:1-18), it was inevitable they would not have a right view of material things.

Jesus first shows how their view of nonessential material things was perverted (vv. 4-24) and then how their view of essential material things was also perverted (vv. 25-34). Their views both of luxuries and necessities were warped.

False doctrine leads to false standards, false behavior, and false values, and hypocritical religion seems always to be accompanied by greed and immorality (cf. 2 Pet. 2:1-3,14-15). Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli the high priest, had no regard for the things of God, but they eagerly took advantage of their father's exalted office as well as their own priestly positions. They "were worthless men; they did not know the Lord" (1 Sam. 2:12). They took more than their prescribed share of the sacrificial meat for themselves, and they committed adultery "with the women who served at the doorway of the tent of meeting" (vv. 13-17, 22).

Annas and Caiaphas, who were high priests during Jesus' ministry, became extremely wealthy from the many concessions they ran or licensed in the Temple. It was of those concessions that Jesus twice cleansed His Father's house (John 2:14-16; Matt. 21:12-13).

Throughout the history of the church to the present day, religious charlatans have used the ministry as a means to garner wealth and to provide opportunity to indulge their sexual lusts.

Often such people, like the scribes and Pharisees, have used their material prosperity as imagined evidence of their spirituality, proclaiming without shame that they are materially blessed because they are spiritually superior. They turn upside down teachings such as those in Deuteronomy 28: "Now it shall be, if you will diligently obey the Lord your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you will obey the Lord your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country" (vv. 1-3). Those blessings are clearly and repeatedly contingent on obedience to the Lord. Material or other earthly benefits that are accumulated by greed, dishonesty, deceit, or in any other immoral way are not to be conceived of as blessings from the Lord. To claim God's approval simply on the basis of one's wealth, health, prestige, or any other such thing is to pervert His Word and use His name in vain.

The Old Testament gives many warnings against accumulating wealth for its own sake. "Do not weary yourself to gain wealth, cease from

your consideration of it” (Prov. 23:4).

Economic problems such as inflation, recessions, and depressions involve many complex factors—monetary, political, military, social, climatic, and so on. But with the exception of the climatic, over which men have little control, the root cause behind most economic difficulty is greed. The problems are brought about in the first place because of greed, and they are often seemingly impossible to solve for the same reason. As John Stott observes, “Worldly ambition has a strong fascination for us. The spell of materialism is very hard to break” (*Christian Counter-Culture* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1978], p. 154). Paul established the proper attitude when he said that “godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content” (1 Tim. 6:6-8).

In the present passage Jesus looks at materialism—particularly in regard to luxuries—from the three perspectives of treasure, vision, and master.

A SINGLE TREASURE

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (6:19-21)

Layup (*thēsaurizō*) and **treasures** (*thēsauros*) come from the same basic Greek term, which is also the source of our English *thesaurus*, a treasury of words. A literal translation of this phrase would therefore be, “do not treasure up treasures for yourselves.”

The Greek also carries the connotation of stacking or laying out horizontally, as one stacks coins. In the context of this passage the idea is that of stockpiling or hoarding, and therefore pictures wealth that is not

being used. The money or other wealth is simply stored for safekeeping; it is kept for the keeping's sake to make a show of wealth or to create an environment of lazy overindulgence (cf. Luke 12:16-21).

It is clear from this passage, as well as from many others in Scripture, that Jesus is not advocating poverty as a means to spirituality. In all of His many different instructions, He only once told a person to “sell your possessions and give to the poor” (Matt. 19:21). In that particular case, the young man's wealth was his idol, and therefore a special barrier between him and the lordship of Jesus Christ. It provided an excellent opportunity to test whether or not that man was fully committed to turning over the control of his life to Christ. His response proved that he was not. The problem was not in the wealth itself, but the man's unwillingness to part with it. The Lord did not specifically require His disciples to give up all their money and other possessions to follow Him, although it may be that some of them voluntarily did so. He did require obedience to His commands no matter what that cost. The price was too high for the wealthy young ruler, to whom possessions were the first priority.

Both testaments recognize the right to material possessions, including money, land, animals, houses, clothing, and every other thing that is honestly acquired. God has made many promises of material blessing to those who belong to and are faithful to Him. The foundational truth that underlies the commandments not to steal or covet is the right of personal property. Stealing and coveting are wrong because what is stolen or coveted rightfully belongs to someone else. Ananias and Sapphira did not forfeit their lives because they kept back some of the proceeds from the sale of their property, but because they lied to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3). Holding back some of the money was selfish, especially if they had other assets on which to live, but they had a right to keep it, as Peter makes plain: “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control?” (v. 4).

God expects, in fact commands, His people to be generous. But He also expects, and even commands, them not only to be thankful for but to *enjoy* the blessings He gives—including the material blessings. The Lord “richly supplies us with all things to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17). That verse is specifically directed to “those who are rich in this present world,” and yet it does not command, or even suggest, that they divest themselves of their wealth, but rather warns them not to be conceited about it or to trust in it.

Abraham was extremely rich for his day, a person who vied in wealth, influence, and military power with many of the kings in Canaan. When we first meet Job he is vastly wealthy, and when we leave him—after the testing that cost him everything he possessed outside of his own life—God has made him wealthier still, in flocks and herds, in sons and daughters, and in a healthy long life. “And the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning” (Job 42:12-17).

The Bible gives considerable counsel for working hard and following good business practices (cf. Matt. 25:27). The ant is shown as a model of the good worker, who “prepares her food in the summer, and gathers her provision in the harvest” (Prov. 6:6-8). We are told that “in all labor there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty” (14:23) and “by wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; and by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches” (24:3-4). “He who tills his land will have plenty of food, but he who follows empty pursuits will have poverty in plenty” (28:19).

Paul tells us that parents are responsible for saving up for their children (2 Cor. 12:14), that “if anyone will not work, neither let him eat” (2 Thess. 3:10), and that “if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8).

During his exceptionally long ministry, which spanned most of the eighteenth century, John Wesley earned a considerable amount of money from his published sermons and other works. Yet he left only 28 pounds when he died, because he continually gave what he earned to the Lord’s work.

It is right to provide for our families, to make reasonable plans for the future, to make wise investments, and to have money to carry on a business, give to the poor, and support the Lord’s work. It is being dishonest, greedy, covetous, stingy, and miserly about possessions that is wrong. To honestly earn, save, and give is wise and good; to hoard and spend only on ourselves not only is unwise but sinful.

Some years ago, I happened to have contact with two quite wealthy men during the same week. One was a former professor at a major university who, through a long series of good investments in real estate, had accumulated a fortune of possibly a hundred million dollars. But in the process he lost his family, his happiness, his peace of mind, and had

aged far beyond his years. The other man, a pastor, also acquired his wealth through investments, but they were investments to which he paid little attention. Because of his financial independence, he gave to his church over the years considerably more than he was paid for being its pastor. He is one of the godliest, happiest, most fruitful, and contented persons I have ever met.

The key to Jesus' warning here is **yourselves**. When we accumulate possessions simply for our own sakes—whether to hoard or to spend selfishly and extravagantly—those possessions become idols.

It is possible that both our **treasures upon earth** and our **treasures in heaven** can involve money and other material things. Possessions that are wisely, lovingly, willingly, and generously used for kingdom purposes can be a means of accumulating heavenly possessions. When they are hoarded and stored, however, they not only become a spiritual hindrance but are subject to loss through **moth, rust, and thieves**.

In ancient times, wealth was frequently measured in part by clothing. Compared to our day of mass-produced clothes, garments represented a considerable investment. Rich people sometimes had golden threads woven into their clothing, both to display and to store their wealth. But the best clothes were made of wool, which the **moth** loves to eat; and even the richest persons had difficulty protecting their clothes from the insects.

Wealth was also often held in grain, as we see from the parable of the rich farmer who said, "I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods" (Luke 12:18). *Brōsis* (**rust**) literally means "an eating," and is translated with that meaning everywhere in the New Testament but here (see Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 8:4, "eating"; 2 Cor. 9:10, "food"; and Heb. 12:16, "meal"). It seems best to take the same meaning here, in reference to grain that is eaten by rats, mice, worms, and insects.

Almost any kind of wealth, of course, is subject to **thieves**, which is why many people buried their nonperishable valuables in the ground away from the house, often in a field (see Matt. 13:44). **Break in** is literally "dig through," and could refer to digging through the mud walls of a house or digging up the dirt in a field.

Nothing we own is completely safe from destruction or theft. And even if we keep our possessions perfectly secure during our entire lives,

we are certainly separated from them at death. Many millionaires will be heavenly paupers, and many paupers will be heavenly millionaires.

But when our time, energy, and possessions are used to serve others and to further the Lord's work, they build up heavenly resources that are completely free from destruction or theft. There **neither moth nor rust destroys, and... thieves do not break in or steal**. Heavenly security is the only absolute security.

Jesus goes on to point out that a person's most cherished possessions and his deepest motives and desires are inseparable, **for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also**. They will either both be earthly or both be heavenly. It is impossible to have one on earth and the other in heaven (cf. James 4:4).

As always, the heart must be right first. In fact, if the heart is right, everything else in life falls into its proper place. The person who is right with the Lord will be generous and happy in his giving to the Lord's work. By the same token, a person who is covetous, self-indulgent, and stingy has good reason to question his relationship with the Lord.

Jesus is not saying that if we put our **treasure** in the right place our **heart** will then be in the right place, but that the location of our **treasure** indicates where our **heart** already is. Spiritual problems are *always* heart problems. Sinful acts come from a sinful heart, just as righteous acts come from a righteous heart.

When the exiles who came back to Jerusalem from Babylon began turning to God's Word, a revival also began. "Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people" and various leaders took turns reading "from the law of God" (Neh. 8:5-8). Through hearing God's Word the people became convicted of their sin, began to praise God, and determined to begin obeying Him and to faithfully support the work of the Temple (chaps. 9-10).

Revival that does not affect the use of money and possessions is a questionable revival. As the Tabernacle was being built, "everyone whose heart stirred him and everyone whose spirit moved him came and brought the Lord's contribution for the work of the tent of meeting and for all its service and for the holy garments" (Ex. 35:21). As plans were being made to build the Temple, David himself gave generously to the work, and "the rulers of the fathers' households, and the princes of the tribes of Israel, and the commanders of thousands and of hundreds, with the overseers over

the king's work, offered willingly. . . . Then the people rejoiced because they had offered so willingly, for they made their offering to the Lord with a whole heart, and King David also rejoiced greatly" (1 Chron. 29:2-6, 9).

G. Campbell Morgan wrote:

You are to remember with the passion burning within you that you are not the child of to-day. You are not of the earth, you are more than dust; you are the child of tomorrow, you are of the eternities, you are the offspring of Deity. The measurements of your lives cannot be circumscribed by the point where blue sky kisses green earth. All the fact of your life cannot be encompassed in the one small sphere upon which you live. You belong to the infinite. If you make your fortune on the earth—poor, sorry, silly soul—you have made a fortune, and stored it in a place where you cannot hold it. Make your fortune, but store it where it will greet you in the dawning of the new morning. (*The Gospel According to Matthew* [New York: Revell, 1929], pp. 64-65)

When thousands of people, mostly Jews, were won to Christ during and soon after Pentecost, the Jerusalem church was flooded with many converts who had come from distant lands and who decided to stay on in the city. Many of them no doubt were poor, and many others probably left most of their wealth and possessions in their homelands. To meet the great financial burden suddenly placed on the church, local believers "began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need" (Acts 2:45).

Many years later, during one of the many Roman persecutions, soldiers broke into a certain church to confiscate its presumed treasures. An elder is said to have pointed to a group of widows and orphans who were being fed and said, "There are the treasures of the church."

God's principle for His people has always been, "Honor the Lord from your wealth, and from the first of all your produce; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine" (Prov. 3:9-10). Jesus said, "Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in

return” (Luke 6:38). Paul assures us that “he who sows sparingly shall also reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully shall also reap bountifully” (2 Cor. 9:6). That is God’s formula for earning dividends that are both guaranteed and permanent.

At the end of His parable about the dishonest but shrewd steward, Jesus said, “I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings” (Luke 16:9). Our material possessions are “unrighteous” in the sense of not having any spiritual value in themselves. But if we invest them in the welfare of human souls, the people who are saved or otherwise blessed because of them will someday greet us in heaven with thanksgiving.

A SINGLE VISION

The lamp of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (6:22-23)

These verses expand on the previous three, and the **eye** becomes an illustration of the heart. **The lamp, or lens, of the body is the eye**, through which all light comes to us. It is the only channel of light we possess, and therefore our only means of vision.

The heart is the eye of the soul, through which the illumination of every spiritual experience shines. It is through our hearts that God’s truth, love, peace, and every other spiritual blessing comes to us. When our hearts, our spiritual **eyes**, are **clear**, then our **whole body will be full of light**.

Haplous (**clear**) can also mean single, as it is translated in the King James Version. An **eye** that is **clear** represents a heart that has single-minded devotion. Bishop John Charles Ryle said, “Singleness of purpose

is one great secret of spiritual prosperity” (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St. Matthew* [London: James Clarke, 1965], p. 56).

Words that are closely related to *haplous* mean “liberality” (Rom. 12:8; 2 Cor. 9:11) and “generously” (Gal. 6:10). The implication in the present verse is that if our heart, represented by the **eye**, is generous (**clear**), our whole spiritual life will be flooded with spiritual understanding, or **light**.

If our **eye is bad**, however, if it is diseased or damaged, no light can enter, and the **whole body will be full of darkness**. If our hearts are encumbered with material concerns they become “blind” and insensitive to spiritual concerns. The eye is like a window which, when **clear**, allows light to shine through, but, when dirty, or **bad**, prevents light from entering.

Ponēros (**bad**) usually means evil, as it is translated here in the King James Version. In the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) it is often used in translating the Hebrew expression “evil eye,” a Jewish colloquialism that means grudging, or stingy (see Deut. 15:9, “hostile”; Prov. 23:6, “selfish”). “A man with an evil eye,” for example, is one who “hastens after wealth” (Prov. 28:22).

The **eye** that is **bad** is the heart that is selfishly indulgent. The person who is materialistic and greedy is spiritually blind. Because he has no way of recognizing true light, he thinks he has light when he does not. What is thought to be **light** is therefore really **darkness**, and because of the self-deception, **how great is the darkness!**

The principle is simple and sobering: the way we look at and use our money is a sure barometer of our spiritual condition.

A SINGLE MASTER

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. (6:24)

The third choice relates to allegiance, to **masters**. Just as we cannot have our treasures both in earth and in heaven or our bodies both in light and in darkness, we cannot **serve two masters**.

Kurios (**masters**) is often translated lord, and refers to a slave owner. The idea is not simply that of an employer, of which a person may have several at the same time and work for each of them satisfactorily. Many people today hold two or more jobs. If they work the number of hours they are supposed to and perform their work as expected, they have fulfilled their obligation to their employers, no matter how many they may have. The idea is of **masters** of slaves.

But by definition, a slave owner has total control of the slave. For a slave there is no such thing as partial or part-time obligation to his master. He owes full-time service to a full-time master. He is owned and totally controlled by and obligated to his master. He has nothing left for anyone else. To give anything to anyone else would make his master less than master. It is not simply difficult, but absolutely impossible, to **serve two masters** and fully or faithfully be the obedient slave of each.

Over and over the New Testament speaks of Christ as Lord and Master and of Christians as His bondslaves. Paul tells us that before we were saved we were enslaved to sin, which was our master. But when we trusted in Christ, we became slaves of God and of righteousness (Rom. 6:16-22).

We cannot claim Christ as Lord if our allegiance is to anything or anyone else, including ourselves. And when we know God's will but resist obeying it, we give evidence that our loyalty is other than to Him. We can no more **serve two masters** at the same time than we can walk in two directions at the same time. We will **either . . . hate the one and love the other, or . . . hold to one and despise the other**.

John Calvin said, "Where riches hold the dominion of the heart, God has lost His authority" (*A Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 1 [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], p. 337). Our treasure is either on earth or in heaven, our spiritual life is either full of light or of darkness, and our master is either **God** or **mammon** (possessions, earthly goods).

The orders of those two **masters** are diametrically opposed and cannot coexist. The one commands us to walk by faith and the other demands we walk by sight. The one calls us to be humble and the other to

be proud, the one to set our minds on things above and the other to set them on things below. One calls us to love light, the other to love darkness. The one tells us to look toward things unseen and eternal and the other to look at things seen and temporal.

The person whose **master** is Jesus Christ can say that, when he eats or drinks or does anything else, he does “all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). He can say with David, “I have set the Lord continually before me” (Ps. 16:8), and with Caleb when he was eighty-five years old, “I followed the Lord my God fully” (Josh. 14:8).

Overcoming Worry_(6:25-34)

For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single cubit to his life's span? And why are you anxious about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these. But if God so arrays the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith? Do not be anxious then, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "With what shall we clothe ourselves?" For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious for tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (6:25-34)

In Matthew 6:19-24 Jesus focuses on the attitude toward luxury, the unnecessary physical possessions men store and stockpile for selfish reasons. In verses 25-34 He focuses on the attitude toward what men eat, drink, and wear, the necessities of life that they absolutely must have to exist. The first passage is directed particularly at the rich and the second particularly at the poor. Both being rich and being poor have their special

spiritual problems. The rich are tempted to trust in their possessions, and the poor are tempted to doubt God's provision. The rich are tempted to become self-satisfied in the false security of their riches, and the poor are tempted to worry and fear in the false insecurity of their poverty.

Whether men are wealthy or poor—or somewhere in between—their attitude toward material possessions is one of the most reliable marks of their spiritual condition. Man as an earthly creature is naturally concerned about earthly things. In Christ we are recreated as heavenly beings and, as children of our heavenly Father, our concerns should now focus primarily on heavenly things—even while we still live on earth. Christ sends us into the world to do His work, just as the Father sent Him into the world to do the Father's work. But we are not to be “of the world” even as Jesus Himself, while on earth, was “not of the world” (John 17:15-18). One of the supreme tests of our spiritual lives, then, is how we now relate to those two worlds. Sixteen of the thirty-eight parables of Jesus deal with money. One out of ten verses in the New Testament deals with that subject. Scripture offers about five hundred verses on prayer, fewer than five hundred on faith, and over two thousand on money. The believer's attitude toward money and possessions is determinative.

Ours is an age of unabashed materialism, an age guided by greed, ambition, success, prestige, self-indulgence, and conspicuous consumption. In his book *The Emerging Order: God in the Age of Scarcity*, Jeremy Rifkin says, “Emphasis on continuous economic growth is a black hole that has already sucked up a majority of the world's critical, nonrenewable resources.” The author, who is not a Christian, makes the closing observation that “the only solution to our approach to life is the reemergence of the evangelical Christian ethic, which is an ethic of unselfishness and low consumption.” The single alternative, Rifkin says, is a constrictive, totalitarian dictatorship that will control our society and our personal lives for us.

Unfortunately, there is little evidence that even most modern evangelicals themselves are any longer committed to such an ethic. We give much more evidence of following the worldly trends of our day than of setting, confronting, or modifying them. In light of that fact, it is difficult for most of us to identify with Jesus' warning not to worry about basic necessities. We are well fed, well clothed, and well fixed in all other necessary things, and in many things that are totally unnecessary.

The heart of Jesus' message in our present passage is: Don't worry—not even about necessities. He gives the command, **Do not be anxious** three times (vv. 25, 31, 34) and gives four reasons why worry, being **anxious**, is wrong: it is unfaithful because of our Master; it is unnecessary because of our Father; it is unreasonable because of our faith; and it is unwise because of our future.

WORRY IS UNFAITHFUL BECAUSE OF OUR MASTER

For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing? (6:25)

For this reason refers back to the previous verse, in which Jesus declares that a Christian's only Master is God. He is therefore saying, "Because God is your Master, **I say to you, do not be anxious.**" A bondsman's only responsibility is to his master, and for believers to worry is to be disobedient and unfaithful to their Master, who is God. For Christians, worry and anxiety are forbidden, foolish, and sinful.

In the Greek, the command **do not be anxious** includes the idea of stopping what is already being done. In other words, we are to stop worrying and never start it again. **For your life** makes the command all-inclusive. *Psuchē* (**life**) is a comprehensive term that encompasses all of a person's being—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Jesus is referring to **life** in its fullest possible sense. Absolutely nothing in any aspect of our lives, internal or external, justifies our being **anxious** when we have the Master we do.

Worry is the sin of distrusting the promise and providence of God, and yet it is a sin that Christians commit perhaps more frequently than any other. The English term *worry* comes from an old German word meaning to strangle, or choke. That is exactly what worry does; it is a kind of

mental and emotional strangulation, which probably causes more mental and physical afflictions than any other single cause.

It has been reported that a dense fog extensive enough to cover seven city blocks a hundred feet deep is composed of less than one glass of water—divided into sixty thousand million droplets. In the right form, a few gallons of water can cripple a large city.

In a similar way, the substance of worry is nearly always extremely small compared to the size it forms in our minds and the damage it does in our lives. Someone has said, “Worry is a thin stream of fear that trickles through the mind, which, if encouraged, will cut a channel so wide that all other thoughts will be drained out.”

Worry is the opposite of contentment, which should be a believer’s normal and consistent state of mind. Every believer should be able to say with Paul, “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need” (Phil. 4:11-12; cf. 1 Tim. 6:6-8).

A Christian’s contentment is found in God, and only in God—in His ownership, control, and provision of everything we possess and will ever need. First, God owns everything, including the entire universe. David proclaimed, “The earth is the Lord’s, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it” (Ps. 24:1). He also said, “Thine, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth” (1 Chron. 29:11).

Everything we now have belongs to the Lord, and everything we will ever have belongs to Him. Why, then, do we worry about His taking from us what really belongs to Him?

One day when he was away from home someone came running up to John Wesley saying, “Your house has burned down! Your house has burned down!” To which Wesley replied, “No it hasn’t, because I don’t own a house. The one I have been living in belongs to the Lord, and if it has burned down, that is one less responsibility for me to worry about.”

Second, a Christian should be content because God *controls* everything. Again David gives us the right perspective: “Thou dost rule over all, and in Thy hand is power and might; and it lies in Thy hand to make great, and to strengthen everyone” (1 Chron. 29:12). Daniel

declared, “Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever, for wisdom and power belong to Him. And it is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings; He gives wisdom to wise men, and knowledge to men of understanding” (Dan. 2:20-21).

Those were not idle words for Daniel. The events of Daniel 2 and 6 were separated by many years. When the jealous commissioners and satraps tricked King Darius into ordering Daniel thrown into the den of lions, it was the king, not Daniel, who was worried. “Slept fled from” the king during the night, but Daniel apparently slept soundly next to the lions, whose mouths had been closed by an angel (6:18-23).

Third, believers are to be content because the Lord *provides* everything. The supreme owner and controller is also the supreme provider—as indicated in one of His ancient names, Jehovah-Jireh, which means “the Lord who provides.” That is the name Abraham ascribed to God when He provided a lamb to be sacrificed in place of Isaac (Gen. 22:14). If Abraham, with his limited knowledge of God, could be so trusting and content, how much more should we who know Christ and who have His whole written Word? As the apostle assures us, “God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19).

The needs that Jesus mentions here are the most basic—what we **eat**, what we **drink**, and what we **put on**. Those are things that every person in every age has needed; but because most western Christians have them in such abundance, they are not often worried about.

Throughout Bible times, however, food and water could seldom be taken for granted. When there was little snow in the mountains there was little water in the rivers, and inadequate rainfall was frequent. Shortage of water naturally brought shortage of food, which seriously affected the whole economy and made clothes harder to buy. Yet Jesus said, **do not be anxious** for any of those things.

Those things are important, and the Lord knows and cares about our need of them, as Jesus goes on to explain. But, He asks rhetorically, **Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing?** All three of those necessities pertain to the body, and Jesus says that the fullness of **life** is more than merely taking care of the body.

Yet taking care of the body has always been a common obsession with men. Even when we are not starving or thirsty or naked, we still give

an inordinate amount of attention to our bodies. We pamper the body, decorate it, exercise it, protect it from disease and pain, build it up, slender it down, drape it with jewelry, keep it warm or keep it cool, train it to work and to play, help it get to sleep, and a hundred other things to serve and satisfy our bodies.

Even as Christians we are sometimes caught up in the world's idea that we live because of our bodies. And since we think we live because of our bodies, we live *for* our bodies. We know better, of course, but that is the way we often act. Our bodies in themselves are not the source of anything. They do not give us life but are given life by God, who is the source of all life—spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical.

Therefore, whether the Lord gives us more or gives us less of anything, it all belongs to Him, as owner, controller, and provider. It is our responsibility to thank Him for what He gives and to use it wisely and unselfishly for as long as He entrusts us with it.

WORRY IS UNNECESSARY BECAUSE OF OUR FATHER

Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single cubit to his life's span? And why are you anxious about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these. But if God so arrays the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith? (6:26-30)

The basic thrust of these verses is that a believer has absolutely no reason to worry, because God is his **heavenly Father**. “Have you forgotten who your Father is?” He asks. To illustrate His point Jesus shows how

unnecessary and foolish it is to worry about food, about life expectancy, or about clothing.

WORRY ABOUT FOOD

Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? (6:26)

There are many birds in northern Galilee, and it is likely that Jesus pointed to some passing birds as He said, **Look at the birds of the air.** As an object lesson, He called attention to the fact that birds do not have intricate and involved processes for acquiring food. **They do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns.**

Like every creature, **birds** have their life from God. But God does not say to them, in effect, “I’ve done My part; from now on you’re on your own.” The Lord has provided them with an abundance of food resources and the instinct to find those resources for themselves and their offspring. **Your heavenly Father feeds them.** He “prepares for the raven its nourishment, when its young cry out to God” (Job 38:41; cf. Ps. 147:9).

If God so carefully takes care of such relatively insignificant creatures as birds, how much more will He take of those who are created in His own image, and who have become His children through faith? **Are you not worth much more than they?**

Arthur Pink comments, “Here we may see how the irrational creatures, made subject to vanity by the sin of man, come nearer to their first estate and better observe the order of nature in their creation than man does. For they seek only for that which God has provided for them, and when they receive it they are content. This solemnly demonstrates that man is more ... vile and more base than even the brute beasts” (*An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974], p. 229).

Jesus does not suggest that birds do nothing to feed themselves. Anyone who has observed them even for a little while is impressed with their diligence and persistence in foraging for food. Many birds spend the greater part of their time and energy finding food for themselves, their mates, and their young. But they do not worry about where their next meal is going to come from. They gather food until they have enough, and then go about whatever other business they may have until time for the next meal. Birds only eat excessively when humans put them in cages. They never worry about or stockpile their food. Certain species store seeds or nuts for winter, but they do so out of instinctive sense, not out of fear or worry. Much less do they stockpile simply for the sake of gloating over their hoard. In their own limited way they illustrate what we should know: that the **heavenly Father feeds them.**

Yet no bird is created in the image of God or recreated in the image of Christ. No bird was ever promised heirship with Jesus Christ throughout all eternity. No bird has a place prepared for him in heaven. And if God gives and sustains life for birds, will He not take care of us who are His children and who *have* been given all those glorious promises?

The idea that the world's food supply is rapidly diminishing is untrue. A recent bulletin of the U. S. Department of Agriculture states, "The world has more than enough food to feed every man, woman, and child in it. If the world's food supply had been evenly divided and distributed among the world's population for the last eighteen years, each person would have received more than the minimum number of calories. From 1960 to the present world food grain production never dropped below a hundred and three percent of the minimum requirement, and averaged a hundred and eight percent."

Nor has the per capita amount of food been dropping. The same bulletin reports, "World per capita food production declined only twice in the last twenty-five years. In fact production of grain, the primary food for most of the world's people, rose from two hundred and ninety kilograms per person during the early fifties to three hundred and sixty kilograms per person during the last five years." It is also stated that only ten percent of the agricultural land in the world could produce enough food to feed every human being on our planet, even by the standard of U. S. consumption!

WORRY ABOUT LONGEVITY

And which of you by being anxious can add a single cubit to his life's span? (6:27)

The second illustration has to do with life expectancy. Our culture is obsessed with trying to lengthen life. We exercise, eat carefully, supplement our diets with vitamins and minerals, get regular physical checkups, and do countless other such things in the hope of adding a few years to our lives.

Yet God has bounded the life of every person. Exercise, good eating, and other common-sense practices are beneficial when done in a reasonable way and looked at in the right perspective. They no doubt can improve the quality and productivity of our lives, but they will not force God into extending our **life's span**.

You can worry yourself to death, but not to life. Dr. Charles Mayo, of the famous Mayo Clinic, wrote, "Worry affects the circulation, the heart, the glands and the whole nervous system. I have never met a man or known a man to die of overwork, but I have known a lot who died of worry."

The gift of life is a gift from God to be used for His purposes, for spiritual and heavenly reasons, not selfish and earthly ones. Our concern should be to obey, honor, please, and glorify Him, leaving everything else to His wisdom and care.

WORRY ABOUT CLOTHING

And why are you anxious about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these. But if God so arrays the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith? (6:28-30)

The third illustration has to do with clothing, using flowers as a model. Some of the people to whom Jesus spoke perhaps had little clothing, no more than one set of coverings for their bodies. He pointed again to their surroundings, this time to the flowers, to assure them of God's concern and provision.

The lilies of the field may have been a general term used of the wild flowers that in great variety and beauty grace the fields and hillsides of Galilee.

Those beautiful decorations of nature make no effort to grow and had no part in designing or coloring themselves. **They do not toil nor do they spin**, Jesus said, stating the obvious; **yet I say to you even Solomon in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these.**

Even the naked eye can see much of the amazing detail, shading, and coloring of a flower. Under a microscope it shows itself to be even more marvelous and intricate than ancients could ever have imagined. Yet even **Solomon**, one of the most resplendent kings the world has ever known, **in all his glory did not clothe himself like one of these** little flowers which anyone there that day could have picked by the dozen.

It is an indictment of our day that we spend so much time, money, and effort to dress ourselves. Lusting after costly, stylish clothes is sinful, because its only purpose is to feed pride. The number of clothing stores we have today, and the vast amounts of clothes we find in them, is staggering. Many people have made a god out of fashion, and shamelessly waste money on expensive clothes they will wear but a few times.

Our worries today are seldom for necessary clothing. If Jesus told those who had but one simple garment not to worry about their clothing, what would He say to us?

Despite their beauty, however, flowers do not last long. Along with **the grass of the field**, they are **alive today and tomorrow [are] thrown into the furnace.**

Klibanos (**furnace**) is better translated "oven." Such ovens were made of hardened clay and were used primarily for baking bread. When a woman wanted to hurry the baking process, she would build a fire inside the oven as well as under it. Fuel for the inside heating was usually composed of dried grass and flowers gathered from nearby fields. Once

the flower's beauty was gone it had little use except to be burned up as fuel for baking. Then it was gone.

But if God bothers to array the grass of the field with beautiful but shortlived flowers, how **much more** is He concerned to clothe and care for His very own children who are destined for eternal life?

To be anxious even about things which we need to survive, Jesus says, is sinful and shows **little faith**. A person who worries about those things may have saving faith, but he does not have faith that relies on God to finish what He has begun. It is significant that each of the four other times Jesus used the phrase "O men [or "you"] of little faith," it was also in relation to worry about food, clothing, or life span (see Matt. 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; Luke 12:28). "You believe that God can redeem you, save you from sin, break the shackles of Satan, take you to heaven where He has prepared a place for you, and keep you for all eternity," Jesus is saying; "and yet you do not trust Him to supply your daily needs?" We freely put our eternal destiny in His hands, but at times refuse to believe He will provide what we need to eat, drink, and wear.

Worry is not a trivial sin, because it strikes a blow both at God's love and at God's integrity. Worry declares our heavenly Father to be untrustworthy in His Word and His promises. To avow belief in the inerrancy of Scripture and in the next moment to express worry is to speak out of both sides of our mouths. Worry shows that we are mastered by our circumstances and by our own finite perspectives and understanding rather than by God's Word. Worry is therefore not only debilitating and destructive but maligns and impugns God.

When a believer is not fresh in the Word every day, so that God is in His mind and heart, then Satan moves into the vacuum and plants worry. Worry then pushes the Lord even further from our minds.

Paul counsels us as he did the Ephesians: "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might" (Eph. 1:18-19).

WORRY IS UNREASONABLE BECAUSE OF OUR FAITH

Do not be anxious then, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “With what shall we clothe ourselves?” For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you. (6:31-33)

Worry is inconsistent with our faith in God and is therefore unreasonable as well as sinful. Worry is characteristic of unbelief. *Ethnoi* (**Gentiles**) literally means simply “peoples,” or “a multitude.” In the plural form, as here, it usually referred to non-Jews, that is, to **Gentiles** and, by extension, to unbelievers or pagans. Worrying about **what to eat, drink, and clothe** themselves with are **things the Gentiles eagerly seek**. Those who have no hope in God naturally put their hope and expectations in things they can enjoy now. They have nothing to live for but the present, and their materialism is perfectly consistent with their religion. They have no God to supply their physical or their spiritual needs, their present or their eternal needs, so anything they get they must get for themselves. They are ignorant of God’s supply and have no claim on it. No heavenly Father cares for them, so there is reason to worry.

The gods of the **Gentiles** were man-made gods inspired by Satan. They were gods of fear, dread, and appeasement who demanded much, promised little, and provided nothing. It was natural that those who served such gods would **eagerly seek** whatever satisfactions and pleasures they could while they could. Their philosophy is still popular in our own day among those who are determined to grab all the gusto they can get. “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” is an understandable outlook for those who have no hope in the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:32).

But that is a completely foolish and unreasonable philosophy for those who *do* have hope in the resurrection, for those whose **heavenly Father knows that [they] need all these things**. To worry about our physical welfare and our clothing is the mark of a worldly mind, whether Christian or not. When we think like the world and crave like the world, we will worry like the world, because a mind that is not centered on God is a mind that has cause to worry. The faithful, trusting, and reasonable

Christian is “anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving [lets his] requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6). He refuses in anyway to “be conformed to this world” (Rom. 12:2).

Within this series of rebukes Jesus gives a positive command coupled with a beautiful promise: **But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you.** The cause of worry is seeking the things of this world, and the cause of contentment is seeking the things of God’s **kingdom and His righteousness.**

De is primarily a conjunction of contrast, for which **but** is a good rendering. In the present context it carries the idea of “rather,” or “instead of.” “Rather than seeking and worrying about food, drink, and clothing like unbelievers do,” Jesus says, “focus your attention and hopes on the things of the Lord and He will take care of all your needs.”

Out of all the options that we have, out of all the things we can seek for and be occupied with, we are to **seek first** the things of the One to whom we belong. That is the Christian’s priority of priorities, a divine priority composed of two parts: God’s **kingdom and God’s righteousness.**

As we have seen in the discussion of the Disciples’ Prayer (6:10), *basileia* (**kingdom**) does not refer to a geographical territory but to a dominion or rule. God’s kingdom is God’s sovereign rule, and therefore to **seek first His kingdom** is to seek first His rule, His will and His authority.

Seeking God’s **kingdom** is losing ourselves in obedience to the Lord to the extent that we can say with Paul, “I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24). To seek first God’s kingdom is to pour out our lives in the eternal work of our heavenly Father.

To seek God’s kingdom is seek to win people into that kingdom, that they might be saved and God might be glorified. It is to have our heavenly Father’s own truth, love, and righteousness manifest in our lives, and to have “peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). We also seek God’s kingdom when we yearn for the return of the King in His millennial glory to establish His kingdom on earth and usher in His eternal kingdom.

We are also to **seek . . . His righteousness.** Instead of longing after the things of this world, we are to hunger and thirst for the things of the world to come, which are characterized above all else by God’s perfect

righteousness and holiness. It is more than longing for something ethereal and future; it is also longing for something present and practical. We not only are to have heavenly expectations but holy lives (see Col. 3:2-3). “Since all these things [the earth and its works, v. 10] are to be destroyed in this way,” Peter says, “what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God” (2 Pet. 3:11).

WORRY IS UNWISE BECAUSE OF OUR FUTURE

Therefore do not be anxious for tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (6:34)

Making reasonable provisions for tomorrow is sensible, but to **be anxious for tomorrow** is foolish and unfaithful. God is the God of tomorrow as well as the God of today and of eternity. “The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness” (Lam. 3:22-23).

It seems some people are so committed to worrying that, if they cannot find anything in the present to worry about, they think about possible problems in the future. **Tomorrow will take care of itself**, Jesus assures us. That is not the careless philosophy of the hedonist who lives only for his present enjoyment. It is the conviction of the child of God who knows that **tomorrow will take care of itself** because it is in his heavenly Father’s hands.

That **each day has enough trouble of its own** is not a call to worry about that trouble, but to concentrate on meeting the temptations, trials, opportunities, and struggles we have today, relying on our Father to protect and provide as we have need. There is enough trouble in each day without adding the distress of worry to it.

God promises His grace for tomorrow and for every day thereafter and through eternity. But He does not *give* us grace for tomorrow now. He

only gives His grace a day at a time as it is needed, not as it may be anticipated.

“The steadfast of mind Thou wilt keep in perfect peace,” Isaiah says, “because he trusts in Thee. Trust in the Lord forever, for in God the Lord, we have an everlasting Rock” (Isa. 26:3-4).

Stop
Criticizing
(7-1-6)

Do not judge lest you be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. And why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces. (7:1-6)

As with all the other elements of the Sermon on the Mount, the perspective of this passage is given in contrast to that of the scribes and Pharisees, whose hypocritical self-righteousness was in direct opposition to the true righteousness of God (see 5:20).

Here the comparison is in the area of human relations. Six verses (1-6) focus on the negative aspect of a self-righteous, judgmental spirit, and the following six verses (7-12) focus on the contrasting positive aspect of a spirit that is humble, trusting, and loving. These twelve verses form the divine summation of all the principles of right human relations.

When an individual or a group of people develop their own standards of religion and morality, they inevitably judge everyone by those self-made beliefs and standards. The scribes and Pharisees had done just that. Over the previous several centuries they had gradually modified God's revealed Word to suit their own thinking, inclinations, and abilities.

By Jesus' time their tradition had taken such a hold on Judaism that it had actually replaced the authority of Scripture in the minds of many Jews (Matt. 15:6; cf. 15:2).

Along with the many other sins spawned by their self-righteousness, the scribes and Pharisees had become oppressively judgmental. They proudly looked down on everyone who was not a part of their elite system. They were unmerciful, unforgiving, unkind, censorious, and totally lacking in compassion and grace.

Their evaluation of others, like every other aspect of their hypocritical system, was based on appearances, on the external and superficial (John 7:24; 8:15). They lived to justify themselves in the eyes of other men; but Jesus told them that their judgment was utterly contrary to God's and was detestable in His sight (Luke 16:15).

The classic portrayal of self-righteous judgment is given in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-gatherer who went to the Temple to pray. "The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people; swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'" Jesus' assessment of the two prayers is clear: "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted" (Luke 18:11-14).

An inseparable corollary of justifying oneself is condemning others. When anyone elevates himself, everyone else is lowered accordingly. The Pharisees were doing all they could to lift themselves up in their own eyes, including acting as spiritual judges by condemning others.

It should be noted that this passage has erroneously been used to suggest that believers should never evaluate or criticize anyone for anything. Our day hates absolutes, especially theological and moral absolutes, and such simplistic interpretation provides a convenient escape from confrontation. Members of modern society, including many professing Christians, tend to resist dogmatism and strong convictions about right and wrong. Many people prefer to speak of all-inclusive love, compromise, ecumenism, and unity. To the modern religious person those

are the only “doctrines” worth defending, and they are the doctrines to which every conflicting doctrine must be sacrificed.

Some years ago a church was looking for a pastor who would emphasize holiness rather than doctrine. I once received a manuscript to review whose primary thesis was that doctrine divides the church. Consequently, the author argued, all doctrine—at least all that might be disagreed with and therefore be divisive—should be eliminated for the sake of the higher goal of unity and fellowship. Right doctrine not only is compatible with true holiness, unity, and fellowship but is absolutely necessary for them to exist. Only right doctrine, biblical doctrine, can teach us what true holiness, unity, and fellowship are—and are not.

In many circles, including some evangelical circles, those who hold to strong convictions and who speak up and confront society and the church are branded as violators of this command not to judge, and are seen as troublemakers or, at best, as controversial. Yet at no time in the history of the church, or of ancient Israel, was spiritual and moral reformation achieved apart from confrontation and conflict. God’s prophets have always been bold and controversial. And they have always been resisted, often by God’s own people. The church reformers of the sixteenth century were men of strong doctrine, conviction, and principle—apart from which the Protestant Reformation would never have come about.

Reformation is needed when spiritual and moral life are low; and for the very reason they are low they will resist every effort to reform. The power of sin, whether in an unbeliever or believer, is opposed to righteousness and will always resist God’s truth and God’s standards. To the carnal person, absolute doctrine and high moral standards are inherently controversial.

Christ does not here or anywhere else forbid courts of law, as claimed by the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy and others. Both the Old and New Testaments uphold not only the right but the divine necessity of human courts of law (e.g., Deut. 19:15-21; Rom. 13:1-7). Nor does this or any other part of Scripture teach that we are never to evaluate, criticize, or condemn the actions or teachings of another person.

The entire thrust of the Sermon on the Mount is to show the complete distinction between true religion and false religion, between spiritual truth and spiritual hypocrisy. Jesus places God’s perfect and holy standards beside the unholy and self-righteous standards of the scribes and

Pharisees and declares that those who follow those unholy and self-righteous standards have no part in God's kingdom (5:20). No more controversial or judgmental sermon has ever been preached.

If this greatest sermon by our Lord teaches anything, it teaches that His followers are to be discerning and perceptive in what they believe and in what they do, that they must make every effort to judge between truth and falsehood, between the internal and the external, between reality and sham, between true righteousness and false righteousness—in short, between God's way and all other ways.

A few verses later Jesus warns, "Beware of the false prophets" (Matt. 7:15). In other words, we are to judge who speaks for God and who does not. Jesus tells us to confront a sinning brother privately with his sin and, if he will not repent, to take one or two others with us to speak to him, and if that does not cause him to change, to bring him before the entire church. If he still does not repent, he is to be put out of the church and regarded "as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer" (Matt. 18:15-17).

Paul tells believers, "Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting" (Rom. 16:17-18). He also instructs saints not even "to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one" (1 Cor. 5:11). Obviously such commands demand that we employ a certain kind of judgment before we can obey.

Every message we hear is to be judged for the soundness of its doctrine. Paul told the Galatians, "But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8). John says, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds" (2 John 10-11).

Not to rebuke sin is a form of hatred, not love. "You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor" (Lev. 19:17). Refusing to warn a person about his sin is just as unloving as refusing to warn him about a serious disease he may have. A

person who does not warn a friend about his sin cannot claim love as his motive (see Matt. 18:15). The author of Hebrews calls for a level of spiritual maturity wherein Christians “because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil” (5:14).

But Jesus is here talking about the self-righteous, egotistical judgment and unmerciful condemnation of others practiced by the scribes and Pharisees. Their primary concern was not to help others from sin to holiness, but to condemn them to eternal judgment because of actions and attitudes that did not square with their own worldly, self-made traditions.

Krinō (to judge) means basically to separate, choose, select, or determine, and has a dozen or more shades of meaning that must be decided from the context. In our present passage Jesus is referring to the judgment of motives, which no mere human being can know of another, and to judgment of external forms. Paul says, “Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way” (Rom. 14:13).

The Bible consistently forbids individual or vigilante justice that assumes for itself the prerogatives of a duly established court of law. It also consistently forbids hasty judgments that do not have full knowledge of the heart or of the facts. “He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him” (Prov. 18:13). Sometimes what appears to be wrong is nothing of the sort.

It is significant that, though God is omniscient, He gives us many examples of the care we ourselves should take before making judgments, especially those that involve serious consequences. Before He judged those who were building the tower of Babel, “The Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built” (Gen. 11:5). Before He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah He said, “I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know” (Gen. 18:21).

What Jesus here forbids is self-righteous, officious, hasty, unmerciful, prejudiced, and unwarranted condemnation based on human standards and human understanding. He gives three reasons why such judgment is sinful: it reveals an erroneous view of God, an erroneous view of others, and an erroneous view of ourselves.

AN ERRONEOUS VIEW OF GOD

Do not judge lest you be judged. (7:1)

Unrighteous and unmerciful judgment is forbidden first of all because it manifests a wrong view of God. With the phrase **lest you be judged**, Jesus reminds the scribes and Pharisees that they are not the final court. To judge another person's motives or to curse to condemnation is to play God. "For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son" (John 5:22). During the millennial kingdom Christ will share some of that judgment with us (Matt. 19:28; 1 Cor. 6:2; etc.), but until that time we blaspheme God whenever we take upon ourselves the role of judge. "Who are you to judge the servant of another?" Paul asks. "To his own master he stands or falls" (Rom. 14:4). Paul was little concerned about how other people judged him, and was not even concerned about how he judged himself. "I am conscious of nothing against myself," he says, "yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord" (1 Cor. 4:3-4).

Except as they may be continually teaching false doctrine or following standards that are clearly unscriptural, we are never to judge a person's ministry, teaching, or life—and certainly not his motives—by a self-styled standard. "Do not speak against one another," James warns us. "He who speaks against a brother, or judges his brother, speaks against the law, and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge of it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?" (James 4:11-12). Such evil judgment is blasphemous, because it sets a man up as God—and there is only one true Judge.

Whenever we assign people to condemnation without mercy because they do not do something the way we think it ought to be done or because we believe their motives are wrong, we pass judgment that only God is qualified to make. An unknown poet of past days wrote,

Judge not the workings of his brain,

And of his heart thou cannot see.
What looks to thy dim eyes a stain,
In God's pure light may only be
A scar brought from some well-won field
Where thou wouldst only faint and yield.

The Savior does not call for men to cease to be examining and discerning, but to renounce the presumptuous temptation to try to be God.

AN ERRONEOUS VIEW OF OTHERS

For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. (7:2)

Most people feel free to judge others like this because they erroneously think they are somehow superior to others. The Pharisees thought they were exempt from judgment because they believed they perfectly measured up to the divine standards. The problem was that those were mere human standards that they, and others like them, had established far short of God's holy and perfect law.

Jesus says that God will judge us with the same type of judgment with which we judge others. When we assume the role of final, omniscient judge, we imply that we are qualified to judge—that we know and understand all the facts, all the circumstances, and all the motives involved. Therefore, when we assert our right to judge, we **will be judged** by the standard of knowledge and wisdom we claim is ours. If we set ourselves up as judge over others, we cannot plead ignorance of the law in reference to ourselves when God judges us.

James has the same principle in mind when he warns, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment" (James 3:1). The person who is qualified to teach is judged on a stricter basis than others because as a teacher he has

greater understanding and influence. “From everyone who has been given much shall much be required” (Luke 12:48).

We are especially guilty if we do not practice what we ourselves teach and preach. “Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things” (Rom. 2:1-2).

God has no double standards. In criticizing unjustly or condemning unmercifully, we play God and give the impression that we ourselves are above criticism and judgment. But God sets none of us as final judge above others, and we dare not set ourselves as judge above others. Other people are not under us, and to think so is to have the wrong view of them. To be gossipy, talebearing, critical, and judgmental is to live under the false illusion that those whom we so judge are somehow inferior to us.

Such judgment is a boomerang, Jesus says, and will come back upon the one who judges. Self-righteous judgment will become its own gallows, just as the gallows Haman had erected to execute the innocent Mordecai was used instead to hang Haman (Esther 7:10). Just as the cruel Adoni-bezek had ordered the thumbs and big toes cut off seventy other kings, so his own were eventually cut off (Judg. 1:6-7).

In ancient Persia a certain corrupt judge who accepted a bribe to render a false verdict was ordered executed by king Cambyses. The judge’s skin was then used to cover the judgment seat. Subsequent judges were forced to render their judgments while sitting on that chair, as a reminder of the consequences of perverting justice.

To be judgmental is dangerous to the victim because of the bias against him. It is even more dangerous to the judge, because by the **standard of measure** with which he judges others **it will be measured to** him.

AN ERRONEOUS VIEW OF OURSELVES

And why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, (7:3-5a)

When we judge critically we also manifest an erroneous view of ourselves. All three false views are connected. When we have a wrong view of God, we cannot but have a wrong view of others and of ourselves. Putting ourselves in God's place as judge perverts our perspective of others and of ourselves.

A *karphos* (**speck**) is not a tiny piece of dust or soot but a small stalk or twig, or possibly a splinter. Though small in comparison to a **log**, it is not an insignificant object to have in the eye. Jesus' comparison, therefore, is not between a very small sin or fault and one that is large, but between one that is large and one that is gigantic. The primary point, of course, is that the sin of the critic is much greater than the sin of the person he is criticizing.

Some interpreters suggest the **speck** represents a rather minor ceremonial infraction, whereas **log** represents an extremely vulgar and repulsive sin. But people with obviously terrible sins usually spend their time trying to hide or justify their own great sin, not in criticizing the small sins of others.

The wretched and gross sin that is always blind to its own sinfulness is self-righteousness, the sin that Jesus repeatedly condemns in the scribes and Pharisees, not only in the Sermon on the Mount but throughout His ministry. Almost by definition, self-righteousness is a sin of blindness, or of grossly distorted vision, because it looks directly at its own sin and still imagines it sees only righteousness. The **log** in this illustration represents the same foundational sin of self-righteousness that Jesus has been condemning throughout the sermon.

The very nature of self-righteousness is to justify self and condemn others. In so doing people play God, because they judge themselves on the basis of their own standards and wisdom. Self-righteousness is the worst of sins because it is unbelief. It trusts in self rather than God. It trusts in self to determine what is right and wrong and to determine who does what is right or wrong. Self-righteousness claims to be both lawgiver and judge,

prerogatives that belong only to the Lord. Consequently it denies and opposes the gospel, because the gospel proclaims man's sinfulness and lostness even as it proclaims God's mercy and grace. Because the self-righteous person sees no sin in his life, he sees no need for God's grace in his behalf. The term **notice** conveys the idea of serious, continuous meditation. Jesus is saying, in effect, "Will you not stop and think about your own sin? Until you have done that, how can you confront another with his shortcomings?"

Thus, the self-righteous person can never be anything but a **hypocrite**, because he continually puts on a deceitful act of righteous superiority. That is why he feels qualified to say to his **brother**, "**Let me take the speck out of your eye**"—let me tell you what is wrong in your life and let me straighten you out.

The **hypocrite** "is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was" (James 1:23-24). He sees but he does not see. He is like those to whom Isaiah was sent, a people who would listen but not perceive and look but not understand, because their hearts were insensitive and "their ears dull, and their eyes dim" (Isa. 6:9-10).

THE RIGHT BALANCE

first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces. (7:5b-6)

The person who has the mind and attitude of the kingdom citizen—the person who is poor in spirit, humble, and who hungers and thirsts for God's righteousness (see Matt. 5:3, 5-6)—will be the person who first of all sees and mourns over his own sin (see 5:4).

Jesus here gives the corrective to the wrong kind of judgment by showing the right balance of humility and conviction, poverty of spirit and power in the Spirit. The Lord's command is, **First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.** First of all we confess our own sin—often the sin of self-righteousness and of a condemning spirit toward others—and ask for God's cleansing. When our own sin is cleansed, when the **log** is taken out of our **own eye**, then we will see our brother's sin clearly and be able to help him. Then we will see *everything* clearly—God, others, and ourselves. We will see God as the only Judge, others as needy sinners who are just like ourselves. We will see our **brother** as a brother, on our own level and with our own frailties and needs.

This right balance of humility and helpfulness is reflected in Psalm 51. David first prays, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.... Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation, and sustain me with a willing spirit. Then," he is able to say, "I will teach transgressors Thy ways, and sinners will be converted to Thee" (vv. 10, 12-13). Jesus told Peter that after he had recovered from his moral defection, he could then "strengthen [his] brothers" (Luke 22:32). Paul advises us, "Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted" (Gal. 6:1). All confrontation of sin in others must be done out of meekness, not pride. We cannot play the role of judge—passing sentence as if we were God. We cannot play the role of superior—as if we were exempt from the same standards we demand of others. We must not play the hypocrite—blaming others while we excuse ourselves.

There is also danger, however, even for the truly humble and repentant believer. The first danger, already mentioned above, is of concluding that we have no right to oppose wrong doctrine or wrong practices in the church, lest we fall into judgmental self-righteousness. We will then not be willing to confront a sinning brother as the Lord clearly calls to do. The second danger is closely related to the first. If we are afraid to confront falsehood and sin in the church, we will be inclined to become indiscriminating and undiscerning. The church, and our own lives, will become more and more in danger of corruption. Realizing the impact of sin in the assembly (1 Pet. 4:15), Peter made a powerful call for a confrontive, critical church when he said, "For it is time for judgment to

begin with the household of God” (v. 17). Believers must be discerning and make proper judgment when it is required.

Jesus closes this illustration with a thunderbolt that completely shatters the sentimental interpretation that, in the name of humility and love, we are never to oppose wrong or correct wrongdoers. It is clear that Jesus does not exclude every kind of judgment. In fact, He just as plainly commands a certain kind of right judgment here as He forbids a wrong kind in the preceding verses. **Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine.** To obey that command it is obviously necessary to be able to determine who are **dogs** and **swine**.

In biblical times **dogs** were seldom kept as household pets in the way they are today. Except for those used as working animals to herd sheep, they were largely half-wild mongrels that acted as scavengers. They were dirty, greedy, snarling, and often vicious and diseased. They were dangerous and despised.

It would have been unthinkable for a Jew to have thrown to those **dogs** a piece of **holy** meat that had been consecrated as a sacrifice in the Temple. Some parts of those offerings were burned up, some parts were eaten by the priests, and some would often be taken home and eaten by the family who made the sacrifice. The part left on the altar was the part which was consecrated exclusively to the Lord, and therefore was **holy** in a very special way. If no man was to eat that part of the sacrifice, how much less should it be thrown to a bunch of wild, filthy **dogs**. Such an act would be the height of desecration.

Swine were considered by Jews to be the epitome of uncleanness. That is the reason Antiochus Epiphanes’ sacrifice of a pig on the Jewish altar and forcing the priests to eat it was such an absolute abomination—and touched off the Maccabean revolt against Greece in 168 B.C.

Because a Jew would never have tried to domesticate a pig, most of the **swine** they encountered were, like the dogs, wild animals who foraged for themselves, often in garbage dumps on the edge of town. Like the scavenging dogs, those **swine** were greedy, vicious, and filthy even by ordinary pig standards. If you came between them and their food they would likely **turn and tear you to pieces** with their tusks and sharp hooves.

Jesus’ point is that certain truths and blessings of our faith are not to be shared with people who are totally antagonistic to the things of God.

Such people are spiritual **dogs** and **swine**, who have no appreciation for that which is holy and righteous. They will take that which is **holy**, the **pearls** (the rarest and most valuable of jewels; see Matt. 13:45-46) of God's Word, as foolishness and as an insult.

A wild animal whose primary concern is scavenging for food will hardly appreciate being thrown a pearl. He will resent its not being something to eat and possibly attack the one who throws it.

Jesus did not give all of His teaching to everyone who happened to be listening. On one occasion He prayed, "I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and intelligent and didst reveal them to babes" (Matt. 11:25). On another occasion He said to His disciples, in answer to their question about why He spoke to the multitudes in parables: "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. . . . Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Matt. 13:11,13). And after Jesus rose from the dead He showed Himself to no one who was not a believer.

Peter warns, "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words" (2 Pet. 2:1-3). A few verses later he speaks of such people as being "like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge" (v. 12). Using as examples the same two animals Jesus mentions in our present text, Peter closes his warning with the words: "It has happened to them according to the true proverb, 'A dog returns to its own vomit,' and, 'A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire'" (v. 22).

Dogs and **swine** represent those who, because of their great perversity and ungodliness, refuse to have anything to do with the **holy** and precious things of God except to **trample them under their feet, and turn and tear God's people to pieces.**

There will be times when the gospel we present is absolutely rejected and ridiculed and we make the judgment to turn away and speak

no more, deciding that we should “shake off the dust of [our] feet” (Matt. 10:14) and begin ministering somewhere else. There will be times when those to whom we witness will resist the gospel and blaspheme God, and we may speak words of judgment. Like Paul, we must then say, in effect, “Your blood be upon your own heads! I am clean. From now on I shall go to the Gentiles” (Acts 18:6). When people not only reject the gospel, but insist on mocking and reviling it, we are not to waste God’s holy Word and the precious **pearls** of His truth in a futile and frustrating attempt to win them. We are to leave them to the Lord, trusting that somehow His Spirit can penetrate their hearts—as He apparently did with some of those who at first rejected the preaching of Paul and the other apostles—or leaving them to the just judgment of God.

A warranted judgment is made when we “reject a factious man [one who belongs to a sect, or a heretic] after the first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned” (Titus 3:10-11). That text shows that in such a situation the believer does not condemn, but rather is able to recognize an already self-condemned person.

Matthew 7:6 is one of the “hard sayings” of Jesus. We must take the command seriously and do our best to obey it, because it is the Lord’s will. But because it is so serious and because we may also be inclined to be self-righteous and judgmental, we need to depend on the Lord with special care and sincerity. Even when we determine that a person is too rebellious to hear the gospel or is a heretical and false teacher, we go on our way not in self-satisfied judgment but in great disappointment and sorrow—remembering how our Lord, as He approached Jerusalem for the last time, “saw the city and wept over” those who refused to recognize and receive their King (Luke 19:41-42). To avoid wrongful judging and to accomplish right discernment is to be marked as a citizen of the heavenly kingdom.

Start Loving (7:7-12)

Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened. Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will he give him a stone? Or if he shall ask for a fish, will he give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. (7:7-12)

Here is the conclusion of the main theme of the Sermon on the Mount, which is to give the standards for kingdom living. Jesus has given the standards related to self, to morality, to religion, and to money and possessions. Here He concludes giving the standards related to human relationships begun in verses 1-6.

This passage forms the positive side of Jesus' summation of the principles that lead to right human relations. To love others in the way God wants us to love first of all requires that we do not self-righteously and carelessly criticize and unmercifully condemn others. If that attitude is present, it has to be removed. Not to be unjustly critical of a person is not the same as loving them, but it is absolutely necessary before true love can exist. Yet love is much more than something negative; it is immeasurably more than simply not wishing evil on others or doing them any wrong. The mere absence of hatred and ill will does not constitute love.

The positive side of love is the active side, the productive side, the side that is the true measure and test of love. It is not seen in what we refrain from doing but in what we do. (The Greek verb forms in the descriptions of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 all emphasize action.) The key

expression of that principle is in verse 12, **however you want people to treat you, so treat them**, to which verses 1-11 point as advance commentary and illustration. That verse, often referred to as the golden rule, has also been called the Mt. Everest of ethics (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 2 vols. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 1:272). The famous Bible scholar Alfred Edersheim said it was the closest approach to absolute love of which human nature was capable, and Bishop J. C. Ryle wrote, “[This truth] settles a hundred different points,. . . it prevents the necessity of laying down endless little rules for our conduct in specific cases” (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St. Matthew* [London: James Clarke, 1965], p. 66).

Jesus gives three reasons for obeying the command to love others as ourselves: God’s promise to His children demands it, His pattern for His children demands it, and His purpose for His children demands it.

GOD’S PROMISE TO HIS CHILDREN DEMANDS IT

Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened. (7:7-8)

Here is one of the Lord’s greatest and most comprehensive promises to those who belong to Him, to those who are His children and citizens of His kingdom. In light of this great promise we can feel free to fully love others and totally sacrifice for others, because our heavenly Father sets the example in His generosity to us and promises that we have access to His eternal and unlimited treasure to meet our own needs as well as theirs. We can do for others what we would want done for ourselves (see v. 12) without fear of depleting the divine resources and having nothing left.

Verses 7-11 make a perfect bridge between the negative teaching about a critical spirit and the positive teaching of the golden rule (v. 12). Even when we have been cleansed of our own sin—had the “log” removed

from our eye—we need divine wisdom to know how to help a brother remove the “speck” from his eye (v. 5). And without God’s help we cannot be sure of who are “dogs” or “swine”—who are the false prophets and apostates to whom we should not offer the holy and precious things of God’s Word (v. 6). These considerations drive us to call on the Lord.

Of the many things for which we should **ask**, **seek**, and **knock**, God’s wisdom is among our greatest needs. We cannot be discerning and discriminating without divine counsel from our heavenly Father; and the primary means for achieving such wisdom is petitioning prayer. “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5).

God gives us many principles in His Word, but He does not give specific methods or rules for every conceivable situation. For one thing, situations keep changing and vary greatly from age to age and person to person. To give specific rules for every circumstance would require a giant library of volumes. But even more important than that is God’s desire that we rely on Him directly. He wants us to be in His Word, and without being in His Word we cannot pray wisely or rightly.

But even beyond our being in His Word, He wants us to be in fellowship with Him as our Father. Along with His perfect and infallible Word, we need His Spirit to interpret and illumine, to encourage and to strengthen. He does not want us to have all the answers in our hip pocket. The Bible is a limitless store of divine truth, which a lifetime of the most faithful and diligent study will not exhaust. But apart from God Himself we cannot even start to fathom its depths or mine its riches. In His Word God gives enough truth for us to be responsible, but enough mystery for us to be dependent. He gives us His Word not only to direct our lives but to draw our lives to Him.

Here Jesus says, in effect, “If you want wisdom to know how to help a sinning brother and how to discern falsehood and apostasy, go to your heavenly Father. **Ask**, **seek**, and **knock** at the doors of heaven, and you will receive, find, and have the door opened.”

Contrary to some popular interpretations, verses 7-8 are not a blank check for just anyone to present to God. First of all, the promise is valid only for believers. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus’ promises are addressed only to believers. A large mass of unbelievers, including some scribes and Pharisees, no doubt were in the multitude on the side of

the mountain that day. In this sermon, however, Jesus *always* speaks of scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites, false prophets, insincere followers, and all other unbelievers in the third person—as if none of them were the direct target of His words. On other occasions (as in Matt. 23) the Lord addresses such persons directly; but during this message all of His references to them are indirect. He gives this sermon to His disciples (5:1-2), with the crowd listening in.

Everyone refers to those who belong to the heavenly Father. Those who are not God’s children cannot come to Him as their Father. The two overriding relationships focused on in the book of Matthew are those of God’s kingdom and God’s family. The kingdom concept deals with rule, and the family concept deals with relationship. In the Sermon on the Mount the primary focus is on God’s family, and we see repeated references to God as heavenly Father (v. 11; cf. 5:16, 45, 48; 6:4, 8-9, 26, 32) and to fellow believers as brothers (5:22-24; 7:3-5).

The two greatest realities of Christian truth are that God is our Father and Christians are our brothers. Believers are the family of God. Paul speaks of the church as the “household of the faith” (Gal. 6:10) and as “God’s household” (Eph. 2:19). John repeatedly speaks of God as our Father (1 John 1:2-3; 2:1,13; 3:1; 4:14; etc.) and of believers as His children (1 John 3:10; 5:2) and as each other’s brothers (1 John 2:9-11; 3:10-12; 4:20; etc.).

Second, the one who claims this promise must be living in obedience to his Father. “Whatever we ask we receive from Him,” John says, “because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight” (1 John 3:22).

Third, our motive in asking must be right. “You ask and do not receive,” explains James, “because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures” (James 4:3). God does not obligate Himself to answer selfish, carnal requests from His children.

Finally, we must be submissive to His will. If we are trying to serve both God and mammon (Matt. 6:24), we cannot claim this promise. “For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (James 1:7-8). As John makes clear, “This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us” (1 John 5:14). To have

confidence in answered prayer on any other basis is to have a false and presumptuous confidence that the Lord makes no promise to honor.

Another possible qualification is perseverance, suggested by the present imperative tenses of **ask**, **seek**, and **knock**. The idea is that of continuance and constancy: “Keep on asking; keep on seeking; keep on knocking.” We also see a progression of intensity in the three verbs, from simple asking to the more aggressive seeking to the still more aggressive knocking. Yet none of the figures is complicated or obscure. The youngest child knows what it is to ask, seek, and knock.

The progression in intensity also suggests that our sincere requests to the Lord are not to be passive. Whatever of His will we know to do we should be doing. If we are asking the Lord to help us find a job, we should be looking for a job ourselves while we await His guidance and provision. If we are out of food, we should be trying to earn money to buy it if we can. If we want help in confronting a brother about a sin, we should be trying to find out all we can about him and his situation and all we can about what God’s Word says on the subject involved. It is not faith but presumption to ask the Lord to provide more when we are not faithfully using what He has already given.

GOD’S PATTERN FOR HIS CHILDREN DEMANDS IT

Or what man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! (7:9-11)

These verses continue to point to and illustrate the golden rule of verse 12. We are also to love others as we love ourselves because that is a part of God’s life pattern for His children and kingdom citizens. “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just

as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma” (Eph. 5:1-2).

If we claim to be God’s children, God’s nature should be reflected in our lives, imperfect as they still are. Jesus here proceeds to show us something of what our heavenly Father’s love is like. First, He gives several illustrations from human family relationships by asking two rhetorical questions.

What man... among you, that is to say, what loving father, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? The obvious answer is no man, no loving father. The crudest of fathers would hardly deceive his own son by giving him a stone to eat that looked like bread. Even if the son discovered the deception before breaking a tooth, his heart would be broken by his father’s cruelty.

Or, Jesus continues, **if the son shall ask for a fish, the father will not give him a snake, will he?** The idea is not that the snake would be alive and poisonous, and therefore of physical danger to the son. The suggestion is of a snake that is cooked to look like ordinary meat and would, unlike the stone, meet the son’s physical need. But because they were among the unclean animals (Lev. 11:12), snakes were not to be eaten by Jews. A loving Jewish father would not deceive and defile his son into dishonoring the Word of God by tricking him into eating ceremonially unclean food. Our Lord is simply showing that it is not natural for a father to ignore either the physical or the spiritual needs of his son.

In the Luke account Jesus gives the added and more dramatic illustration of a scorpion being substituted for an egg (11:12). Certain Near East scorpions were quite large and resembled a bird’s egg when they curled up to sleep. In this instance, the deceit could cause great physical danger to the son, even an agonizing death.

If you then, being evil—as sinful human fathers—**know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!** Here is one of the many specific scriptural teachings of man’s fallen, **evil** nature. Jesus is not speaking of specific fathers who are especially cruel and wicked, but of human fathers in general, all of whom are sinful by nature.

Those who do not know the true God have no divine source to whom they can turn with assurance or trust. Most pagan gods are but larger than life images of the men who made and worship them. Greek

mythology tells of Aurora, the goddess of dawn, who fell in love with Tithonus, a mortal youth. When Zeus, the king of gods, promised to grant her any gift she chose for her lover, she asked that Tithonus might live forever. But she had forgotten to ask that he also remain forever young. Therefore when Zeus granted the request, Tithonus was doomed to an eternity of perpetual aging (*Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* [5.218-38]). Such are the capricious ways of the gods men make.

But not so with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. As in the previous chapter, Jesus uses the phrase **much more** to describe God's love for His children (cf. 6:30). Our divine, loving, merciful, gracious **Father who is in heaven** has no limit on His treasure and no bounds to the goodness He is willing to bestow on His children **who ask Him**. The most naturally selfless relationship among human beings is that of parents with their children. We are more likely to sacrifice for our children, even to the point of giving up our lives, than for any other persons in the world. Yet the greatest human parental love cannot compare with God's.

There is no limit to what our heavenly Father will give to us when we ask in obedience and according to His will. Again we get additional truth from the parallel passage in Luke, which tells us, "How much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?" (11:13).

The truth Jesus proclaims here is that, if imperfect and sinful human fathers so willingly and freely give their children the basics of life, God will infinitely outdo them in measure and in benefit. That is why the children of God are "blessed . . . with every spiritual blessing" (Eph. 1:3) offered by "the riches of His grace, which He lavished upon us (vv. 7-8). If we want God to treat us with loving generosity as His children, we should so treat others, because we are those who bear His likeness.

GOD'S PURPOSE FOR HIS CHILDREN DEMANDS IT

Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. (7:12)

The implication of verses 7-11 is made explicit in verse 12. The perfect love of the heavenly Father is most reflected in His children when they treat others as they themselves wish to be treated.

There is no capacity within an unbeliever to love in the way that Jesus commands here. Unbelievers can do many ethical things, and every once in a while they might even approach the level of this highest of ethical standards. But they cannot sustain such selflessness, because they do not have the divine resource necessary for regular, habitual living on that plane.

However you want people to treat you sums up the sermon to this point, and **so treat them** is a summary of **the Law and the Prophets**. It is also a paraphrase of the second great commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39; cf. Lev. 19:18). The golden rule instructs us as to how we are to love other people, “especially,” as Paul points out, “those of the household of the faith” (Gal. 6:10). And “he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8; cf. v. 10; Gal. 5:14).

How we **treat** others is not to be determined by how we *expect* them to treat us or by how we think they *should* treat us, but by how we **want them to treat** us. Herein is the heart of the principle, an aspect of the general truth that is not found in similar expressions in other religions and philosophies.

For many years the basic instrument of music was the harpsichord. As its keys are depressed, a given string is plucked to create the desired note, much as a guitar string is plucked with a pick. But the tone made in that way is not pure, and the mechanism is relatively slow and limiting. Sometime during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, during Beethoven’s lifetime, an unknown musician modified the harpsichord so that the keys activated hammers that struck, rather than plucked, the strings. With that minor change, a major improvement was made that would henceforth radically enhance the entire musical world, giving a grandeur and breadth never before known.

That is the sort of revolutionary change Jesus gives in the golden rule. Every other form of this basic principle had been given in purely negative terms, and is found in the literature of almost every major religion and philosophical system. The Jewish rabbi Hillel said, “What is hateful to yourself do not to someone else.” The book of Tobit in the Apocrypha teaches, “What thou thyself hatest, to no man do.” The Jewish

scholars in Alexandria who translated the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) advised in a certain piece of correspondence, “As you wish that no evil befall you, but to be a partaker of all good things, so you should act on the same principle toward your subjects and offenders.” Confucius taught, “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.” An ancient Greek king named Nicocles wrote, “Do not do to others the things which make you angry when you experience them at the hands of other people.” The Greek philosopher Epictetus said, “What you avoid suffering yourself, do not afflict on others.” The Stoics promoted the principle, “What you do not want to be done to you, do not do to anyone else.” In every case the emphasis is negative. The principle is an important part of right human relations, but it falls short—far short—of God’s perfect standard.

Those expressions go only as far as sinful man can go, and are essentially expressions not of love but of self-interest. The motivation is basically selfish—refraining from harming others in order that they will not harm us. Those negative forms of the rule are not golden, because they are primarily utilitarian and motivated by fear and self-preservation. As Scripture repeatedly tells us of fallen mankind, “There is none who does good, there is not even one” (Rom. 3:12; cf. Ps. 14:3); “each of us has turned to his own way” (Isa. 53:6).

Man’s basic problem is preoccupation with self. He is innately beset with narcissism, a condition named after the Greek mythological character Narcissus, who spent his life admiring his reflection in a pool of water. In the final analysis, every sin results from preoccupation with self. We sin because we are totally selfish, totally devoted to ourselves, rather than to God and to others. Unregenerate man can never come up to the standard of selfless love—the love that loves others as oneself and that treats others in the same way that one wants to be treated.

Only Jesus gives the fullness of the truth, which encompasses both the positive and the negative. And only Jesus can give the power to live by that full truth. The dynamic for living this supreme ethic must come from outside our fallen nature. It can come only from the indwelling Holy Spirit, whose first fruit is love (Gal. 5:22). In Jesus Christ, “the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom. 5:5). Only Christ’s own Spirit can empower us to

love each other as He loves us (John 13:34). We can only love in a divine way because God Himself has first loved us divinely (1 John 4:19).

Selfless love does not serve in order to prevent its own harm or to insure its own welfare. It serves for the sake of the one being served, and serves in the way it likes being served—whether it ever receives such service or not. That level of love is the divine level, and can be achieved only by divine help. Only God's children can have right relations with others, because they possess the motivation and the resource to refrain from self-righteously condemning others and to love in an utterly selfless way.

Which Way to Heaven? (7:13-14)

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it. (7:13-14)

Here is the appeal to which Jesus has been moving through the whole sermon. He gives the call to decide now about becoming a citizen of God's kingdom and inheriting eternal life, or remaining a citizen of this fallen world and receiving damnation. The way to life is on God's terms alone; the way to damnation is on any terms a person wants, because every way but God's leads to the same fate.

Jesus has been giving God's standards throughout the sermon, standards that are holy and perfect and that are diametrically opposed to the self-righteous, self-sufficient, and hypocritical standards of man—typified by those of the scribes and Pharisees. He has shown what His kingdom is like and what its people are like—and are not like. Now He presents the choice of entering the kingdom or not. Here the Lord focuses on the inevitable decision that every person must make, the crossroads where he must decide on the **gate** he will enter and the **way** he will go.

Our lives are filled with decisions—what to wear, what to eat, where to go, what to do, what to say, what to buy, whom to marry, what career to follow, and on and on. Many decisions are trivial and insignificant, and some are essential and life-changing. The most critical of all is our decision about Jesus Christ and His kingdom. That is the ultimate choice that determines our eternal destiny. It is that decision that Jesus here calls men to make.

In perfect harmony with His absolute sovereignty, God has always allowed men to choose Him or not, and He has always pleaded with them to decide for Him or face the consequences of a choice against Him. Since mankind turned their backs on Him in the Fall, God has bent every effort and spared no cost in wooing His creatures back to Himself. He has provided and shown the way, leaving nothing to man but the choice. God made His choice by providing the way of redemption. The choice is now man's.

While Israel was in the wilderness the Lord instructed Moses to tell the people, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him" (Deut. 30:19-20).

After Israel came into the Promised Land, Joshua confronted the people again with a choice: of continuing to serve the Egyptian and Canaanite gods they had adopted or of turning to the Lord who had delivered them from Egypt and given them the land promised to Abraham. "Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve," Joshua pleaded (Josh. 24:13-15).

On Mount Carmel the prophet Elijah asked the people of Israel, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). The Lord commanded Jeremiah to set the choice again before His people: "Thus says the Lord, 'Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death'" (Jer. 21:8).

In John 6:66-69, Jesus called for a choice: "As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore. Jesus said therefore to the twelve, 'You do not want to go away also, do you?' Simon Peter answered Him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.'" "

That is the call that God has been making to men since they turned away from Him, and it is the supreme appeal of His Word.

In his poem *The Ways*, The British poet John Oxenham wrote,

To every man there openeth
A Way, and Ways, and a Way,
And the High Soul climbs the High Way,
And the Low Soul gropes the Low,
And in between, on the misty flats,
The rest drift to and fro.
But to every man there openeth
A High Way and a Low,
And every man decideth
The Way his soul shall go.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus presents still again that great choice of choices. This sermon therefore cannot be simply admired and praised for its ethics. Its truths will bless those who accept the King but will stand in judgment over those who refuse Him. The one who admires God's way but does not accept it is under greater judgment, because he acknowledges that he knows the truth.

Nor does this sermon apply only to the future age of the millennial kingdom. The truths Jesus teaches here are truths whose essence God teaches in the Old Testament and throughout the New Testament. They are truths for God's people of every age, and the decision about the **gate** and the **way** has always been a **now** decision.

The choice is between the one and the many—the one right and the many wrongs, the one true way and the many false ways. As John Stott points out, in Matthew 7:13-14 “Jesus cuts across our easy-going syncretism” (*Christian CounterCulture* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1978], p. 193). There are not many roads to heaven, but one. There are not many good religions, but only one. Man cannot come to God in *any* of the ways that man himself devises, but only in the one way that God Himself has provided.

The contrast Jesus makes is not between religion and irreligion, or between the higher religions and the lower ones. Nor is it a contrast between nice and upright people and vile and degraded ones. It is a contrast between divine righteousness and human righteousness, *all* of which is unrighteousness. It is a contrast between divine revelation and human religion, between divine truth and human falsehood, between

trusting in God and trusting in self. It is the contrast between God's grace and man's works.

There have always been but two systems of religion in the world. One is God's system of divine accomplishment, and the other is man's system of human achievement. One is the religion of God's grace, the other the religion of men's works. One is the religion of faith, the other the religion of the flesh. One is the religion of the sincere heart and the internal, the other the religion of hypocrisy and the external. Within man's system are thousands of religious forms and names, but they are all built on the achievements of man and the inspiration of Satan. Christianity, on the other hand, is the religion of divine accomplishment, and it stands alone.

Even the law given through Moses, though divine, was not a means of salvation but rather a means of showing man's need for salvation. "By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight," Paul explains; "for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). The law came to show us our sinfulness and guilt before God, and to show us that we are incapable in ourselves of keeping God's perfect law.

But when self-righteous, ego-centered man saw that he was sinful by the law's standard, he simply set the law aside and devised standards of his own. He invented new religions that accommodated his shortcomings and that were humanly achievable. By meeting his own attainable standards, man therefore considered himself righteous. That is what the rabbis and scribes had done in regard to their traditions. They lowered God's standards, raised their own estimates of themselves, and felt they had achieved a righteous standing with God (Rom. 10:3). And that is exactly the type of self-ascribed righteousness that Jesus declares will never bring a person into the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:20).

From here through the rest of the sermon (vv. 13-27) Jesus repeatedly points out two things: the necessity of choosing whether to follow God or not, and the fact that the choices are two and only two. There are two gates, the narrow and the wide; two ways, the narrow and the broad; two destinations, life and destruction; two groups, the few and the many; two kinds of trees, the good and the bad, which produce two kinds of fruit, the good and the bad; two kinds of people who profess faith in Jesus Christ, the sincere and the false; two kinds of builders, the wise and the foolish; two foundations, the rock and the sand; and two houses,

the secure and the insecure. In all preaching there must be the demand for a verdict. Jesus makes the choice crystal clear.

In verses 13-14 Jesus deals with the first four of those contrasts: the two gates, the two ways, the two destinations, and the two groups.

THE TWO GATES

Enter is in the aorist imperative tense, and therefore demands a definite and specific action. The command is not to admire or to ponder the **gate** but to **enter** it. Many people admire the principles of the Sermon on the Mount but never follow those principles. Many people respect and praise Jesus Christ but never receive Him as Lord and Savior. Because they never receive the King and never enter the kingdom, they are as much separated from the King and as much outside His kingdom as is the rankest atheist or most unethical pagan.

Jesus' command is not simply to enter *some* gate but to enter **the narrow gate**. Every person enters one gate or the other; that is unavoidable. Jesus pleads for men to enter the *right gate*, God's gate, the only gate that leads to **life** and to heaven.

Jesus has repeatedly shown the narrowness of God's internal standard of righteousness, in contrast to the broad and external standards of Jewish tradition. The path to that narrow way of kingdom living is through **the narrow gate** of the King Himself. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6).

When we preach, teach, and witness that Christ is the only way to God, we are not proclaiming our own view of right religion but God's revelation of truth. We do not proclaim the narrow way simply because we are already in it, or because it happens to suit our temperament, or because we are bigoted and exclusive. We proclaim the narrow way because it is God's way and God's only way for men to find salvation and eternal life. We proclaim a narrow gospel because Jesus said, "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved" (John 10:9). We proclaim a narrow gospel because "there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be

saved” (Acts 4:12), and because “there is one God and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). We proclaim a narrow gospel because that is the only gospel God has given and therefore the only gospel there is.

The person who enters **the narrow gate** must enter alone. We can bring no one else and nothing else with us. Some commentators suggest that a turnstile represents the idea implicit in **narrow gate**. A turnstile allows only one person through at a time, with no baggage. People do not come into the kingdom in groups, but singly. The Jews had the mistaken notion that they were all in God’s kingdom together by racial salvation, signified by circumcision.

Furthermore, God’s gate is so narrow that we must go through it naked. It is the gate of self-denial, through which one cannot carry the baggage of sin and self-will. When we sing, “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling,” we are testifying to the way of the gospel. The way of Christ is the way of the cross, and the way of the cross is the way of self-denial. “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it” (Matt. 16:24-25).

Jesus confronted the rich young ruler who sought eternal life and presented a test of his willingness to submit to His lordship: “One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess, and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Luke 18:22). As his response proved, that man’s desire to rule his own life and to hold on to his earthly wealth prevented his entering the kingdom, because “when he had heard these things, he became very sad; for he was extremely rich” (v. 23). He also gave evidence of self-righteousness and self-deceit in denying his true state of sin (v. 21), because if he had in his heart truly kept all the commandments as he claimed, he would surely have kept the greatest commandment—which is to love God with all one’s heart, soul, and might (Deut. 6:5; cf. Matt. 22:37). Thus he would have followed Christ with total commitment. The issue with that young man was very simply a matter of lordship. Jesus confronted him on the matter of life control. One who comes to salvation yields control to Christ whether that means he gives up all or is allowed to keep all and receive more. Salvation turns sovereignty over to Christ.

To love God with everything we have is to jettison self—self-confidence, self-achievement, self-righteousness, and self-satisfaction. “Unless you are converted and become like children,” Jesus said, “you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). The mark of a child is dependency, utter dependency for everything he has. Saving faith is not merely an act of the mind; it counts the cost (Luke 14:28); it is also a stripping of the self and crying, as did the tax-gatherer in the Temple, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” (Luke 18:13). Easy believism is not scriptural believism. The **narrow gate** means that those who enter do so stripped of all they possess, rather than adding Jesus to their accumulated treasures. Salvation is the exchange of all that we are for all that He is (see Matt. 13:44-46). And as He did for Job, the Lord will give back much more.

The **narrow gate** demands repentance. Many Jews believed that simply being a Jew, a physical descendant of Abraham, was sufficient for entrance into heaven. Many people today believe that being in a church qualifies them for heaven. Some even believe that simply being a human being qualifies them, because God is too good and kind to exclude anyone. God does offer the way to all, and His greatest longing is that everyone enter, because He does not desire “for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). Paul preached “repentance toward God” (Acts 20:21) as Jesus had preached it (Mark 1:14-15). John the Baptist readied a people for the Lord by repentance (Luke 3:1-6). The way of repentance, of turning from our own way and our own righteousness to God’s, is the only way to enter His kingdom and therefore the only way to keep from perishing.

Charles Spurgeon said, “You and your sins must separate or you and your God will never come together. No one sin may you keep; they must all be given up, they must be brought out like Canaanite kings from the cave and be hanged up in the sun.”

The repentant life will be a changed life. The primary message of John’s first epistle is that the truly redeemed life will manifest itself in a transformed life, in which confession of sin (1:8-10), obedience to God’s will (2:4-6), love of God’s other children (2:9-11; 3:16-17), and practice of righteousness (3:4-10) are normal and habitual. “By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples” (John

15:8). Anything less is damning demon-faith (James 2:19) that is orthodox but fruitless.

Those who preach a gospel of self-indulgence preach an utterly different gospel than Jesus preached. The gate of pride, of self-righteousness, and self-satisfaction is the **wide gate** of the world, not the **narrow gate** of God.

Most people spend their lives rushing around with the crowds, doing what everyone else does and believing what everyone else believes. But as far as salvation is concerned, there is no security in numbers. If every person in a group is saved it is because each of them individually comes into the kingdom by his own decision, energized by the Holy Spirit, to trust Christ.

Two Ways

The two gates lead to two ways. **The gate that is wide** leads to **the way that is broad**; and **the narrow gate**, which **is small**, leads to **the way that is narrow**. The narrow way is the way of the godly, and the broad way is the way of the ungodly—and those are the only two ways in which men can travel. The godly person delights “in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. And he will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season,” whereas the ungodly “are like chaff which the wind drives away” (Ps. 1:2-4).

The way that is broad is the easy, attractive, inclusive, indulgent, permissive, and self-oriented way of the world. There are few rules, few restrictions, and few requirements. All you need do is profess Jesus, or at least be religious, and you are readily accepted in that large and diverse group. Sin is tolerated, truth is moderated, and humility is ignored. God’s Word is praised but not studied, and His standards are admired but not followed. This way requires no spiritual maturity, no moral character, no commitment, and no sacrifice. It is the easy way of floating downstream, in “the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2). It is the tragic way “which seems right to a man,” but whose “end is the way of death” (Prov. 14:12).

A West Indian who had chosen Islam over Christianity said his reason was that Islam “is a noble, broad path. There is room for a man and his sins on it. The way of Christ is too narrow.” It seems that many preachers today do not see that issue as clearly as that unbelieving Muslim.

The way that is narrow, however, is the hard way, the demanding way, the way of self-denial and the cross. *Stenos* (**narrow**) comes from a root that means “to groan,” as from being under pressure, and is used figuratively to represent a restriction or constriction. It is the word from which we get stenography, writing that is abbreviated or compressed.

The fact that **few are those who find** God’s way implies that it is to be sought diligently. “And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13). No one has ever stumbled into the kingdom or wandered through the narrow gate by accident. When someone asked Jesus, “Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?” He replied, “Strive to enter the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able” (Luke 13:23-24). The term *agōnizomai* (“strive”) indicates that entering the door to God’s kingdom takes conscious, purposeful, and intense effort. That is the term from which we get agonize, and is the same word Paul uses to describe an athlete who agonizes (“competes”) to win a race (1 Cor. 9:25) and the Christian who “fights the good fight of faith” (literally, “struggles the good struggle,” 1 Tim. 6:12). The requirements for kingdom citizenship are great, demanding, clearly defined, and allow for no deviation or departure. Luke 16:16 says, “Everyone is forcing his way into [the kingdom],” implying conflict and effort (cf. Acts 14:22).

The kingdom is for those who come to the King in poverty of spirit, mourning over their sin, and hungering and thirsting for His righteousness to replace their own (Matt. 5:3-4, 6). It is for those who want the kingdom at any cost, who will sell all they have to buy that great treasure and that great pearl (Matt. 13:44-46). It is not for those who want a cheap and easy way to assure heaven, while continuing to live their own selfish and worldly lives on earth. Jesus only saves those for whom He becomes Lord. Sadly, most people think that heaven can be obtained on much easier terms than those prescribed by Christ.

William Hendriksen comments,

The Kingdom then is not for weaklings, waverers, and compromisers. ... It is not for Balaam, the rich young ruler, Pilate and Demas. ... It is not won by means of deferred prayers, unfulfilled promises, broken resolutions and hesitant testimonies. It is for strong and sturdy men, like Joseph, Nathan, Elijah, Daniel, Mordecai and Peter ... Stephen ... and Paul. And let us not forget such valiant women as Ruth, Deborah, Esther and Lydia. (*Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973], p. 490)

As Paul expresses it in Romans 7:14-25, it should be the desire of our hearts as Christians to fulfill every command and requirement of our Lord, even though we know that we will fail. But we also know that “if we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). And the gracious God who saved us because we could not fulfill His law in our own power knows that, even after salvation, we still cannot fulfill His law in our own power. The great difference is that in Christ we not only have a Savior but a burden bearer. He helps us carry all our burdens, including the burden of obedience. “Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me,” Jesus says, “for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light” (Matt. 11:29-30).

God’s way of salvation is remarkably simple, but it is not easy. We can give nothing or give up nothing that will earn us entrance into the kingdom, but if we long to hold on to forbidden things it can keep us out of the kingdom. That is another reason why **few are those who find it**.

We can pay nothing for salvation, yet coming to Jesus Christ costs everything we have. “If anyone comes to Me,” Jesus says, “and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross [a willingness even to die if necessary] and come after Me cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26). The Lord goes on to show the seriousness of deciding to follow Christ. “For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost, to see if he has enough to complete it? ... Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and take counsel

whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand?” (vv. 28, 31).

The person who says yes to Christ must say no to the things of the world, because to be in Christ is to rely on His power rather than our own and to be willing to forsake our own way for His. It can cost persecution, ridicule, and tribulation. In His last instructions to His disciples, Jesus several times reminded them of the price they would pay for following Him: “Because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:19-20); “They will make you outcasts from the synagogue” (John 16:2); “Therefore you too now have sorrow” (16:22); and “In the world you have tribulation” (16:33).

When we identify ourselves with Jesus Christ we declare war on the devil, and he declares war on us. The one whom we formerly served now becomes our great enemy, and the ideas and ways we once held dear now become our great temptations and pitfalls.

With the warnings about suffering the Lord also gives promises that our hearts will rejoice (John 16:22*b*) and that we are to take courage because He has overcome the world (16:33*b*). But He promises to enable us to prevail over those times of suffering, not to escape them.

TWO DESTINATIONS

Both the **broad** and the **narrow** ways point to the good life, to salvation, heaven, God, the kingdom, and blessing—but only the **narrow** way actually leads to those. There is nothing here to indicate that the **broad way** is marked “Hell.” The point our Lord is making is that it is marked “Heaven” but does not lead there. That is the great lie of all the false religions of human achievement. The two very different destinations of the two ways are made clear by the Lord (cf. Jer. 21:8). The **broad... leads to destruction**, whereas only the **narrow... leads to life**. Every religion except Christianity, the only religion of divine accomplishment, follows the same spiritual way and leads to the same spiritual end, to hell. There are many of those roads, and most of them are attractive, appealing,

and crowded with travelers. But not a single one leads where it promises; and not a single one fails to lead where Jesus says it leads—to **destruction**.

Apōleia (**destruction**) does not refer to extinction or annihilation, but to total ruin and loss (cf. Matt. 3:12; 18:8; 25:41, 46; 2 Thess. 1:9; Jude 6-7). It is not the complete loss of being, but the complete loss of well-being. It is the destination of all religions except the way of Jesus Christ, and it is the destiny of all those who follow any way but His. It is the destination and destiny of perdition, hell, and everlasting torment. “The way of the wicked will perish” (Ps. 1:6).

But God’s way, the **way** that is **narrow**, leads to eternal **life**, to everlasting heavenly fellowship with God, His angels, and His people. Everlasting **life** is a quality of life, the life of God in the soul of man (see Ps. 17:15). “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:2-3).

TWO GROUPS

Going into the two gates, traveling down the two ways, and heading for the two destinations we find two groups of people. Those who go in through the **wide gate** and travel the **way** that is **broad** toward the destination of **destruction** are **many**. The many will include pagans and nominal Christians, atheists and religionists, theists and humanists, Jews and Gentiles—every person from whatever age, background, persuasion, and circumstance who has not come to saving obedience to Jesus Christ.

In the day of judgment many will claim to be followers of Christ, but “many will seek to enter and will not be able,” Jesus warns. “Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, ‘Lord, open up to us!’ then He will answer and say to you, ‘I do not know where you are from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets’; and He will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you are from; depart from Me, all you evildoers’” (Luke 13:24-27). “Many will say to Me

on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matt. 7:22-23). Those particular ones who are excluded will not be atheists or rank pagans, but nominal Christians who professed to know and trust Christ but who refused to come to Him on His terms—through His **gate** and by His **way**.

The group that goes through the **narrow gate** and travels the **narrow way** and is destined for **life** is **few** in number. When Jesus said, “Do not be afraid, little flock” (Luke 12:32), the word He used for “little” was *mikros*, from which we get our prefix *micro*, meaning something small. “Many are called, but few are chosen,” He says in another place (Matt. 22:14).

Believers are not **few** in number because the gate is too **narrow** or too **small** to accommodate more. There is no limit to the number who could go through that gate, if they go through in God’s way, in repentance for their sins and in trust in Jesus Christ to save them. Nor is the number few because heavenly space is limited. God’s grace is boundless, and heaven’s dwellings are limitless. Nor is the number few because God desires that most people perish. He earnestly desires “for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

A letter written to a Melbourne, Australia, daily newspaper expresses clearly the attitude of a person on the broad road to destruction.

After hearing Dr. Billy Graham on the air, viewing him on television and reading reports and letters concerning him and his mission, I am heartily sick of the type of religion that insists my soul (and everyone else’s) needs saving—whatever that means. I have never felt that I was lost. Nor do I feel that I daily wallow in the mire of sin, although repetitive preaching insists that I do.

Give me a practical religion that teaches gentleness and tolerance, that acknowledges no barriers of color or creed, that remembers the aged and teaches children of goodness and not sin.

If in order to save my soul I must accept such a philosophy as I have recently heard preached, I prefer to remain forever damned.

Every person who *will* come to Jesus Christ *can* come to Jesus Christ. “All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out,” Jesus assures us. “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:37, 40).

Beware of False Prophets (7:15-20)

Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits. (7:15-20)

After giving the invitation to “enter by the narrow gate,” to come to God by the only way He has provided, Jesus warns that not everyone who claims to belong to God and to speak for Him actually does so. When we stand at the crossroads of decision, we should remember that the true way to God is narrow and that the false way is broad; the true way is difficult and demanding, and the false way is easy and permissive; the true way has relatively few following in it, and the false way has many.

Jesus now says, in effect, “As you strive to enter that narrow gate and walk that narrow way that leads to life, beware of those who would mislead you. Just as there is a misleading gate and a misleading way, there are also misleading preachers and teachers who point to that gate and promote that way.” Just like the false gate and way, they will claim to show the way to heaven and life, but they actually show the way to hell and destruction. The false gate has false prophets standing in front of it who seek to lead people into the false way and hinder them from entering the true.

In the present passage Jesus first gives a warning and then calls us to be watchful. Just as He described the true and false ways, He now

describes the true and false teachers of those ways.

WARNING

Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. (7:15)

False prophets were not new to Israel. As long as God has had true prophets, Satan has had false ones. They are seen from the earliest times of redemptive history. Moses warned,

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, "Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them," you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the Lord your God. (Deut. 13:1-5)

False prophets always find a hearing and often are encouraged by those who are displeased with God's ways. "For this is a rebellious people," Isaiah said of Israel, "false sons, sons who refuse to listen to the instruction of the Lord; who say to the seers, 'You must not see visions'; and to the prophets, 'You must not prophesy to us what is right, speak to us pleasant words, prophesy illusions'" (Isa. 30:9-10). From chapter 5 through chapter 23 of Jeremiah we see that man of God repeatedly against the false prophets by whom his people were being so terribly misled.

As Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives shortly before the last Passover week, His disciples asked, "Tell us, when will these things be,

and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” He replied, “See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will mislead many.... For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:3-5, 24). John warns against the same problem, pointing out that “many deceivers have gone out into the world” (2 John 7).

Paul warned the Roman believers, “Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting” (Rom. 16:17-18). In other parts of the New Testament **false prophets** are spoken of as “deceitful spirits” who advocate “doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1) and as those “who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them” (2 Pet. 2:1).

They are called false brothers (2 Cor. 11:26), false apostles (2 Cor. 11:13), false teachers (2 Pet. 2:1), false speakers, that is, liars (1 Tim. 4:2), false witnesses (Matt. 26:60), and false Christs (Matt. 24:24). The apostle John tells us, therefore, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

Paul’s last words to the Ephesian elders, when he met with them for a farewell on the beach near Miletus, included a somber warning about inevitable false teachers. “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert” (Acts 20:29-31).

There has always been a large market for false prophets, because most people do not want to hear the truth. They prefer to hear what is pleasant and flattering, even if it is false and dangerous, over what is unpleasant and unflattering, even if it is true and helpful.

THE DEFINITION OF A FALSE PROPHET

From the beginning of God's redemptive work on behalf of fallen mankind, His true representatives have been marked by two things: they are divinely commissioned, and they present a divine message. They are called by God, and they declare the message of God and only that message. A true prophet is God's voice to men.

When Moses was called he said, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since Thou hast spoken to Thy servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." And the Lord said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say" (Ex. 4:10-12).

The most dangerous characteristic of false prophets, however, is that they, too, claim to be from God and to speak on His behalf. "An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land," God told Jeremiah. "The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule on their own authority; and My people love it so!" (Jer. 5:30-31). Again He said, "The prophets are prophesying falsehood in My name. I have neither sent them nor commanded them nor spoken to them; they are prophesying to you a false vision, divination, futility and the deception of their own minds" (14:14). And still again He said,

"Also among the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing: the committing of adultery and walking in falsehood; and they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one has turned back from his wickedness." ... Thus says the Lord of hosts, "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you. They are leading you into futility; they speak a vision of their own imagination, not from the mouth of the Lord.... I did not send these prophets, but they ran. I did not speak to them, but they prophesied." (23:14, 16, 21)

In a promise of judgment the Lord told Zechariah, "For behold, I am going to raise up a shepherd in the land who will not care for the perishing, seek the scattered, heal the broken, or sustain the one standing, but will devour the flesh of the fat sheep and tear off their hoofs" (Zech. 11:16). Such a shepherd is a greater danger to the flock than wild animals,

because he comes among them as their protector. Under the guise of the one who is supposed to feed and care for them, he instead slaughters and eats them himself. That is a picture of the antichrist, who is the prototype of all false prophets.

One of the most frightening discoveries about the People's Temple Christian Church was that a large majority of its members had been raised in Christian homes of one sort or another. Most of those who joined that church did so in the belief that it offered a higher and more genuine experience of Christian fellowship and service. Yet the church dissolved overnight when its leader, Jim Jones, and nearly a thousand of his most loyal followers committed mass suicide at Jonestown, a remote church settlement in the jungles of Guyana, South America.

In his book *Deceived*, Mel White tries to determine why so many people could be so fatally misled. Among the reasons he suggests are:

He [Jim Jones] knew how to inspire hope. He was committed to people in need; he counseled prisoners and juvenile delinquents. He started a job placement center; he opened rest homes and homes for the retarded; he had a health clinic; he organized a vocational training center; he provided free legal aid; he founded a community center; he preached about God. He even claimed to cast out demons, do miracles and heal.

But on the other hand we find all the marks of a false prophet. He promoted himself through the use of celebrities, a very common vehicle for false prophets to gain credibility. He manipulated the press; he wanted certain favorable stories; he was big on playing the press....And he used the language and the forms of faith to gain his power.

Jim Jones created a warm, purportedly Christian community. But he replaced Jesus Christ as the authority and more and more garnered loyalty to himself. He began demanding money for every service he offered and was preoccupied with sex, in both its normal and deviant forms. He would lie convincingly about anything in order to gain an advantage or make a desired impression. Before his bizarre death he had managed to gain the admiration and praises of countless church leaders,

governors, senators, congressmen, and even the president of the United States.

The greatest tragedy of Jonestown was not that nearly a thousand people died, but that they died believing they were serving God. In truth, of course, they were serving Satan, and were on their way to hell if they did not know Christ. Any believers who may have been among them incurred great loss of reward.

“For false Christs and false prophets will arise,” Jesus warned, “and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:24). Jude declares that “Certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude 4).

The scribes and Pharisees were classic examples of false shepherds. In the name of leading and caring for God’s people they instead led them further and further from His ways. Posing as God’s spokesmen they used the people to feather their own ecclesiastical nests, and cared nothing for the people or for God. They were rapaciously self-seeking and self-serving. When Jesus completely unmasked their deceit and hypocrisy (see Matt. 23) it is no wonder they crucified Him.

The scribes and Pharisees, and those who followed their pernicious teachings, did not accept Jesus’ teaching because they were dedicated to falsehood rather than the truth. On one occasion Jesus said to them,

Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word. You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies. But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me.... He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God. (John 8:43-45, 47)

“Let no one deceive you with empty words,” Paul warns the Ephesians; “for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them” (Eph. 5:6).

To the Colossians he says, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ” (Col. 2:8).

THE DANGER OF FALSE PROPHETS

Beware always warns of danger. It is not a call simply to notice or sense something, but to be on guard against it because it is so harmful. The word conveys the idea of holding the mind away. **False prophets** are more than wrong; they are dangerous, and we should not expose our minds to them. They pervert thinking and poison the soul. They are more dangerous than a cobra or a tiger, because those animals can only harm the body. False prophets are spiritual beasts and are immeasurably more deadly than the physical ones. Both Peter and Jude call them “unreasoning animals.” Peter goes on to warn that they “deceive unstable souls, luring them into their jaws through the lust of flesh” (2 Pet. 2:12; cf. Jude 10).

In Palestine, **wolves** were the most common natural enemy of sheep. They roamed the hills and valleys, looking for a sheep that strayed away from the flock or lagged behind. When a wolf found such a sheep it quickly attacked and tore it to pieces. Even a grown, healthy sheep was utterly defenseless against a wolf.

Wolves are known for being merciless and ferocious (cf. Ezek. 22:27). *Harpax* (**ravenous**) is also translated “swindler” (Luke 18:11; 1 Cor. 5:10-11; 6:10), referring metaphorically to those who deceitfully and mercilessly ravage a person of his money and possessions. **False prophets** and **wolves** are clever and wily, and are always on the lookout for new victims.

Jude gives a strong warning against false prophets and tells how believers are to respond to them. He writes, “Keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life” (v. 21). Our first need is to get ourselves right with the Lord, to make sure we are in the place of divine fellowship, blessing, and power. Then we will be prepared to “have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others,

snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh” (vv. 22-23).

The first group Jude mentions is composed of believers who have been tempted to doubt their faith, and who need comfort and assurance. The second group is composed of unbelievers who are on their way to hell and who need to be grabbed, as it were, and held back. The third group, however, is composed of those who are confirmed in false religion and who are extremely dangerous, even to the most mature Christian. We must witness to such people with special care and in special dependence on the Lord for wisdom and protection, lest we ourselves become spiritually contaminated by their polluted views and ways.

False prophets and those who follow false prophets are as dangerous to God’s people as **ravenous wolves** are to sheep.

THE DECEPTION OF FALSE PROPHETS

The danger of **false prophets** is greatly increased because of their deception. When an enemy is seen for what he is, we are alerted and can be prepared to defend ourselves. But when an enemy poses as a friend, our defenses are down. The dogs and swine of verse 6 are much more easily recognized because of their open sinfulness and rejection of God.

In Old Testament times prophets were often recognizable by what they wore. Like Elijah, they often wore rough, hairy, uncomfortable clothing as a symbol of their foregoing the normal comforts of life for the cause of God. John the Baptist, as the last prophet of the Old Covenant, wore a camel’s hair coat and ate locusts and wild honey. There were exceptions, but prophets generally could be identified by their plain, coarse clothing. For that reason, a person who wanted to impersonate a prophet would sometimes wear such clothing. Zechariah speaks of such men who “put on a hairy robe in order to deceive” (Zech. 13:4).

Similarly, shepherds invariably wore woolen clothing, made from the wool of the sheep they tended. That is the **sheep’s clothing** of which Jesus here speaks. **False prophets** do not deceive the flock by impersonating sheep but by impersonating the shepherd, who wears **sheep’s clothing** in the form of his wool garments. Just as the ancient

false prophets often wore the garments of the true prophet, so false shepherds often disguise themselves as true shepherds. Satan's man goes under the guise of God's man, claiming to teach the truth in order to deceive, mislead, and, if possible, destroy God's people.

Scripture speaks of three basic kinds of false teachers: heretics, apostates, and deceivers. Heretics are those who openly reject the word of God and teach that which is contrary to divine truth. Apostate teachers are those who once followed the true faith but have turned away from it, rejected it, and are trying to lead others away. Those two kinds of false teachers at least have the virtue of a certain honesty. They do not claim to represent orthodox, biblical Christianity.

The false shepherd (the deceiver), on the other hand, gives the appearance of orthodoxy, frequently with great declarations and fanfare. He is not a liberal or a cultist but one who speaks favorably of Christ, the cross, the Bible, the Holy Spirit, and so on, and who associates with true believers. He may go out of his way to appear orthodox, fundamental, and evangelical. From his looks, vocabulary, and associations he gives considerable evidence of genuine belief. But he is not genuine; he is a fake and a deceiver. He has the speech of orthodoxy, but is a living lie.

“For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder,” Paul goes on to explain, “for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness” (2 Cor. 11:13-15). These **false prophets** are especially dangerous because they masquerade as true prophets and therefore are able to creep into Christian circles unnoticed (Jude 4; cf. Acts 20:28-32).

False prophets are almost always pleasant and positive. They like to be with Christians, to talk like Christians, and to be identified as Christians. They know and use biblical terminology and often appear highly knowledgeable about Scripture. The doctrines they affirm are seemingly biblical.

Many false prophets also appear to be sincere, and because of that sincerity they can more easily mislead others. Paul warns that “evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2 Tim. 3:13). Being themselves deceived by the ultimate deceiver, such people can be thoroughly convinced in their own minds that

their perverted beliefs are true. They have become so deeply devoted to falsehood that darkness seems to be light, and black seems to be white.

If they are so deceptive, how then can they be identified? Most frequently they show their true colors by what they do not affirm. In other words, they are identified not so much by what they say as by what they do not say. They usually do not openly deny Jesus' divinity, His substitutionary atonement, the depravity and lostness of man, the reality and penalty of sin, the destiny of hell for unbelievers, the need for repentance, humility, and submission to God, and other such "negative" and uncomfortable truths. They simply ignore them.

In order to carry out their deceit effectively, these spurious leaders live moral and upright lives on the surface. The great commentator John Broadus wrote that many of the false prophets have come from traditional religious training, and because of the ingraining of early traditional Christian moral values they find it difficult to overtly overcome the restrictions on their minds by their early training. (*Matthew* [Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson, 1886], p. 167). Outward morality helps give the impression of spiritual genuineness and therefore helps perpetuate the deceit. But the truth is they are energized by "deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons" and have become "liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron" (1 Tim. 4:1-2). They are motivated by the desire for "sordid gain" (1 Pet. 5:2). Their false faith cannot restrain their unregenerate flesh, so the true sensuality of those "slaves of corruption" (2 Pet. 2:19) often becomes known, and it is evident that "in their greed" they exploit people "with false words" (2:3). They also have "eyes full of adultery" and "never cease from sin," possessing a "heart trained in greed" (2:14).

In *The Didache*, one of the earliest Christian writings after New Testament times, we find a section devoted to dealing with false prophets. The term used to describe them is *Christemporos*, which means "Christ merchants." False prophets use Jesus Christ and His gospel and church as means for serving their own ends. They use the things of God as mere merchandise to promote and dispense to their own advantage.

The Didache gives several means for distinguishing true prophets from false. One was that a true prophet would not remain as a house guest more than two days, because he would need to be up and about his work. A false prophet, however, would willingly stay indefinitely, since he had no real mission to accomplish except serving his own interests. The second

test was in regard to asking for money. The true prophet, said *The Didache*, would ask for bread and water, but nothing more—that is, only for necessities to keep himself going. A false prophet, on the other hand, is not the least averse to asking for or even demanding money. A third test was in the area of life-style. A person who does not lead a life that corresponds to the standards he teaches is clearly not a man of God. Still another test was in regard to willingness to work. If a person wanted to live off others and would not work for his own keep, he was a Christ trafficker.

A false prophet is always in church work for himself, to pad his own pockets, to satisfy his own greed, ego, and prestige and to gain power, influence, and recognition for himself.

Our day has more than its share of Christ merchants. Through books, radio, television, recordings, in churches, conferences, seminars, crusades, and by various other means they package and sell the gospel in much the same way that Madison Avenue sells cars and soap. They are insincere peddlers of the Word of God who corrupt it for their own ends (2 Cor. 2:17).

THE DAMNATION OF FALSE PROPHETS

The destiny of **false prophets** is only implied in verse 19, but it is made explicit in both the preceding and following passages. Because they enter by the wide gate and travel the broad way, their end is destruction (v. 13). And when they come before Jesus in the day of judgment and say “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” He will respond, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (vv. 22-23).

Peter tells us that, along with the heretics and apostate false teachers, “their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep,” that they will be kept “under punishment for the day of judgment,” that like wild beasts they will “also be destroyed,” and that “the black darkness has been reserved” for them (2 Pet. 2:3, 9,12,17; cf. Jude 13).

WATCHING

You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits. (7:16-20)

After warning about false prophets, Jesus tells us what to watch for in identifying them. Because they are so extremely deceptive and dangerous—ravenous spiritual and moral wolves in sheep’s clothing—the Lord would hardly have left us without means of determining who they are.

Jesus assures us that we **will know them by their fruits**. A fruit tree may be beautiful, decorative, and offer pleasant shade in the summer. But its primary purpose is to bear fruit, and it is therefore judged by what it produces and not by how it looks. (That understanding is the key to interpreting John 15 properly.)

Similarly a prophet—used in this passage in the broadest sense of one who speaks for God—is judged by his life, not simply by his appearance or his words. The kind of person he really is cannot help being revealed. Some false prophets are noticeably spurious and only the most gullible person would be taken in by them. Others conceal their true nature with remarkable skill, and only careful observation will expose them for what they are. But there is a true assurance in the statement **you will know them**. There is no need to be deceived if we look closely.

It is the cleverly deceptive false prophet that Jesus is speaking about here. No one needs help in deciding that a tree is bad if it bears shriveled, discolored, and obviously rotten fruit—or no fruit at all. It is the tree that appears to bear good fruit, but does not, that is deceptive.

It is possible for **grapes** to be stuck on **thorn bushes** and for **figs** to be stuck on **thistles**. From a distance they might appear to be growing on

real fruit trees. Because the fruit is genuine, naive persons might conclude that the tree itself also has to be genuine.

It is possible for real Christians to be taken in by false prophets. When believers are careless about study of and obedience to the Word, lazy about prayer, and uncritical about the things of God, it is easy for them to be deceived by someone who pretends to be orthodox—especially if he is pleasant, positive, and permissive. When that happens, they are in danger of becoming **grapes on thorn bushes** and **figs on thistles**. Satan loves to use God’s own people to promote his evil work, seeking, if it were possible, even to snatch them from their heavenly Father (Matt. 24:24).

It is also possible for a tree itself to bear fruit that is colorful, well formed, and attractive, but which is bitter, distasteful, and even poisonous. That kind of **bad tree** with its **bad fruit** is much harder to judge than **thorn bushes** that have **grapes** on them or **thistles** that have **figs** on them. In the second case, both the tree and the fruit appear to be genuine. What it **bears** has to be examined carefully to determine if it is **good fruit** or **bad fruit**. A mature believer who has developed discernment can spot the bad tree and bad fruit (Heb. 5:14).

Judging the fruit of false prophets, of course, is not nearly so easy as judging fruit in an orchard. But from Scripture we discover at least three primary tests we can apply in order to know. They are in the areas of character, creed, and converts.

CHARACTER

A person’s basic character—his inner motives, standards, loyalties, attitudes, and ambitions—will eventually show through in what he does and how he acts. John the Baptist told the hypocritical Pharisees and Sadducees who came to be baptized to first “bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance” (Luke 3:8). Their manner of living belied their claim that they loved and served God. When the multitude then asked John what good fruit was, he replied, “Let the man who has two tunics share with him who has none; and let him who has food do likewise” (v. 11). To the tax-gatherers who asked what they should do, John said, “Collect no more than what you have been ordered to” (v. 13). John was saying that the person

who is genuinely repentant and who truly trusts and loves God will also love and help his fellow man (cf. James 2:15-17; 1 John 3:17; 4:20).

No person is saved *by* good works, but every believer is saved *for* good works. “For we are His workmanship,” Paul tells us, “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). In another place Paul admonishes us to “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col. 1:10). “By this is My Father glorified,” Jesus says, “that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.... If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments, and abide in His love” (John 15:8,10).

As with everything that is godly and righteous, true fruit-bearing begins on the inside, in the heart. Paul speaks of our “having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:11) and informs us that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23).

A person who belongs to Jesus Christ and who is called by God and given God’s message will give evidence of **good fruit** both in his attitudes and his actions. A person who does not belong to God, especially a false prophet who claims to be God’s messenger, will sooner or later manifest the **bad fruit** that the **bad tree** of his sensual life inevitably produces.

False prophets can disguise and hide their **bad fruit** for a while with ecclesiastical trappings, biblical knowledge, and evangelical vocabulary. They can cover it by belonging to Christian organizations, associating with Christian leaders, and by talking about divine things. But how they talk, act, and react when not in the view of Christians will eventually expose their true loyalty and convictions. What is in the heart will emerge, and corrupt theology will result in a corrupt life. False teaching and perverted living are inseparable, and eventually will become manifest.

Peter tells us that the true and mature believer will be growing in faith, moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. “If these qualities are yours and are increasing,” he says, “they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:5-8). Those, on the

other hand, who are false and deceiving prophets, in “speaking out arrogant words of vanity... entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption” (2:18-19). And their false believers may temporarily escape “the defilements of the world,” but they will eventually return to their “vomit” and “to wallowing in the mire” (2 Pet. 2:20-22).

Unless those who claim to be God’s spokesmen give evidence that their deepest motives and life patterns are to honor, glorify, and magnify God, and to grow in humility, holiness, and obedience, we can be sure that God has not called or sent them. If they are oriented to money, prestige, recognition, popularity, power, sexual looseness, and selfishness, they do not belong to Jesus Christ. If they are proud, arrogant, resentful, egotistical, and self-indulgent, they clearly are false prophets. The true test, a beatitude attitude of humility, can be summed up in Jesus’ words: “He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who is seeking the glory of the one who sent Him, He is true, and there is no unrighteousness in Him” (John 7:18).

Martyn Lloyd-Jones wisely comments,

A Christian can generally be known by his very appearance. The man who really believes in the holiness of God, and who knows his own sinfulness and the blackness of his own heart, the man who believes in the judgment of God and the possibility of hell and torment, the man who really believes that he himself is so vile and helpless that nothing but the coming of the Son of God from heaven to earth and His going to the bitter shame and agony and cruelty of the cross could ever save him, and reconcile him to God—this man is going to show all that in his personality. He is a man who is bound to give the impression of meekness, he is bound to be humble. Our Lord reminds us here that if a man is not humble, we are to be very wary of him. He can put on a kind of sheep’s clothing, but that is not true humility, that is not true meekness. And if a man’s doctrine is wrong, it will generally show itself at this point. He will be affable and pleasant, he will appeal to the natural man, and to the things that are physical and carnal; but he will not give the

impression of being a man who has seen himself as a hell-bound sinner, and who has been saved by the grace of God alone. (*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* vol. 2 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], pp. 258-59)

It is nearly always the case that false prophets will attract avowed unbelievers as well as nominal and carnal believers. He appeals to the natural man and carefully avoids anything that is offensive to man's proud, fallen nature. He makes a point of being attractive, likeable, and of giving no offense.

But no person, no matter how clever and deceitful, can indefinitely hide a character that is rotten and out of tune with God. John Calvin said, "Nothing is more difficult to counterfeit than virtue." It demands too much. It demands more than any person has in himself, and when God's divine provision and power are absent the charade cannot last long.

CREED

A second area in which a false prophet can be judged is that of doctrine. Superficially what he teaches may seem biblical and orthodox, but careful examination will always reveal ideas that are unscriptural and the absence of a strong, clear theology. False ideas will be taught, or at least important truths will be omitted. Frequently there will be a combination of both. Eventually the fruit will show a tree for what it is, because **a good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit.**

On a later occasion Jesus said to the Pharisees, "You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil" (Matt. 12:34-35).

When judging whether or not a teaching is from God, Isaiah counsels: "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn," that is, they have no light (Isa. 8:20). The teaching of a false prophet cannot withstand scrutiny under the divine light of Scripture.

All false prophets will have an incomplete, distorted, or perverted view of Christ. If Satan can confuse and mislead people about the person and work of Christ, he has confused and misled them at the very heart of the gospel.

Jesus has just shown that the way of salvation, the gate to God's kingdom and life, is narrow and demanding, whereas the gate to hell and destruction is broad (Matt. 7:13-14). Immediately He begins the warning about false prophets and how to identify them. The false shepherd's way to heaven will never be God's way, and their way of living will never be according to God's standards.

Arthur Pink says, "False prophets are to be found in the circles of the most orthodox, and they pretend to have a fervent love for souls, yet they fatally delude multitudes concerning the way of salvation. The pulpit, platform, and pamphlet hucksters have wantonly lowered the standard of divine holiness and so adulterated the Gospel in order to make it palatable to the carnal mind."

The creed of false prophets never has a narrow gate or a narrow way. On the surface their message may sound difficult and demanding, but it will always rest on the foundation of man's works and will therefore always be accomplishable by man's own effort. They never reveal the depth or danger of sin and depravity, the need for repentance, forgiveness, and submission to the Lord, or the destiny of judgment, condemnation, and eternal destruction for those apart from God. There is no brokenness over sin and no longing after righteousness. They have easy answers for small problems. "They have healed the brokenness of My people superficially," Jeremiah says, "saying, 'Peace, peace,' but there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14). There is no humility, no warning of judgment, and no call for repentance and a contrite heart of obedience.

They have a ready hearing among most people, because they say only what people like to hear. Just as did ancient Israel in Jeremiah's time, people today like it that way (Jer. 5:31). They want to hear illusions, not truth. They are enamored with pleasure and fantasy and resent being confronted with anything disquieting and condemnatory. They want encouragement but not correction, positive words but not negative truth. They will accept grace as long as it is cheap grace and does not reflect against their own sinfulness, inadequacies, and lostness.

The creed of the false prophet, if he has any at all, will be vague, indefinite, and ethereal. No demanding truth will be absolute or clear-cut, and every principle will be easy and attractive.

Arthur Pink declares, “Any preacher who rejects God’s law, who denies repentance to be a condition of salvation, who assures the giddy and godless that they are loved by God, who declares that saving faith is nothing more than an act of the will which every person has the power to perform is a false prophet and should be shunned as a deadly plague” (*An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, p. 362). False prophets talk much about the love of God but nothing of His holiness, much about people who are deprived but nothing, about those who are depraved, much about God’s universal fatherhood of every human being but nothing about His unique fatherhood only of those who are His children through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ, much about what God will give to us but nothing about obedience to Him, much about health and happiness but nothing about holiness and sacrifice. Their message is a message of gaps, the greatest gap of which leaves out the truth that saves.

CONVERTS

False prophets can also be identified by their converts and followers. They will attract to themselves people who have the same superficial, self-centered, and unscriptural orientation as they do. “Many will follow their sensuality,” Peter tells us, “and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned” (2 Pet. 2:2). They have many followers because they teach and promote what the majority of people want to hear and believe (cf. 2 Tim. 4:3).

Their followers will be like them—egotistical, proud, self-centered, self-indulgent, self-willed, and self-satisfied, while being religious. They will be both self-oriented and group-oriented, but never God-oriented or Scripture-oriented.

God has not ordained false prophets, but He has ordained that they exist. Paul explains to the Corinthian church, “There must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you” (1 Cor. 11:19). False factions will act as magnets to

attract others who are false. In that indirect way they will help protect true believers by partly separating the chaff from the wheat.

But true believers who are carnal and worldly can also be attracted and corrupted, becoming grapes on thorn bushes and figs on thistles. Generally speaking, however, false prophets attract false believers, and in that way act as a sort of negative protection for the true church.

False prophets and their false followers do “not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. And for this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness” (2 Thess. 2:10-12). Ultimately, God makes sure that **every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire** (cf. John 15:2, 6). Peter says such shepherds are “bringing swift destruction upon themselves” (2 Pet. 2:1; cf. Jer. 23:30-40).

Our Lord closes this potent section with an affirming repetition of verse 16, **so then, you will know them by their fruits**. Thus we are once again called to be discerning when listening to preachers who call us to the broad way that leads to death and hell.

Empty Words and Empty Hearts (7:21-29)

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.”

Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock. And everyone who hears these words of Mine, and does not act upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and it fell, and great was its fall.

The result was that when Jesus had finished these words, the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes. (7:21-29)

Jesus is still giving the invitation of his sermon—calling people from false religion to the true kingdom. He has said that few enter the narrow gate of salvation because first of all it must be found (v. 14), implying that it must be sought and searched for. No one stumbles into the kingdom inadvertently. Second, the narrow and demanding way of salvation is the complete opposite of the way of the world, which is broad, easy, and indulgent. Third, the narrow gate into the kingdom requires going through alone and naked, taking no possessions, no works, no pride,

no self-righteousness. Fourth, as the Lord mentions in the parallel account in Luke 13:24, we must strive to enter in penitence and brokenness of heart. Fifth, false prophets must be avoided, because they deceive many people by luring them into the broad way that leads to destruction (vv. 15-20).

Now Jesus gives a final reason why so few enter the narrow gate of salvation: self-deception. J. C. Ryle says, “The Lord Jesus winds up the Sermon on the Mount by a passage of heart-piercing application. He turns from false prophets to false professors, from unsound teachers to unsound hearers” (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospel: St. Matthew* [London: James Clarke, 1965], pp. 69-70). Not only can false prophets deceive us about the way of salvation, but we can deceive ourselves. After warning us about false prophets, the Lord now warns men about themselves. Sinful man is biased in his own favor and, because of pride, tends to reject the true gospel.

The two categories of self-deception are those of mere verbal profession and of mere intellectual knowledge. The first, described in verses 21-23, involves those who say but do not do, and the second, described in verses 24-27, involves those who hear but do not do.

The Lord is not speaking to irreligious people, to atheists or agnostics. Nor is he speaking to pagans, heretics, or apostates. He is speaking specifically to people who are devotedly religious—but who are deluded in thinking they are on the road to heaven when they are really on the broad road to hell. They are not unlike those in the last days who Paul says will hold a form of godliness but will deny its power (2 Tim. 3:5).

Various polls in recent years have estimated that perhaps fifty percent of Americans identify themselves as born-again Christians. But on the basis of the Bible’s description of true believers and the fact that few (cf. Matt. 7:14) really come on God’s terms, those estimates could not be remotely correct. By scriptural standards, it is hard to believe that even half of the church members in the United States are true believers.

The New Testament not only gives extremely high standards for judging the true Christian life, but also gives many warnings about spiritual self-deception in regard to salvation. In Matthew 25 Jesus tells of the five foolish virgins who pretended devotion to the bridegroom but missed meeting him because of their unpreparedness (vv. 1-12), and of

those professed believers (symbolized as goats) who are surprised that the Lord rejects them because they never truly served Him (vv. 32-33, 41-46).

What lulls people into such deception? First of all, many professed Christians—and even many true Christians—hold a false doctrine of assurance. Often it is because the person who witnessed to them told them that all they had to do was make a profession of faith, walk an aisle, raise a hand, say a prayer, and never doubt what the Lord had done in their lives. Perhaps they have been taught that to ever doubt their salvation is to doubt God's Word and integrity. Unfortunately, many evangelists, pastors, and personal workers attempt to certify a person's salvation apart from the convicting work of the Holy Spirit and the evidence of fruit with continuance in obedience to the Word (John 8:31). But we have no right to assure a person of something we cannot be certain is true. God's own Holy Spirit will witness His reality to those who truly belong to Him (Rom. 8:14-16).

Peter makes clear that one's calling and choosing are made secure by increasing qualities of fruitfulness that demonstrate the genuineness of salvation and eliminate stumbling over doubt (2 Pet. 1:3-11). And our Lord teaches that some people appear saved, but are not (see Matt. 13:20-22). Quick and easy assurance can deceive.

A second contributor to self-deception is failure of self-examination. Through a faulty and presumptuous view of God's grace, some professed believers blithely go through life oblivious to and unconcerned about their sins. Yet the Lord tells His people to examine their lives each time they come to His table (1 Cor. 11:28). Paul tells us, "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?" (2 Cor. 13:5). Such examination looks at the heart and the inner motives and desires to see if they are set toward God's holiness and glory. Even the weakest Christian has pure longings in his heart for righteousness—even though he lets his flesh hinder their fulfillment (Rom. 7:14-25).

John tells us, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9). A person who is not concerned about having his present sins cleansed has good reason to doubt that his past sin

has been forgiven. A person who has no desire to come to the Lord for continued cleansing has reason to doubt that he ever came to the Lord to receive salvation.

When a couple lives together without being married, when a person practices homosexuality, is deceptive and dishonest in business, is hateful and vengeful, or habitually practices any sin without remorse or repentance, such persons cannot be Christian—no matter what sort of experience they claim to have had or what sort of testimony they now make. God’s Word is explicit: “Do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9-10). Again Paul warns, “For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” (Eph. 5:5-6). In each of those extremely somber warnings Paul pleads with his readers not to be deceived.

The person who professes to be a Christian but who habitually and unrepentantly continues in known sin makes out God to be liar, because His Word expressly denies that any such person belongs to Him (1 John 3:6-10).

A third cause of self-deception is inordinate concentration on religious activity. Attending church, hearing sermons, singing songs of the faith, reading the Bible, attending Bible studies, and many other perfectly good and helpful activities can actually insulate a person from the very God he is supposedly worshiping and serving. Those things can cause a believer to think he is being faithful and obedient, when in reality he may not be; and they can cause an unbeliever to think he is saved, when in reality he is not.

A fourth cause of self-deception is what may be called the fair exchange, or balancing out, approach. Instead of confessing and asking forgiveness for his sins, a person may give himself the benefit of the doubt and rationalize his salvation by thinking that the good things he does balance out the bad, that the positive cancels the negative. But in the first place, apart from God it is impossible to do anything that is truly good,

because “there is none who does good, there is not even one,” Paul tells us (Rom. 3:12), quoting David (Ps. 14:1-3; 53:1-3). In the second place, it is the sin itself—not an excess or imbalance of it—that separates us from God and brings death and damnation (Rom. 5:12; 6:23). Whatever good we might somehow accomplish would not cancel those consequences of sin, any more than eating right and exercising will save the life of a person infected with a deadly disease. His only hope is in receiving a cure for the disease, not in trying to balance off its deadly effect by keeping his body otherwise healthy. Isaiah said that the best deeds of men before God are as “a filthy garment,” that is, a menstrual cloth (Isa. 64:6).

Apart from outright hypocrites and the blatantly disobedient, there are two other common kinds of deceived people who believe they are Christians when they are not. One is the superficial person, the one who has had little or no instruction in the gospel and who thinks that his attending Sunday school as a child, having been baptized, being a church member, or other such things put him in good standing with God.

The other type of person is much more knowledgeable about the Bible and the gospel, and is often heavily involved in church activities of various sorts. But he lives in a constant state of sinfulness, with no thought of confessing and forsaking his sin or of seeking after righteousness. He looks to feelings, experiences, healings, angels, earthly material blessings, promises, and a host of other external things for proof of his salvation. He is not concerned about decreasing sin or increasing righteousness. He is not concerned about God’s commands, God’s standards, or God’s glory, but only what he can get out of God for himself. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones suggests, he is more concerned about the by-products of the faith than the fruit itself (*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 2:285).

This group includes those who are more committed to a denomination or Christian organization than to the Word of God. It includes those who are academically interested in theology—even orthodox, biblical theology—but not in obedience to the Bible on which that theology is based. It includes those who overemphasize and distort a particular aspect of biblical truth, to the exclusion and sometimes contradiction of other truths. It encompasses those who are overindulgent in the name of grace but lack penitence.

Just as there are many people who are deceived by the broad road that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13), there are also many ways in which those people are deceived, of which the ones mentioned above are only a sampling. There is almost no limit to the means by which men can be deluded by Satan, by other men, and by themselves. In every case there is failure to come through the narrow gate with repentance, submission to the Lord, humility, and a desire for holiness. It is therefore of immeasurable importance to recognize and be on guard against beguilings of every sort. But the most important objective is not to identify all of the many deceitful ways but to find and follow the one true way.

The many delusions found in the broad way of destruction are evidenced in two basic manifestations, which Jesus focuses on here: empty words and works and empty hearts. Those in the first group make mere verbal profession of faith and works. Those in the second have mere intellectual knowledge of the gospel they hear. Those in the first group *say* but do not do; those in the second *hear* but do not do.

EMPTY WORDS

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.” (7:21-23)

A Jew could use the term **lord** simply as a title of respect and honor, given to any political, military, or religious leader, including teachers. But for those people to say, **Lord, Lord**, suggests much more than human respect, as their following comments make clear. That they claimed to have prophesied, cast out demons, and performed miracles in Jesus’ **name** indicates they acknowledged Him as **Lord** in a supernatural way. **Lord** was a common Jewish substitute title for Jehovah, or Yahweh,

which name they considered too holy to utter. Therefore to address Jesus as **Lord** was to address Him as the one true God. To address Him as **Lord, Lord** was to add a spirit of intense zeal to demonstrate strength of devotion and dedication. In verse 22, the three references to **your name** are emphatic and convey the significance of who He is. Jesus is therefore talking about those who make a profession of faith in Him.

These people claim to be followers of the God of Israel, the Creator and Lord of all earth. Not only that, but they acknowledge Jesus Himself to be divine, because they **will say to Me** [that is, to Jesus] **on that day, “Lord, Lord.”** And the fact that they have claimed so many outstanding works in His name tells us they are especially fervent religious workers.

The final judgment, **on that day**, is presented here in general, without reference to the distinction between the separate tribunals for believers (2 Cor. 5:10) and for unbelievers (Rev. 20:11-15). **That day** is a frequently used reference to the era of divine judgment known throughout Scripture as “the day of the Lord” (Isa. 2:12; Joel 2:1; Mal. 4:5; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10; etc.). Matthew uses **that day** here and in 24:36, where it refers to the second coming of the Savior. It is noteworthy that the second coming parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) makes reference to those virgins who are shut out of the kingdom as crying out, “Lord, Lord,” to which He also replies, “I do not know you” (vv. 11-12). These few passages together reveal that Matthew has in mind the unspecified season of judgment that will accompany the return of Jesus Christ.

That some of the ones Jesus is talking about here are true believers is shown by His saying, **Not everyone** and **many**. The same **many** who entered the wide gate (v. 13) are now at the end of the broad way facing the Judge. For some people, however, the claim **Lord, Lord** will be legitimate, because Jesus will have indeed been their Lord on earth and they will have served Him genuinely.

If Jesus is speaking about the great white throne judgment, many professing believers who are *not* genuine will already have spent centuries in hell awaiting their final judgment (see Luke 16:23-26; Acts 1:25). Because they were so zealous and active and diligent in religious work—in the Lord’s own **name**—they are incredulous that they are even standing before Christ to be judged. Even at that time they will address Christ as **Lord** and speak to Him in desperation with the greatest respect and sincerity. Their words and their works will seem impressive to them, but

their lives will not support the claim of their lips. In Luke 6:46 Jesus said, “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”

It is not the one who simply claims the Lord, but the one **who does the will of My Father who is in heaven** who is saved. The issue is obedience to the Word of God. “If you abide in My Word, then you are truly disciples of Mine,” Jesus said (John 8:31; cf. 6:66-69; Matt. 24:13; Col. 1:22-23; 1 Tim. 4:16; Heb. 3:14; 10:38-39; 1 John 2:19). Salvation and obedience to the will of God are inseparable, as the writer of Hebrews makes clear: “He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation” (5:9; cf. Rom. 1:5; 6:16; 15:18; 16:19, 26; 1 Pet. 1:2, 22).

Jesus’ word to the disobedient claimers will be, **I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness**. All their words of respect and honor and all their works of dedication and devotion will be declared empty and worthless. They may have had God’s name in their mouths, but rebellion was in their hearts.

His saying, **I never knew you**, does not, of course, mean that Jesus was unaware of their identity. He knows quite well who these persons are; they are deceived professing Christians whose lives were spent in the **practice [of] lawlessness**.

“To know” was a Hebrew idiom that represented intimate relations. It was frequently used of marital intimacy (see Gen. 4:1,17; etc.; where “had relations” is literally “knew,” as in the KJV). It was also used of God’s special intimacy with His chosen people Israel and with all of those who trust in Him. In a unique and beautiful way the Lord “knows those who take refuge in Him” (Nah. 1:7). The Good Shepherd knows His sheep intimately (John 10:1-14).

Jesus therefore will say to those who claim Him but never trusted in Him, **I never knew you**. “I have never known you as My disciples, and you have never known Me as your Lord and Savior. We have no intimate part of each other. You chose your kingdom, and it was not My kingdom.” **Depart from Me** is the resulting final sentence to hell, and is identical in thought to the judgment of Matthew 25:41 at the Lord’s return: “Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.” The lake of fire awaits all false professors (Rev. 20:15).

Practice lawlessness is a present participle in the Greek, indicating continuous, regular action, and identifies the unforgiven sin and

unrighteous life patterns of those claimers of salvation. **You** continually and habitually **practice lawlessness** is the idea. Profession of Christ and **practice of lawlessness** are totally incompatible. A good tree *cannot* bear that sort of fruit (Matt. 7:18; John 3:4-10).

A good tree not only can but will bear good fruit, and a life that professes to be Christian, but in no way reflects Christ's righteousness, has no part in Him. That kind of profession comes from the kind of faith that has no works and is dead (James 2:17). It is the demon faith James refers to (James 2:19), which is orthodox and accurate, but unholy. In the ultimate and most tragic sense such a false profession is to take the Lord's name in vain. "The blasphemy of the sanctuary," G. Campbell Morgan observed, "is far more awful than the blasphemy of the slum" (*The Gospel According to Matthew* [New York: Revell, 1929], p. 79). Mere professed devotion to Christ is but another Judas kiss.

The Lord knows well that even His most faithful disciples will fail, stumble, and fall into sin. Otherwise He would not have told us to pray, "Forgive us our debts" (Matt. 6:12). And when "we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). No Christian is sinless, but the fact that we continually confess our sins, seek the Lord's forgiveness, and long for righteousness (Matt. 5:6) is evidence that we belong to Him. God's will may not be the *perfection* of the true believer's life, but it is the *direction* of it.

Those who continually practice **lawlessness**, however, give evidence that they do *not* belong to Christ. They do not recognize or confess their sins or hunger for righteousness, because they have no part of Christ. All religious activity, no matter how orthodox and fervent, that does not result from obedience to the lordship of Christ and the pursuit of His glory is rebellion against the law of God, which demands heart conformity.

This passage is all the more amazing when one considers the impressive works that those professing believers claim to have accomplished. They tell the Lord, **Did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?**

As already mentioned, we know from verse 21 (**not everyone**) that some of these claims will be made by genuine believers. And because

Jesus does not question the factualness of the claims, it is possible that actual prophecies were made, demons cast out, and some kind of miracles performed even by those who were not genuine believers.

There are three possible explanations for the claim of the false believers. It may be that they were allowed to do those amazing works by God's power. God put words in Balaam's mouth, even though that prophet was false and wicked (Num. 23:5). King Saul, after he became apostate had the "Spirit of God [come] upon him mightily, so that he prophesied" (1 Sam. 10:10). The wicked high priest Caiaphas unwittingly and unintentionally "prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation" (John 11:51).

A second possibility is that those amazing acts were accomplished by Satan's power. Jesus predicted that "false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect" (Matt. 24:24). The unbelieving sons of Sceva, for example, were Jewish exorcists, who made their living casting out demons (Acts 19:13-14). Mark 9:38-40 tells of someone outside the apostles casting out demons. Paul promises false signs in the last days, lying wonders of Satan (2 Thess. 2:8-10). Acts 8:11 describes the work of a satanic sorcerer. Today there are miracle workers, healers, and exorcists who claim to work for Jesus Christ but are satanic deceivers.

A third possibility is that some of the claims were simply false. The prophecies, exorcisms, and miracles were fake and contrived. No doubt all three will be represented.

But whether the works themselves were done in God's power or not, the people who did them did not belong to Him and did not truly recognize Him as **Lord**, despite their profession. They had no part in His kingdom or its righteousness, and those works, whether genuine or false, divine or Satanic, would stand them in no good stead before the judgment seat of Christ.

The words of an engraving from the cathedral of Lübeck, Germany, beautifully reflect our Lord's teaching here:

Thus speaketh Christ our Lord to us, You call Me master and obey Me not, you call Me light and see Me not, you call Me the way and walk Me not, you call Me life and live Me not, you call Me wise and follow Me not, you call Me fair and love Me not,

you call Me rich and ask Me not, you call Me eternal and seek Me not, if I condemn thee, blame Me not.

EMPTY HEARTS

Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock. And everyone who hears these words of Mine, and does not act upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and it fell, and great was its fall. (7:24-27)

The second evidence that the many (vv. 13, 22) who are in the broad way will not enter the kingdom is that their lives are not built on the foundation of Christ and His Word. Again Jesus picks up the theme of man's own righteousness, the righteousness that is totally unacceptable to God and that will in no way qualify a person for His kingdom (Matt. 5:20).

In the first illustration (vv. 21-23) we see a contrast between the true and false verbal professions of faith and good works. Here we see contrasts between obedient and disobedient hearers. Both groups hear God's true Word, but some hear and obey, and some hear and disobey; some turn their trust to God's righteousness, and some continue trusting in their own, though that does not become visible until the judgment.

The implication is that even those who disobey believe that they belong to Christ and make a convincing profession of faith in Him. They hear God's Word and recognize it as God's Word, but wrongly believe that simply knowing and recognizing it are enough to please God and guarantee them a place in His kingdom. Like those who say, "Lord, Lord,"

and do amazing religious works but really “practice lawlessness,” the false hearers build their religious house, but are self-deceived as to its viability.

In the illustration of those who make false professions, the true believers are mentioned only by implication (“not everyone who says to me,” v. 21). In the illustration of the hearers and builders, however, both the true and the false believers are clearly described. In these two groups we see many similarities but also some radical differences.

SIMILARITIES

First of all, both builders have heard the gospel. **Everyone who hears these words of Mine** applies both to the **wise man** (v. 24) and to the **foolish man** (v. 26). They both know the way of salvation.

Second, they both proceed to build a **house** after they have heard the way of salvation. The **wise man** builds his house, which represents his life, on **these words of Mine**. The implication is that the **foolish man**, although he **does not act upon Christ’s words**, thinks that his **house** is secure simply because he has heard and acknowledged the **words**. He believes the life he lives is Christian and therefore pleasing to God. He does not intentionally build a **house** he thinks is going to **fall**. Both builders have confidence their houses will stand; but one man’s confidence is in the Lord and the other man’s is in himself.

Third, both builders build their houses in the same general location, evidenced by their apparently being hit by the same storm. In other words, the outward circumstances of their lives were essentially the same. One had no advantage over the other. They lived in the same town and possibly attended the same church, heard the same preaching, went to the same Bible study, and fellowshiped with the same friends.

Fourth, the implication is that they built the same kind of **house**. Outwardly their houses were very much alike. From all appearances the **foolish man** lived much in the same way as the **wise man**. We might say they were both religious, theologically orthodox, moral, served in the church, supported it financially, and were responsible citizens of the community. They seemed to believe alike and live alike.

DIFFERENCES

The differences between the two builders and the two houses they built were not noticeable from the outside. But they were immeasurably more important than the similarities. The key is to understand that one does **act upon** God's Word (obedience) and the other **does not act upon** His Word (disobedience). One builds using the divine specifications, the other uses his own.

By far the greatest difference between the specifications of these builders and the way they build is in the foundations they laid. The **wise man... built his house upon the rock**, whereas the **foolish man ... built his house upon the sand**.

Petra (rock) does not mean a stone or even a boulder, but a great outcropping of rock, a large expanse of bedrock. It is solid, stable, and unmovable. **Sand**, by contrast, is loose, unstable, and extremely movable. The land agents selling lots on the sand are the false prophets Jesus has just warned about (vv. 15-20).

The scribes and Pharisees had a complex and involved set of religious traditions which they regarded as having great value before God. But all those traditions were external, superficial, and unstable. They had no spiritual or moral substance or stability. They were shifting **sand**, composed entirely of the opinions, speculations, and standards of men. Those who created and followed them took no account of obedience to God's Word, purity of the heart, spirituality of the soul, or integrity of behavior. Their only concern was for appearance, the compelling desire to be seen and "honored by men" (Matt. 6:2).

As Arthur Pink says of such people,

They bring their bodies to the house of prayer but not their souls; they worship with their mouths, but not "in spirit and in truth." They are sticklers for immersion or early morning communion, yet take no thought about keeping their hearts with all diligence. They boast of their orthodoxy; but disregard the precepts of Christ. Multitudes of professing Christians abstain from external acts of violence, yet hesitate not to rob their neighbors of a good name by spreading evil reports against them. They contribute

regularly to the “pastor’s salary,” but shrink not from misrepresenting their goods and cheating their customers, persuading themselves that “business is business.” They have more regard for the laws of man than those of God, for His fear is not before their eyes.

But the **wise man** builds **his house upon a rock**, and I believe the **rock** spoken of here is God’s Word—**these words of Mine**. This builder is one who hears Jesus’ **words ... and acts on them**. Building on the **rock** is equivalent to obeying God’s Word.

After Peter confessed, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus said, “flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church” (Matt. 16:16-18). This “rock” (*petra*) is the same **rock** as that in Matthew 7:24-25. It is the bedrock of God’s Word, His divine revelation. It is the divine revelation such as was given to Peter by the “Father who is heaven,” and is the only **rock** on which the Christian life can be built.

The mark of true discipleship is not simply hearing and believing, but believing and doing. The true disciples of Jesus Christ, the only true converts of the gospel, are those who are “doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was” (James 1:22-24). In other words, a person who professes to know Christ but does not obey Christ, has no lasting image of what the new life is all about. He glimpses Christ, and glimpses what Christ can do for him, but his image of Christ and of the new life in Christ soon fade. His experience with the gospel is shallow, superficial, and short-lived.

“By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments,” John declares. “The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked” (1 John 2:3-6). Paul powerfully and convincingly asserts the same thing: “To those

who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled. They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient, and worthless for any good deed” (Titus 1:15-16).

To profess knowledge of God and His truth but not follow God obediently and live His truth is to be deceived. It is to have entered by the wide gate and to be walking on the broad way that leads to destruction. It is to have a **house** built **upon the sand**.

The only validation we can ever have of salvation is a life of obedience. That is the only proof Scripture mentions of our being under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Obedience is the sine qua non of salvation.

The **house** built on the **rock** is the life of obedience, the life Jesus has been explaining throughout the Sermon on the Mount. It is the life that has a scriptural view of itself, as described in the Beatitudes. It is the life that has a scriptural view of the world, and sees itself as God’s means for preserving and enlightening the world while not being a part of it. It is the life that has the divine view of Scripture and that determines not to alter God’s Word in the slightest degree. It is a life that is concerned about internal righteousness rather than external form. It is a life that has a godly attitude toward what is said and what is done, toward motives, things, money, and other people. It is a life of genuineness rather than hypocrisy, and of God’s righteousness rather than self-righteousness.

The **house** built on the **rock** is the life that empties itself of self-righteousness and pride, that is overwhelmed by and mourns over its own sin, that makes the maximum effort to enter the narrow gate and be faithful in the narrow way of Christ and His Word. Such a builder does not build his life or place his hope on ceremony, ritual, visions, experiences, feelings, or miracles but on the Word of God and that alone.

The **sand** is composed of human opinions, attitudes, and wills, which are always shifting and always unstable. To build on **sand** is to build on self-will, self-fulfillment, self-purpose, self-sufficiency, self-satisfaction, and self-righteousness. To build on **sand** is to be unteachable, to be “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 3:7).

To build the **house** of one’s life on the **sand** is to follow the ultimate deception of Satan, which is to make a person believe he is saved

when he is not. Because that person is under the delusion that he is safe, he sees no reason either to resist Satan or to seek God.

Besides the great difference in the foundations they lay, the **wise man** builds his **house** the hard way, whereas the **foolish man** builds his the easy way. The one chooses the narrow gate and the other the broad. The one searches carefully for a solid foundation of **rock** on which to build; the other simply finds a section of sand in a desirable location and starts to build.

The easy way is attractive for several reasons, the first of which is that it is quick. The foolish person is always in a hurry. His first desire is to please himself, and he takes the shortest route to that end. In church work he wants the quick, easy solution, the one that causes the least controversy and hassle, with no consideration of how the solution may square with Scripture. He is for easy evangelism, easy believism, and easy discipleship, because they bring quick results that are simple to see and measure. He has no time for searching the Word for the right truth with which to witness, or for soul-searching or sound conviction. He sees a verbal profession, a card signed, or a prayer prayed as sufficient to bring a person to Christ. He is perfectly willing to declare a person saved without his having any awareness that he is lost.

The foolish person also likes the easy way because he is basically superficial. That which is superficial requires little planning, little effort, little care to detail, and little concern for quality or standards. The person who is superficial looks for what is pleasing rather than for what is right, for what is enjoyable rather than for what is true, for what satisfies himself rather than what satisfies God. He looks to Christianity for instant results, instant pleasure, and instant rewards. He cares much about spiritual “highs” but nothing about spiritual “depths.”

Of his own day Charles Spurgeon wrote,

Want of depth, want of sincerity, want of zeal in religion—this is the want of our times. Want of an eye to God in religion, lack of sincere dealing with one’s soul, neglect of using the lancet with our hearts, neglect of the search warrant which God gives out against sin, carelessness concerning living upon Christ; much reading about Him, much talking about Him, but too little feeding on His flesh and drinking of His blood—these are the

causes of a tottering profession and a baseless hope. (Cited by Pink in *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974], p. 423)

In His parable of the sower Jesus spoke of the person who “hears the word, and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away” (Matt. 13:20-21). He receives quickly and falls away quickly. He likes God’s promises but not His requirements.

The **foolish man** always has excuses when Jesus makes demands on his life. When he first hears the gospel he says to the Lord, “I will follow You wherever You go.” But when he hears, “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head,” he suddenly remembers that he has to bury his father (that is, await his father’s death in order to receive the inheritance) or “say good-bye to those at home.” Such a person who puts his hand to the plow and then looks back, Jesus says, is “not fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:57-62).

The rain, the floods, and the winds do not represent specific types of physical judgment but simply sum up God’s final judgment. The storm is the ultimate test that the **house** of every human life will face. As the angel of death in Egypt passed by the blood-sprinkled homes of Israel’s children while slaughtering all the first-born in the rest, so the same judgment that harmlessly passes over the **house** that is **founded upon the rock** of Christ and His Word will utterly destroy the one that is **built... upon the sand**—which is anything other than Christ and His Word.

Whether one’s religion is true or false, one day it is going to be tried. And that trial will prove with absolute finality what is wheat and what is chaff, who are sheep and who are goats, who have entered by the narrow gate to walk the narrow way and who have entered by the wide gate to walk the broad way.

Those whose houses are on the **rock** of Jesus Christ and His Word will be delivered “from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:10), and will only have praise from God, says Paul (1 Cor. 4:5). That wrath is ultimately poured out at the judgment at the great white throne, which John describes in Revelation 20. “And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing

before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.... And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (vv. 12,15).

The only difference about the storm in regard to the **wise** and the **foolish** men is in the way it affects their houses. The **house** of the **wise man** may have been shaken, **yet it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock.**

But when the same adversity came upon the **house** of the **foolish man** it disintegrated—**and great was its fall.** It was utterly demolished, leaving its builder with absolutely nothing. That is the destiny of those who build on the **sand** of man's ideas, man's philosophies, and man's religions. It is not that such people will have little left, but nothing left. Their way is not an inferior way to God, but no way to God at all. Always and inevitably it leads to destruction; its absolute destiny is to **fall.**

The greatest problem in evangelism is not follow-up but conversion. Right follow-up is not nearly so difficult as right conversion. Follow-up is the hardest when conversion is the easiest, because easy conversion is frequently no conversion. It results from seed falling on rocky soil, where it springs up quickly and dies just as quickly. The unconverted are indeed hard to follow up, whereas those who have truly come to Christ are eager to learn from His Word and associate with His people.

I heard of a large church that one year claimed 28,000 conversions, 9,600 baptisms, and 123 additions to the church! After reflecting on those figures, one of the church staff members decided that something was terribly wrong and decided to minister elsewhere. It is quite impossible that so many true conversions would produce so few Christians who would want to identify with their new brothers and sisters in the Lord.

The **wise man** builds carefully, because there is substance and great importance to what he is building. In the parallel passage in Luke, Jesus says, he "dug deep and laid a foundation upon the rock" (6:48). He is not satisfied with superficial confessions of faith, with quickie conversions that involve no repentance, no mourning over sin, and no despairing of self.

Knowing that he owes everything to the Lord, this man desires to give Him his maximum effort. After he does everything his Lord commands he declares that he has only done his duty (Luke 17:10). Yet he does not consider his work for the Lord burdensome. For one thing, the work we truly do for the Lord is the work He does through us. For another, the work that is truly done for the Lord is done out of love, not out of compulsion or fear. As the anonymous writer of the hymn “How Firm a Foundation” says, the Lord promises this man:

The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no, never, no, never forsake!

The most tragic difference between the builders is in their final destinies. Jesus' unequaled and unparalleled sermon masterpiece ends with a devastating warning of judgment. Its final words are: **and great was its fall**. The bottom line of the gospel for those who reject Christ is not that they forfeit a great deal of blessing or even that they forfeit a life of eternal bliss with God in heaven—though those things are absolutely true. The bottom line for those who reject Christ is that they are destined for everlasting torment, destruction that keeps on destroying forever. To reject Christ is to look forward to being “cast into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:47-48). Because of this inevitability every professing Christian needs to hear the words of the Holy Spirit through James: “Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (James 1:22). As we learn from Proverbs, “There is a kind who is pure in his own eyes, yet is not washed from his filthiness” (30:12).

RESPONSE TO THE SERMON

The result was that when Jesus had finished these words, the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes. (7:28-29)

The response to this most magnificent discourse ever given was as astounding in a negative way as the sermon itself was in a positive way. It seems certain that some of those in **the multitudes** who were there that day believed in Jesus. But the number who then entered the narrow gate proved what He had said: “few are those who find it” (7:14).

But any conversions that may have taken place are not reported. We are only told that **the multitudes were amazed at His teaching** (cf. John 7:46). *Ekplēssō* (**were amazed**) literally means to be struck out of oneself, and was used figuratively of being struck in the mind, that is, of being astounded or beside oneself. The crowd was totally dumbfounded by the power of what Jesus said. They had never heard such comprehensive, insightful words of wisdom, depth, insight, and profundity. They had never heard such straightforward and fearless denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees or such a black and white presentation of the way of salvation. They had never heard such a fearful warning about the consequences of turning away from God. They had never heard such a powerful and demanding description of true righteousness or such a relentless description and condemnation of self-righteousness.

But the most remarkable thing that struck the audience that day was that Jesus **was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes. Authority** (*exousia*) has to do with power and privilege, and is a key word in Matthew’s presentation of Jesus’ kingship (9:1-8; 21:23-27; 28:18). In the New Testament it is used for the power that proves and reflects the sovereignty of Jesus. The **scribes** quoted others to lend authority to their teachings, but Jesus quoted only God’s Word and spoke as the final **authority** on truth. He spoke eternal truth simply, directly, with love (in contrast to the bitter hatred of the Pharisees), and without hesitation or consultation. That astounded the crowd.

All of those things were important for them to hear, and it was entirely appropriate, in fact unavoidable, that they should be **amazed**, because **His teaching** was indeed amazing. But what they needed was not amazement but belief, not astonishment but obedience. Jesus did not tell

them all of those things for their amazement, or even simply for their information, but for their salvation. He did not intend merely to show them the narrow gate and the narrow way, but pleaded with them to *enter* that gate and to follow that way, which He would make accessible by paying the penalty for their sins.

But most of the people only watched and listened, only heard and considered—but did not decide. Even by not deciding, however, they decided. For whatever reasons—possibly for no conscious reason at all—they decided to stay on the broad road.

C. S. Lewis gives a remarkable illustration from his own life of what the attitude is of many who hear the gospel:

When I was a child I often had toothache, and I knew that if I went to my mother she would give me something which would deaden the pain for that night and let me get to sleep. But I did not go to my mother—at least, not till the pain became very bad. And the reason I did not go was this. I did not doubt she would give me the aspirin: but I knew she would also do something else. I knew she would take me to the dentist next morning. I could not get what I wanted out of her without getting something more, which I did not want. I wanted immediate relief from pain: but I could not get it without having my teeth set permanently right. And I knew those dentists; I knew they started fiddling about with all sorts of other teeth which had not yet begun to ache. They would not let sleeping dogs lie. (*Mere Christianity* [New York: Macmillan, 1977], p. 177)

It is that very sort of thinking that keeps many people out of the kingdom: the price is more than they want to pay. Lewis goes on to say, in the imagined words of Christ, “You have free will, and if you choose, You can push Me away. But if you do not push Me away, understand that I am going to see this job through.... I will never rest, nor let you rest, until you are literally perfect—until My Father can say without reservation that He is well pleased with you, as He said He was well pleased with Me” (p. 158).

That is the decision the Lord demands before He can turn empty hearts, with their empty words and empty works, into full hearts that

produce the good works for which they are recreated. It is God's great desire that no person perish and that every person "come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9), that he might "be filled up to all the fulness of God" (Eph. 3:16-19). That only became possible through the Savior's death and resurrection, which climaxed His work for sinful man and will be the great conclusion to Matthew's good news.

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COMMENTARY
MATTHEW 8-15
John MacArthur Jr.

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To Dr. John Stead,
my partner in ministry
at The Master's College
and my lifelong friend

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Preface

It continues to be a rewarding divine communion for me to preach expositionally through the New Testament. My goal is always to have deep fellowship with the Lord in the understanding of His Word, and out of that experience to explain to His people what a passage means. In the words of Nehemiah 8:8, I strive “to give the sense” of it so they may truly hear God speak and, in so doing, may respond to Him.

Obviously, God’s people need to understand Him, which demands knowing His Word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15) and allowing that Word to dwell in us richly (Col. 3:16). The dominant thrust of my ministry, therefore, is to help make God’s living Word alive to His people. It is a refreshing adventure.

This New Testament commentary series reflects this objective of explaining and applying Scripture. Some commentaries are primarily linguistic, others are mostly theological, and some are mainly homiletical. This one is basically explanatory, or expository. It is not linguistically technical, but deals with linguistics when that seems helpful to proper interpretation. It is not theologically expansive, but focuses on the major doctrines in each text and on how they relate to the whole of Scripture. It is not primarily homiletical, although each unit of thought is generally treated as one chapter, with a clear outline and logical flow of thought. Most truths are illustrated and applied with other Scripture. After establishing the context of a passage, I have tried to follow closely the writer’s development and reasoning.

My prayer is that each reader will fully understand what the Holy Spirit is saying through this part of His Word, so that His revelation may lodge in the minds of believers and bring greater obedience and faithfulness—to the glory of our great God.

OUTLINE

The King's Divine Authority—Attesting Miracles (8-9)

The King's Apostles—Their Commissioning (10)

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Jesus' Power **over Disease** (8:1-15)

And when He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. And behold, a leper came to Him, and bowed down to Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." And He stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and present the offering that Moses commanded, for a testimony to them."

And when He had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, entreating Him, and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering great pain." And He said to him, "I will come and heal him." But the centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I, too, am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it." Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled, and said to those who were following, "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. And I say to you, that many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." And Jesus said to the centurion, "Go your way; let it be done to you as you have believed." And the servant was healed that very hour.

And when Jesus had come to Peter's home, He saw his mother-in-law lying sick in bed with a fever. And He touched her hand, and the

fever left her; and she arose, and waited on Him. (8:1-15)

Matthew 8 begins where chapter 4 leaves off, with the Sermon on the Mount as a sort of parenthesis in between. At the end of chapter 4, Jesus was “going about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. And the news about Him went out into all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, taken with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them. And great multitudes followed Him from Galilee and Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan” (vv. 23-25). Jesus then “went up on the mountain” (5:1), where He preached His great sermon, and then came down from the mountain, still followed by “great multitudes” (8:1).

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus turned the religious beliefs and practices of popular Judaism, especially those of the scribes and Pharisees, topsy-turvy. He had told them, in effect, that their teaching was wrong, their living was wrong, and their attitude was wrong. Virtually everything they believed in, stood for, and hoped in was unbiblical and ungodly. The Lord overturned their entire religious system and exposed them as religious hypocrites and spiritual phonies.

Unlike other Jewish teachers of that day, Jesus did not quote the Talmud, the Midrash, the Mishnah, or other rabbis. He recognized no written authority but the Old Testament Scripture and even put His own words on a par with Scripture. “The result was,” Matthew explains, “that when Jesus had finished these words [the Sermon on the Mount], the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one with authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt. 7:28-29).

In establishing Jesus’ messiahship Matthew demonstrated His legal qualification through His genealogy, His prophetic qualification through the fulfillment of prophecy by His birth and infancy, His divine qualification by the Father’s own attestation at His baptism, His spiritual qualification by His perfect resistance to Satan’s temptations, and His theological qualification through the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount.

In chapters 8 and 9 Matthew dramatically sets forth still another qualification: Jesus' divine power. Through the miracles of these two chapters, Matthew shows beyond doubt that Jesus is, in fact, the very Son of God, because only God could perform such supernatural feats. In an astounding display of power, Jesus cleansed a leper, healed two paralytics, cooled a fever, calmed a storm at sea, cast out demons, raised a girl from the dead, gave sight to two blind men, restored speech to a man made dumb by demons, and healed every other kind of disease and sickness.

These two chapters are particularly critical to understanding the life and ministry of Christ. In this section Matthew records a series of nine miracles performed by the Lord, each one selected out of the thousands He performed during His three-year ministry. The nine miracles of Matthew 8-9 are presented in three groups of three miracles each. In each group Matthew recounts the miracles and then reports the Jews' response.

Jesus' miracles were the supreme proof of His divinity and the irrefutable credentials of His messiahship. Matthew's purpose in recording the miracles, like Jesus' purpose in performing them, was to confirm His deity and His claim to be the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world. In many ways this section is the heart of Matthew's message.

When Jesus first called His twelve disciples, He charged them not to go to Gentiles or Samaritans but "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 'And as you go, preach, saying "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; freely you received, freely give'" (10:5-8).

Tragically, however—and inexplicably from a human point of view—many of the Jews who saw Jesus' miracles concluded that He performed them by demonic rather than by divine power (Matt. 12:24). As more and more Jews rejected Him, Jesus turned His attention to the establishment of the Gentile church. He also began to speak more in parables, which the unbelieving Jews could not understand because of their spiritually hardened hearts (13:11-13).

It should be noted that the apostle John also recorded the miracles in his gospel as proof signs of Jesus' divinity and messiahship. When the Jewish leaders criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, accused Him of blasphemy, and then sought to kill Him for claiming to be equal to God, "Jesus therefore answered and was saying to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the

Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and greater works than these will He show Him, that you may marvel. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes” (John 5:16-21). A short while later He further explained, “The works which the Father has given Me to accomplish, the very works that I do, bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me” (v. 36).

Still later Jesus said to His Jewish listeners, “I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father’s name, these bear witness of Me... I and the Father are one” (John 10:25, 30). When “the Jews took up stones again to stone Him,” Jesus said, “I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me? ... If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father” (vv. 31-32, 37-38).

To His troubled disciples, who even late in His ministry could not comprehend His relationship to the Father, Jesus had to explain again, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me; otherwise believe on account of the works themselves” (John 14:10-11; 15:24).

In his stated purpose for writing this gospel, John says, “Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (20:30-31).

The first three miracles reported in detail by Matthew (cf. 4:23-24) all involve the healing of physical affliction. In New Testament times disease was rampant and medical science as we know it did not exist. If a person survived a serious disease it was usually because the malady had run its course. Whether or not it was fatal, most disease caused great pain and suffering, for which there was little remedy. Sufferers were often left scarred, deformed, crippled, or otherwise debilitated for the rest of their lives. Plagues would sometimes wipe out entire villages, cities, or even regions. The list of diseases was long, and life expectancy was short.

Many diseases are mentioned in Scripture. We read of various forms of paralysis and atrophy, which would encompass such things as muscular dystrophy and poliomyelitis. The Bible frequently speaks of blindness, which was rampant because it could be caused by countless forms of disease, infection, and injury. Deafness was almost as common and had almost as many causes. We are told of boils, infected glands, various forms of edema, dysentery, mutism and other speech disorders, epilepsy, intestinal disorders, and many unidentified diseases.

When Jesus healed, He did so with a word or a touch, without gimmicks, formulas, or fanfare. He healed instantaneously, with no drawn out period of waiting or of gradual restoration. He healed totally, not partially, no matter how serious the disease or deformity. He healed everyone who came to Him and even some who never saw Him. He healed organic as well as functional afflictions. Most dramatically and powerfully of all, He even raised the dead.

It is small wonder, therefore, that Jesus' healing miracles brought such immediate and widespread attention. For people who seldom had means to alleviate even the symptoms of disease, the prospect of complete cure was almost too astounding to be believed. Even the rumor of such a thing would bring a multitude of the curious and hopeful. For those of us who live in a society where basic good health is accepted largely as a matter of course, it is difficult to appreciate the impact Jesus' healing ministry had in Palestine. Jesus instructed the disciples not to take any money, because people would have paid them all they had for health, and that could easily have corrupted the disciples' motives and objectives (see 10:8-9). For a brief period of time disease and other physical afflictions were virtually eliminated as Jesus went through the land healing thousands upon thousands (see Matt. 4:23-24; 8:16-17; 9:35; 14:14; 15:30; 19:2; 21:14; etc.). As Jesus Himself said on several occasions, His miraculous works alone should have been more than enough reason to believe in Him (John 10:38; 14:11). Such things had never happened before in the history of the world and could only have a divine cause. That is what made the rejection of the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and others so self-condemnatory. No one could deny that Jesus performed the miracles, and only the most hard-hearted resistance to the truth could make a person reject His divinity in the face of such overpowering evidence. Those who would not believe in Jesus were indicted by every miracle He performed.

In the first three miracles of Matthew 8 the Lord healed a leper, a paralytic, and a woman with a fever. Beside the fact that each of them involved healing, these three miracles have four other common characteristics. First of all, in each of them Jesus dealt with the lowest level of human need, the physical. Although even earthly life involves much more than the physical, the physical part has its importance, and Jesus was lovingly sympathetic to those with physical needs. He thereby revealed the compassion of God toward those who suffer in this life.

Second, in each of the first three miracles Jesus responded to direct appeals, either by the afflicted person himself or by a friend or relative. In the first case the leper himself asked Jesus to make him clean (8:2); in the second the centurion asked in behalf of his servant (v.6); and in the third (v. 14), several unnamed friends or relatives asked on behalf of Peter's mother-in-law, as we learn from the parallel account in Luke 4:38.

Third, in each of the first three miracles Jesus acted by His own will. Though He was sympathetic to the needs of those who were afflicted and was moved by the appeals for help, He nevertheless acted sovereignly by His own volition (vv. 3, 13, 15).

Fourth, in all three miracles Jesus ministered to the needs of someone who, especially in the eyes of the proud Jewish leaders, was on the lowest plane of human existence. The first person He helped was a leper, the second was a Gentile soldier and his slave, and the third was a woman. We learn from John that Jesus first revealed His messiahship to a despised Samaritan adulteress in Sychar (John 4:25-26), and we learn from Matthew that these three miracles of His early ministry served the humblest members of society. Our Lord showed special compassion toward those for whom society had special disdain.

THE WRETCHED MAN: A LEPER

And when He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. And behold, a leper came to Him, and bowed down to Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." And He stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to

him, “See that you tell no one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and present the offering that Moses commanded, for a testimony to them.” (8:1-4)

The **great multitudes** that **followed** Jesus **when He had come down from the mountain** did not do so because they adored Him as their Messiah. Most of the crowd, no doubt, was simply curious, never before having seen anyone perform miracles or heard anyone speak with such authority (4:23-25; 7:28-29). They were uncommitted observers, amazed by what Jesus said and did but not convicted of their need of Him as Lord and Savior.

The root word behind *lepros* (**leper**) means “scaly,” which describes one of the earliest and most obvious characteristics of leprosy. There continues to be much debate among scholars as to whether or not the disease commonly called Hansen’s disease today is the same as biblical leprosy. Many biblical terms for diseases simply describe observable symptoms that could apply to several different physical afflictions. In addition to that, some diseases change over the course of years, as immunities develop and new strains of infectious microorganisms are formed.

Most medical historians believe that leprosy originated in Egypt, and the leprosy bacillus called myobacterium leprae has been found in at least one mummy that also showed the typical scaly evidence of the disease on its skin. The Old Testament scholar R. K. Harrison maintains that the symptoms described in Leviticus 13 “could presage clinical leprosy” (Colin Brown, ed. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975], 2:465). It seems safe to assume, therefore, that ancient leprosy was virtually the same as contemporary Hansen’s disease.

This severe form of leprosy was the most feared disease of the ancient world, and even today it cannot be totally cured, though it can be kept in check by proper medication. Although some 90 percent of people in modern times are immune to such contagion of leprosy, it was much more communicable in ancient times. Spongy, tumorlike swellings would eventually grow on the face and body, and the bacillus would become systemic and affect internal organs, while the bones would begin to

deteriorate. Untreated in ancient times, it produced a weakness which made the victim vulnerable to tuberculosis or other diseases.

In order to protect His chosen people, God gave strict and specific regulations to Moses regarding leprosy, the details of which are found in Leviticus 13. A person suspected of having the disease was taken to a priest for examination. If he showed signs of having more than a superficial skin problem, he was isolated for seven days. If the symptoms became worse, the person was isolated for seven more days. If, at that time, the rash had not spread further, the person was pronounced clean. If, however, the rash had become worse, he was pronounced unclean. When leprosy was immediately evident from a person's hair turning white and his having raw, swollen flesh, he was pronounced unclean on the spot and no isolation period was involved. A less serious type of disease caused the entire skin to turn white, in which case the affected person could be considered clean. That disease was probably a form of psoriasis, eczema, vitiligo, tuberculoid leprosy, or perhaps a condition which Herodotus and the great Greek physician Hippocrates called leukoderma. When a person was found to have the serious form of leprosy, his clothes were to be torn, his head uncovered, his mouth covered (to prevent spread of the disease), and he was to cry, "Unclean! Unclean!" wherever he went to warn others to stay clear of him. Lepers were legally ostracized and forbidden to live in any community with their fellow Israelites (Num. 5:2). Among the sixty-one defilements of ancient Judaism, leprosy was second only to a dead body in seriousness. The Talmud forbade a Jew from coming closer than six feet to a leper, and if the wind was blowing, the limit was one hundred fifty feet.

Recent medical studies confirm that Hansen's disease can be passed on to others when it is inhaled through the air—a good reason for a leper to cover his mouth, as the Leviticus regulations required. People have also contracted the disease from touching an object handled by a leper—again showing the value of the Leviticus standard, which required the burning of contaminated clothes.

In his book *Unclean! Unclean!* L. S. Huizenga describes some of the horrors of leprosy.

The disease which we today call leprosy generally begins with pain in certain areas of the body. Numbness follows. Soon the skin in such spots loses its original color. It gets to be thick, glossy, and scaly. . . . As the sickness progresses, the thickened spots become dirty sores and ulcers due to poor blood supply. The skin, especially around the eyes and ears, begins to bunch, with deep furrows between the swellings, so that the face of the afflicted individual begins to resemble that of a lion. Fingers drop off or are absorbed; toes are affected similarly. Eyebrows and eyelashes drop out. By this time one can see the person in this pitiable condition is a leper. By a touch of the finger one can also feel it. One can even smell it, for the leper emits a very unpleasant odor. Moreover, in view of the fact that the disease-producing agent frequently also attacks the larynx, the leper's voice acquires a grating quality. His throat becomes hoarse, and you can now not only see, feel, and smell the leper, but you can hear his rasping voice. And if you stay with him for some time, you can even imagine a peculiar taste in your mouth, probably due to the odor. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1927, p. 149; cited in William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973], p. 388)

Although advanced leprosy is generally not painful, because of the nerve damage it is disfiguring, debilitating, and can be repulsive in the extreme, and has therefore for millennia been one of the most dreaded of diseases. One ancient rabbi said, "When I see lepers I throw stones at them lest they come near me." Another said, "I would not so much as eat an egg that was purchased on a street where a leper had walked."

An up-to-date look at modern leprosy reveals more of its character. Dr. Paul Brand, world-renowned expert on the treatment of Hansen's disease has provided much help in understanding the unique nature of this affliction.

Hansen's disease (HD) is cruel, but not at all the way other diseases are. It primarily acts as an anesthetic, numbing the pain cells of hands, feet, nose, ears, and eyes. Not so bad, really, one might think. Most diseases are feared *because* of their pain—what makes a painless disease so horrible?

Hansen's disease's numbing quality is precisely the reason such fabled destruction and decay of tissue occurs. For thousands of years people thought HD caused the ulcers on hands and feet and face which eventually led to rotting flesh and loss of limbs. Mainly through Dr. Brand's research, it has been established that in 99 percent of the cases, HD only numbs the extremities. The destruction follows solely because the warning system of pain is gone.

How does the decay happen? In villages of Africa and Asia, a person with HD has been known to reach directly into a charcoal fire to retrieve a dropped potato. Nothing in his body told him not to. Patients at Brand's hospital in India would work all day gripping a shovel with a protruding nail, or extinguish a burning wick with their bare hands, or walk on splintered glass. Watching them, Brand began formulating his radical theory that HD was chiefly anesthetic, and only indirectly a destroyer.

On one occasion, he tried to open the door of a little storeroom, but a rusty padlock would not yield. A patient—an undersized, malnourished ten-year-old—approached him smiling.

“Let me try, sahib, doctor,” he offered and reached for the key. With a quick jerk of his hand he turned the key in the lock.

Brand was dumbfounded. How could this weak youngster out-exert him? His eyes caught a telltale clue.

Was that a drop of blood on the floor?

Upon examining the boy's fingers, Brand discovered the act of turning the key had gashed a finger open to the bone; skin, fat, and joint were all exposed. Yet the boy was completely unaware of it! To him, the sensation of cutting his finger to the bone was no different from picking up a stone or turning a coin in his pocket.

The daily routines of life ground away at the HD patient's hands and feet, but no warning system alerted him. If an ankle turned, tearing tendon and muscle, he would adjust and walk crooked. If a rat chewed off a finger in the night, he would not discover it missing until the next morning. . . .

. . . Stanley Stein (author of *Alone No Longer*) went blind because of another cruel quirk of HD. Each morning he would wash his face with a hot washcloth. But neither his hand nor his face was sensitive enough to temperature to warn him that he was using scalding water. Gradually he destroyed his eyes with his daily washing. (Philip Yancey, *Where Are You God When It Hurts?* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977, pp. 32-34])

Leprosy is a graphic illustration of sin. Like leprosy, sin infects the whole person, and it is ugly, loathsome, corrupting, contaminating, alienating, and incurable by man. Lepers in ancient Israel were vivid object lessons of sin.

Yet a leper was the first to be healed by Jesus in this series of miracles in Matthew, and the fact that the **leper came to Him** was astounding in itself, because lepers were forbidden to come close to nonlepers.

Four things about this particular leper stand out. First of all he came to Jesus with confidence. He obviously sensed a love and tenderness in Jesus that allowed him to approach **Him** without fear of reprisal (such as being stoned) or even of reprimand. He somehow knew that Jesus was

neither afraid of him nor ashamed to associate with him. He did not shout to Jesus from a distance, as he was supposed to do, but approached Him directly and without hesitation. Because he realized Jesus was not ashamed of him, he was less ashamed of himself. He thought of nothing but his great need and of Jesus' ability and willingness to meet that need.

Second, the man came to Jesus with reverence. His boldness did not come from presumption but from humble adoration. When he reached Jesus he **bowled down to Him**. *Proskuneō* (from which comes **bowled down**) literally means to prostrate oneself and is most often translated "to worship" (see Matt. 2:2; 4:9,10; John 4:20-24; Acts 7:43; Rev 4:10; 19:10). From the reverential nature of his request it seems that the leper addressed Jesus as **Lord** not simply in the sense of "Sir," but as an acknowledgment of deity. He felt he was in the presence of God and that therefore Jesus could heal him of his terrible disease. It is both interesting and instructive to note that the scribes and Pharisees who were doubtlessly in the multitude that day were beautifully and richly attired, yet were inwardly corrupt, proud, and unbelieving. By contrast, the **leper** appeared loathsome and repulsive on the outside, but inwardly he was reverent and believing.

Third, the leper came to Jesus with humility. He came expectantly but not demandingly saying, **Lord, if you are willing**. He asked to be healed only if it were the Lord's will. He did not claim to be worthy or deserving, but left himself in the Lord's hands to do as He would. The implication seems to be that the leper was quite willing to remain leprous if that were the Lord's will. Obviously he wanted to be healed, but he did not explicitly ask Jesus for healing, almost as if that were too much to presume. He simply acknowledged Jesus' ability to heal him. How far that humble spirit is from the demands of many Christians today who make claims on God's healing, blessing, and favor as if those were their inherent rights. This man claimed no rights, and his first concern was not his own welfare at all, but the Lord's will and glory.

Fourth, the leper came with faith, declaring, **You can make me clean**. He literally said, "You have the power to make me clean." That is faith at its highest—the absolute conviction that God is able, coupled with humble submission to His Sovereignty in the exercise of His power. The man knew that Jesus was not obligated to heal him, but he also knew that He was perfectly capable of doing it. He had the faith of Shadrach,

Meshach, and Abed-nego, who declared to Nebuchadnezzar, “If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (Dan. 3:17-18).

The leper came with confidence because he believed Jesus was compassionate, with reverence because he believed Jesus was God, with humility because he believed Jesus was sovereign, and with faith because he believed Jesus had the power to heal him.

In response to that faith, Jesus **stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, “I am willing; be cleansed.”** Jews were forbidden by the Mosaic law to touch a leper, because he was unclean (Lev 5:3). To do so was to expose themselves to both ceremonial and physical contamination. They could not help a leper by touching him, but only harm themselves. Yet it is certain that lepers yearned for the touch of another human being. In their isolation and social stigma they no doubt would have given anything for even brief intimate contact with someone besides other lepers.

Jesus could have healed with only a word, as He did on numerous other occasions. But He made an obvious point of touching this man. That simple act in itself was amazing, not in the sense of being sensational and spectacular—as are the supposed miracles of many modern healers—but simply in the fact that the Son of God lovingly condescended to touch the outcast of outcasts whom no other man would even come near.

The healing was instantaneous: **immediately his leprosy was cleansed.** Jesus did not need to heal in stages, although at times He chose to do so (Mark 8:22-26; John 9:6-7). When He touched defilement it went away. The scene on this occasion must have been startling—to see a deformed, shriveled, scaly, sore-covered, derelict suddenly stand upright, with perfect arms and legs, with his face smooth and unscarred, his hair restored, his voice normal, and his eyes bright. The marvels of modern medical science pale beside such miraculous restoration.

The first requirement of faith is obedience, and as soon as the leper was cleansed, **Jesus said to him, “See that you tell no one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and present the offering that Moses commanded, for a testimony to them.”** Before he celebrated his new lease on life, and even before he testified to others about his miraculous cleansing, the man

was to fulfill the requirements of the Mosaic law by having the temple priests attest to his cure.

This process, described in Leviticus 14, involved taking two birds and killing one of them over running water. The live bird, along with cedar wood, a scarlet string, and some hyssop, was then dipped in the blood of the slain bird. The former leper was then sprinkled seven times and pronounced clean by the priest, and the live bird was set free. The cleansed person was then to wash his clothes, shave off all his hair, and bathe himself. He could then rejoin Israelite society, although he had to remain outside his tent for seven days. The final act on the eighth day was to bring the required guilt, sin, and grain offerings—according to what could be afforded—and to be anointed by the priest on various parts of the body.

Jesus may have told the man not to say anything about his healing in order not to increase the crowd's adulation of Him simply as a miracle worker, or perhaps He wanted to discourage their looking to Him as a political deliverer. It may have been that the Lord was still in His period of humiliation and that His exaltation by the crowd at this time would have been premature in the divine plan.

All of those reasons could have been involved, but Jesus' instruction to **go, show yourself to the priest, and present the offering that Moses commanded**, was specifically given **for a testimony to them**, that is, to the multitude and especially to the Jewish leaders. Although Jesus devastated the hypocritical, superficial, and unbiblical standards and practices of the scribes and Pharisees, He did not want the people to think He was violating the requirements of God's law—which He had just declared He came to fulfill, not destroy (5:17). In addition to that, when the priest declared the man clean—as he would have to do because of the obvious healing—Jesus' miracle would be officially confirmed by the Jewish establishment. It is likely also for this reason that Jesus told the man not to tell anyone else before he presented himself to the priest for examination. If word that his healing was done by Jesus reached Jerusalem ahead of the man, the priests would no doubt have been reluctant to verify the cleansing.

Sadly, the man who had shown such confident and humble faith in his joyous exuberance did not also show immediate obedience. We learn from Mark that he became so excited that "he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news about, to such an extent that

Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere” (Mark 1:45).

As Jesus remarked several times in various words, “Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’?” (Matt. 9:5; cf. Mark 2:9; Luke 5:23). The Lord’s greatest purpose was to cleanse sin, not sickness, and even His physical cleansings became illustrations of the spiritual cleansing He offered. The healing of leprosy was especially powerful in that regard, because its great physical destructiveness, pervasiveness, ugliness, and incurableness represent the even greater destructiveness, pervasiveness, ugliness, and incurableness of sin. Just as leprosy destroys physical health and makes a person an outcast with other men, so sin destroys spiritual health and makes a person an outcast with God. But just as Christ can cure leprosy, He can also cure sin; and just as His cleansing from leprosy restored men to human fellowship, His cleansing from sin restores them to God’s.

Much modern evangelism and personal witness is weakened by failure to confront men with the terribleness and danger of their sin. Coming to Christ is not getting on a popular bandwagon of religious sentimentality. It is facing and confessing one’s sin and bringing it to the Lord for cleansing. True conversion takes place when, like the leper, desperate people come to Christ humbly confessing their need and reverently seeking His restoration. The truly repentant person, like this leper, comes with no pride, no self-will, no rights, and no claim to worthiness. He sees himself as a repulsive sinner who has absolutely no claim to salvation apart from the abundant grace of God. He comes believing that God can and will save him only as he places his trust in Jesus Christ.

After a person is saved from sin, Jesus’ first requirement is that he henceforth obey the Word of God. Only a life-style of holy living can give proper testimony to what Jesus Christ has done in saving us. It is best to say nothing of our relationship to Jesus Christ unless our living reflects something of His holiness and will. When a Christian lives obediently, then both his actions and his words testify to Christ’s goodness and power.

THE RESPECTED MAN: A GENTILE

And when He had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, entreating Him, and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering great pain.” And He said to him, “I will come and heal him.” But the centurion answered and said, “Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I, too, am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come!’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this!’ and he does it.” Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled, and said to those who were following, “Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. And I say to you, that many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And Jesus said to the centurion, “Go your way; let it be done to you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed that very hour. (8:5-13)

Many commentators believe that the first three miracles of Matthew 8 occurred on the same day. If so, Jesus entered **Capernaum** only a short while after healing the leper. Because Jesus pronounced a curse on it (Matt. 11:23), the ancient city no longer exists, except in the form of the ruins of a synagogue and of a few houses, including, according to tradition, that of Peter. It was a lovely town in Jesus’ day and He spent considerable time there, much of it perhaps in Peter’s home (see 8:14).

The **centurion** who **came to Him** not only was a Gentile but an officer in the Roman occupation army, a man who ordinarily would have been greatly hated by the Jews. Such soldiers were often hated still more because the Romans usually chose alien residents of a region to make up its occupation force—making those soldiers not only oppressors but traitors in the eyes of the populace.

We learn from Luke that this **centurion** actually **came to** Jesus through some Jewish intermediaries, because he felt spiritually unworthy of approaching Jesus personally and perhaps also because he thought he

would be rebuffed because of his military position. He was probably in the troops of the wicked Antipas and was possibly even a Samaritan, a half-breed Jew who was traditionally hated even more than Gentiles by “pure” Jews. Yet this man was held in great esteem by the Jews of Capernaum, because, as they told Jesus, “He is worthy for You to grant this to him; for he loves our nation, and it was he who built us our synagogue” (Luke 7:2-5). Like Cornelius (Acts 10:2), this **centurion** was undoubtedly a God-fearing Gentile. It is noteworthy that each of the Roman centurions mentioned in the New Testament are spoken of favorably. And from the biblical record it seems likely that each of them became a believer in Christ.

Pais, here translated **servant**, literally means a young child. Luke calls him a slave (*doulos*), indicating he was probably born into the slave household of the centurion. In any case, the boy “was highly regarded” by the centurion, who was now afraid that his servant would die (Luke 7:2). **Lord**, he said to Jesus through his emissaries, **my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering great pain**. Whatever the disease was, it was paralyzing, painful, and fatal. Like the leper, it seems the centurion was reluctant to ask Jesus specifically for a healing, since he simply states the young man’s terrible condition—although the request is clearly implied.

The fact that the **centurion** cared so much for his **servant** set him apart from the typical Roman soldier, who could be brutally heartless. The average slave owner of that day, whether military or civilian, had no more regard for his slave than for an animal. The great Greek philosopher Aristotle said there could be no friendship and no justice toward inanimate things, not even toward a horse, an ox, or a slave, because master and slave were considered to have nothing in common. “A slave,” he said, “is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave” (*Ethics*, 1161b). The Roman law expert Gaius wrote that it was universally accepted that the master possessed the power of life and death over his slave (*Institutes*, 1:52). Still another Roman writer, Varro, maintained that the only difference between a slave, a beast, and a cart was that the slave talked (*On Landed Estates*, 1:17.1). Cato the Elder advised those in economic difficulty to look over their livestock and hold a sale. They should sell their worn-out oxen, their blemished cattle, sheep, wool, and hides, their

old wagons and tools, their old and sickly slaves, and whatever else was superfluous (*On Agriculture*, 2.7).

But the **centurion** from **Capernaum** had no such inhumane ideas. He was a seasoned and capable fighting man or he would not have been a centurion—who, as the title indicates, was responsible for a hundred men. He was a man's man, and a soldier's soldier. Yet he had deep compassion for his dying slave boy and felt unworthy to approach Jesus personally. Jesus knew the man's heart and did not need to hear a direct request, either from the centurion or from the Jews who came in his behalf. He simply responded in love, saying, **I will come and heal him.**

When Jesus came near to his house, **the centurion** saw Him and sent some friends out to meet Him (Luke 7:3). In his behalf they **answered and said, “Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof.”** He felt genuinely unworthy for Jesus to go to that much trouble for him, and no doubt also did not want Him to break the Jewish tradition of not entering the house of a Gentile in order to avoid ceremonial contamination.

The centurion's twice addressing Jesus as **Lord** indicates much more than courtesy. Jesus testified of the man that He had not seen such great faith in all of Israel (v. 10). The man here affirmed the divine lordship of Christ, believing that Jesus was indeed God and consequently had the power to heal his paralyzed servant. Because the servant was too ill to be carried out to Jesus and because he felt unworthy to have Jesus come into his house, the centurion said to Him, **Just say the word, and my servant will be healed.** From the many reports he had doubtlessly heard of Jesus' healing power, and perhaps from having witnessed some of the healings himself, he knew that distance presented no barrier.

The centurion also understood delegation of power. **For I, too, am a man under authority, with soldiers under me,** he said. **And I say to this one, “Go!” and he goes, and to another, “Come!” and he comes, and to my slave, “Do this!” and he does it.** He recognized **authority** when he saw it, even in a realm in which he had no experience or understanding. He knew that if he had the power to make his soldiers and slaves do his bidding by simply giving them orders, Jesus' supernatural powers could even more easily allow Him simply to **say the word** and cause the **servant [to] be healed.**

Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled, and said to those who were following, **“Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel.”** Although, as God, Jesus knew all men’s hearts, in His humanness He was amazed that this Gentile soldier showed more genuine **faith** in Him than He had found **with anyone in Israel**. Many Jews had believed in Jesus, but none had shown the sincerity, sensitivity, humility, love, and depth of faith of this Gentile soldier. Even to His disciples Jesus would say a short time later, **“You men of little faith”** (8:26). Still later in His ministry He would say to Philip, **“Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me?”** (John 14:9).

This Gentile would not be alone in his belief. Jesus went on to say, **many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.** Those who had less spiritual advantage and less opportunity to know God’s truth—the Gentiles **from east and west**—would show greater response to the gospel than God’s own chosen people, who considered themselves to be **the sons of the kingdom** simply by virtue of racial descent.

The gospel came through Abraham’s seed, as Matthew has already attested through Jesus’ genealogy. But the benefit of the gospel, which is salvation, is appropriated by faith, not by genealogical descent. The Jews played an integral part in God’s bringing the Messiah and His gospel, and they are yet destined to play an important role in the end times. It was integral to God’s plan of salvation that His own Son be born, live, and die as a Jew. But the fact that **Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**—or any other Jew—will be **in the kingdom of heaven** will not be because of their Jewishness but because of their saving faith.

Jesus’ words to those Capernaum Jews was startling in the extreme. What He said utterly contradicted everything taught by their rabbis. The twenty-ninth chapter of the apocryphal book of Second Baruch pictures what Jews believed would be the great heavenly feast at which all Jews were going to sit down and eat behemoth, the elephant, and leviathan, the giant sea monster, or whale—symbolic of an unlimited amount of food. In the eyes of many Jews, one of the most significant and appealing things about the feast was that it would be totally free of Gentiles.

But at that meal, Jesus said, many Gentiles would be present and many Jews absent. The presumed **sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.** To the Jews God had given the unique promises and privileges of His kingdom, but because they rejected the King when He came to them, they disqualified themselves from God's blessing of light and destined themselves for **outer darkness**, where, instead of feasting throughout eternity, they would suffer forever in the horror of **weeping and gnashing of teeth.** Jewish tradition taught that sinners—a term synonymous with Gentiles in their thinking—would spend eternity in the outer darkness of gehenna. Jesus concurred with them about the destiny of condemned sinners (see also Matt. 22:13; 24:51), but He declared them totally wrong about the identity of those condemned sinners.

Hell is a place both of darkness and of fire, a combination not found in our present world. Part of the supernatural quality of hell is that it will be a place of fire, pain, and torment that will continue for all eternity in total darkness.

Being a physical descendant of Abraham was a great privilege and advantage (Rom. 3:1-2), but in spite of what most Jews believed, it did not guarantee salvation. It is the children of Abraham's spiritual faith, not the children of his physical body, whom God adopts as His own children (Rom. 8:14-17; Gal. 3:7-9, 26-29; cf. Rom. 4:11, 16). Those who reject Christ, even though they are physical descendants of Abraham, will have no place **at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven.** By their rejection of the Son of God—especially in light of the irrefutable evidence of His miracles—they prove they are really sons of Satan (John 8:42-44). Because they are false **sons of the kingdom**, they annul the divine promise, forfeit the divine blessing, and are forever barred from the divine **kingdom.** That was the substance of Jesus' brief but sobering message to the unbelieving Jews just before He pronounced the healing of the centurion's slave.

Jesus again reaffirmed the greatness of the centurion's faith as He said to him, **“Go your way; let it be done to you as you have believed.”** **And the servant was healed that very hour.** That the **servant was healed** was Jesus' affirmation that **the centurion** truly **believed**, because otherwise his servant would have remained sick and probably soon died.

The servant's healing was *according to* the centurion's faith (**as you have believed**), and because the healing was complete so had to have been the faith. And if the centurion had such great faith before the miracle, how much greater must it have been when he saw his beloved young friend get up from his deathbed and go about his work in perfect health and without pain?

Jesus did not give the principle **as you have believed** as a universal promise to all believers. The principle of healing in proportion to faith was sovereignly applied as the Lord saw fit (see also, e. g., Matt. 9:29). Paul had absolute faith in God's ability to heal him, and he personally experienced, and was often used as the instrument of, God's miraculous healing. But when he prayed three times in great earnestness for his "thorn in the flesh" to be removed, the Lord's answer to him was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

THE RELATIVE: A WOMAN

And when Jesus had come to Peter's home, He saw his mother-in-law lying sick in bed with a fever. And He touched her hand, and the fever left her; and she arose, and waited on Him. (8:14-15)

The first thing many male Jews did every morning was to pray, "Lord, I thank Thee that I was not born a slave, a Gentile, or a woman." In the first two miracles of Matthew 8, Jesus showed mercy and compassion not only to an outcast leper but to an outcast Gentile and his slave. Now He shows mercy and compassion to a woman. The proud, self-righteous Jewish men could not have missed Jesus' point: physical health, race, social status, or gender made no difference to Him. None of those things in itself was an advantage or disadvantage as far as His ministry and message were concerned. That the disadvantaged more often received His blessing was due to their more often being humble and aware of their need. Likewise, that the advantaged more often failed to receive His blessing was due to their more often being proud and self-satisfied.

Mark tells us that when Jesus, Peter, Andrew, James, and John arrived at **Peter's home**, some of the group discovered that Peter's **mother-in-law** was ill, "and immediately they spoke to Him about her" (Mark 1:30). Luke adds the information that her fever was high and that the unidentified friends or relatives "made request of Him on her behalf" (Luke 4:38). In response to their request, Jesus then went to her room and **saw her lying sick in bed with a fever.**

We do not know the cause of the fever, but the facts that it was high and that the woman was too sick to get up suggest an extremely serious and probably life-threatening illness. The demands of everyday living did not allow most people in that day the luxury of going to bed whenever they felt bad. Physical pain and discomfort were a regular part of life, and, unless they were severe, did not normally interfere with a person's responsibilities.

Again Jesus' response and healing were immediate. **And He touched her hand, and the fever left her; and she arose, and waited on Him.** We know from both Mark and Luke that she also served the other people there (Mark 1:31; Luke 4:39), but Matthew emphasizes her special ministry to Jesus: **she waited on Him.** His healing touch had instantly removed her fever and pain, and most likely saved her life. We can be sure she served her gracious Lord with special attention and care.

Although Peter's mother-in-law obviously was a woman, she was also a Jew. It may therefore be that, after His strong words of verses 11-12, Jesus did not want to leave the impression that God had forsaken His chosen people, even though most of them had forsaken Him. That the kingdom was open to faithful Gentiles certainly did not mean it was closed to faithful Jews. As Paul makes clear in his letter to the Romans, "God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew ... There has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. . . . For if you [Gentiles] were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more shall these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?" (Rom. 11:2, 5, 24).

What Keeps Men from Christ? (8:16-22)

And when evening had come, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed; and He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were ill in order that what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, “He Himself took our infirmities, and carried away our diseases.”

Now when Jesus saw a crowd around Him, He gave orders to depart to the other side. And a certain scribe came and said to Him, “Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go.” And Jesus said to him, “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.” And another of the disciples said to Him, “Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father.” But Jesus said to him, “Follow Me; and allow the dead to bury their own dead.” (8:16-22)

After Jesus had healed the leper, the centurion’s slave boy, and Peter’s mother-in-law, Matthew reports that the crowd brought Him countless other people to be healed. Because these were brought to Him **when evening had come**, it is possible that the first three healings had been done on the Sabbath. Because of their religious leaders, many Jews were afraid to ask Jesus to heal on the Sabbath, and since it ended at sundown, they now felt free to bring **many who were demon-possessed; and He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were ill.**

As He had done before (see 4:23-24) and many times afterward (see 14:14; Luke 5:17; 9:6; etc.), Jesus here performed mass healings, without regard to individual faith or circumstances. Whether the problem was spiritual, as with the **demon-possessed**, or physical, as with those **who were ill**, He **healed all**. He was giving evidence of His deity and

messiahship, and everyone who came for healing was healed. As mentioned in the previous chapter, for all practical purposes Jesus banished sickness and disease from Palestine during the course of His earthly ministry.

Through His healing miracles Jesus participated in human pain and sorrow in that **He Himself took our infirmities, and carried away our diseases**. He participated first of all by sympathizing with man's pain and sickness. Jesus knew men's hearts and all of their inner feelings. He knew the agony, the bewilderment, the confusion, the despair, and the frustration that disease and sickness bring in addition to physical pain. Repeatedly the gospel writers tell of Jesus' having compassion on those who came to hear Him teach and to experience His healing touch (Matt. 9:36; 15:32; Mark 1:41; Luke 10:33). Just as surely as then, He now knows the agonies of His children, "for we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses" (Heb. 4:15). It was not that Jesus carried **away our** diseases by contracting them, but by experiencing vicariously the pain they bring.

Second, Jesus **took our infirmities, and carried away our** diseases in the sense that He saw and felt the destructive power of their root cause, which is sin. Jesus did not weep over Lazarus' tomb in remorse over the death of a dear friend, because He knew His friend would soon be raised from the dead. He wept because of the evil, sinful power that brought suffering and death to every man. He could not see the pain of sickness and death without feeling the pain of sin. Sin, sickness, and death are all inextricably tied to the curse. That is why Jesus asked rhetorically, "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, and walk?'" (Matt. 9:5). Neither is easier or harder. The same cause is behind both sin and sickness, and only divine power can remove either.

Third, and most supremely, Jesus **took our infirmities, and carried away our diseases** in that His victorious redeeming work dealt with sin in such a devastating way that ultimately all sickness and disease will be **carried** away. The King was offering His kingdom and was previewing its marvelous and glorious elements, one of the most wonderful of which will be the removal of all illness and sorrow for all eternity.

Jesus healed because of His divine and loving compassion for those who were suffering and for their loved ones who suffered with them. He

healed because He hated sickness and disease, which were never part of God's plan for mankind and which came about because of sin. But He also healed in order to give a preview of His coming kingdom, in which there will be no more sin, no more death, no more sorrow, no more pain. Just as on the mount of transfiguration He pulled back the veil of His flesh and gave His three disciples a glimpse of His divine glory, through His vast healing miracles Jesus gave a vision of His glorious kingdom—when all disease and sickness would be banished, not in a small corner of the world or for a few brief years, but throughout the whole world and forever (see Rev. 21:1-4).

But before He established His earthly kingdom that would be free of suffering and death, the Messiah Himself would have to suffer and die to redeem men from sin. He would be “pierced through for our transgressions,. . . crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being [would fall] upon Him, and by His scourging we [would be] healed” (Isa. 53:5). And before He suffered and died He would give evidence of His divine power by bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows (v. 4). It is that verse to which Matthew refers when he says that Jesus **healed all who were ill in order that what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, “He Himself took our infirmities, and carried away our diseases.”**

Disease and death cannot be permanently removed until sin is permanently removed, and Jesus' supreme work, therefore, was to conquer sin. In the atonement He dealt with sin, death, and sickness; and yet all three of those are still with us. When He died on the cross, Jesus bruised the head of Satan and broke the power of sin, and the person who trusts in the atoning work of Christ is immediately delivered from the penalty of sin and one day will be delivered from the very presence of sin and its consequences. The ultimate fulfillment of Christ's redeeming work is yet future for believers (cf. Rom. 8:22-25; 13:11). Christ died for men's sins, but Christians still fall into sin; He conquered death, but His followers still die; and He overcame pain and sickness, but His people still suffer and become ill. There is physical healing in the atonement, just as there is total deliverance from sin and death in the atonement; but we still await the fulfillment of that deliverance in the day when the Lord brings the end of suffering, sin, and death.

Those who claim that Christians should never be sick because there is healing in the atonement should also claim that Christians should never die, because Jesus also conquered death in the atonement. The central message of the gospel is deliverance from sin. It is the good news about forgiveness, not health. Christ was made sin, not disease, and He died on the cross for our sin, not our sickness. As Peter makes clear, Christ's wounds heal us from sin, not from disease. "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness" (1 Pet. 2:24).

In some ways it is hard to understand why any person would fail to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior after even once hearing Him speak or after seeing even one miracle of healing. It is still harder to understand why people continued to reject the incomparable, gracious, loving Son of God after hearing Him preach many times and seeing Him heal dozens, or perhaps hundreds, of people of every sort of affliction. It seems totally incredible, however, that God's own chosen people—who were given His covenant, His law, His prophets, and His many special blessings - would reject the Son of their own God, the Messiah their own Scriptures prophesied, the very Deliverer whom they claimed to look and long for.

Yet as one studies the gospel accounts, that was exactly the response of most of the Jews. Their unbelief and rejection flew in the face of everything Christ said and did in their very midst. The proofs of His divinity, His power, and His goodness were obvious and beyond contradiction. Yet, as the evidence increased, so did resistance and rejection. At the beginning of his gospel, John prepares us for that response, telling us that "He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11). From the beginning Jesus knew that rejection would exceed acceptance, and He said to those who sought to kill Him, "You do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent. You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life" (John 5:38-40). Like the rebellious citizens in one of Jesus' parables about the kingdom, those who rejected Christ said, in effect, "We do not want this man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14).

Those who rejected Jesus Christ even after witnessing His miracles were like a judge or jury who, after hearing an open and shut court case,

makes a decision that is the exact opposite of what the evidence calls for. Jesus' authority was evident, as the people recognized from the beginning of His ministry (Matt. 7:29). His teaching was unique, as the officers reported to the chief priests and Pharisees who had sent them to arrest Jesus. "Never did a man speak the way this man speaks," they said (John 7:46). To the unbelieving Jewish leaders who questioned him about his healing by Jesus, the former blind man said, "Well, here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where He is from, and yet He opened my eyes. . . . Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, He could do nothing" (John 9:30, 32-33). When representatives from the Pharisees and the Herodians tried to entrap Jesus with a question about paying taxes to Caesar, He answered, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's." His answer was so astute that His questioners "marveled, and leaving Him, they went away" (Matt. 22:21-22). The Jews were amazed at His teaching in the Temple, saying, "How has this man become learned, having never been educated?" (John 7:15). Although many accusations were leveled against Jesus, no one could convict Him of falsehood or any other sin (John 8:46). When Jesus healed the paralytic, the multitude was "filled with awe" (Matt. 9:8), and after He cast out a demon they said, "Nothing like this was ever seen in Israel" (v. 33). When Jesus wept over the grave of Lazarus, the Jews said, "Behold how He loved him!" (John 11:36). Jesus' composure was also beyond the human. When He stood before Pilate, who had the power to release Him or order Him crucified, Jesus would not give a single word in His own defense, "so that the governor was amazed" (Matt. 27:14).

Everything about Jesus was astounding, marvelous, and humanly unexplainable. It is no wonder that, when the people marveled at Him but would not accept Him, Jesus would Himself marvel at their unbelief (Mark 6:6). How can people witness God's power over and over again, admit that it is marvelous and even divine, and yet refuse to accept and follow the One who does such wonderful things?

Jesus Himself explained that some people run from the truth because it exposes their sin, which they do not want to give up. "The light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed" (John 3:19-

20). Others are attracted to Jesus' charisma and power. They marvel at the wonderful things He says and does, but they take nothing to heart. They follow Jesus from a distance, wanting to be thrilled but not changed, entertained but not saved. Often they are willing to be identified as a follower of Jesus Christ, but their commitment is superficial and they have no staying power.

In 9:18-22 Matthew shows us two of the things that often keep such people from genuine conversion: personal comfort and personal riches.

THE BARRIER OF PERSONAL COMFORT

Now when Jesus saw a crowd around Him, He gave orders to depart to the other side. And a certain scribe came and said to Him, "Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." (8:18-22)

Jesus and His disciples were on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, and the **crowd** became so massive that He **gave orders to depart to the other side**. Though He was completely God, Jesus was also completely human. He needed occasional rest and respite from the never-ending demands of those who came to Him for help.

When Jesus decided to cross the lake, the issue of commitment was pressed for several men who apparently were reevaluating their relationship to Him. From Mark we learn that some of the crowd got into other boats in order to go across the lake with Jesus (4:36), but three men (a third is mentioned in Luke 9) obviously did not want to leave and they approached Jesus just before He departed.

The first man was **a certain scribe**, who **said to Him, "Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go."** Since he did not ask Jesus a question or a favor, we can only guess at the man's motive for making that statement to Jesus. As **a scribe** he would have broken with the majority of his fellow scribes had he become a dedicated disciple of Jesus. He knew

such a decision would be costly, and perhaps he wanted to see how Jesus reacted to his declaration of allegiance.

The scribes were authorities in Jewish law, and were closely associated with the Pharisees. They were highly educated and were the scholarly class of Jewish society. They were fiercely loyal to the system of religious traditions that many of their forerunners had been instrumental in devising. Typically the scribes were teachers, not followers of teachers, and they were especially reluctant to follow a teacher such as Christ, who not only was not educated in a rabbinic school but actually denounced the traditions they held sacrosanct.

For a **scribe** to address Jesus as *didaskalos* (**Teacher**) was therefore a considerable concession in itself, and no doubt the crowd, as well as the inner circle of the twelve disciples, were impressed that the Lord was spoken to so favorably by one of the Jewish leaders. In his own mind the man no doubt believed what he said to Jesus was true, just as Peter was later convinced in his own mind that he would never forsake Jesus (Matt. 26:33, 35). But neither man knew himself as well as he thought. The **scribe** may have sincerely thought that Jesus was the greatest **Teacher** he had ever heard and the greatest miracle worker the world had ever seen. He probably sincerely recognized that Jesus' teaching and power were from God and that He was in some uniquely special way God's man for the hour. He found Jesus appealing and wanted to be associated with Him. **I will follow You wherever You go**, he said to Jesus.

Unlike many Christian churches and organizations today, who are eager to embrace any famous personality who makes a profession of Christ, Jesus knew that a strong profession does not necessarily reflect strong commitment. Even without knowing men's hearts as He did, Christians today can benefit from taking that truth into account.

Jesus responded to the scribe's statement by making a statement of His own. He did not verbally question the man's sincerity but simply mentioned some demands of true discipleship the man had never considered. **Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."** At first glance Jesus' words seem unrelated to the scribe's affirmation. He was saying, in proverbial form, that in spite of His divine authority and miracle-working power, self-indulgence was not in His plan, and He had fewer physical comforts than many animals. **Foxes have holes** they can

call their own, and **birds of the air have nests** to which they can return and rest.

The Messiah is first referred to as **the Son of Man** in Daniel 7:13. Jesus is called by that title over eighty times in the gospels and it was the most common name that He used for Himself. It was a term of His humiliation, and was especially appropriate in the figure of His having **nowhere to lay His head**. In His humiliation He did not even have the basic comforts of life. Jesus had no place of His own—no house or property, not even a tent. After the dispute about Jesus' healing of the blind man, "everyone went to his home," John tells us: "But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives" (John 7:53-8:1). Whereas others went home to spend the night, Jesus spent it alone under the stars, in prayer with His Father. We are told of His often spending time in the home of Peter in Capernaum and of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany, but we are never told of His spending even an hour in His own house, because He had none.

Jesus' purpose in making such a statement was obviously to make the **scribe** take stock of the genuineness of his commitment. Impressive words of affirmation are easy to make, especially when one does not know the cost of commitment involved. The Lord knew that the initial declared faith of many of His followers was shallow and superficial. When Jesus was in Jerusalem during the first Passover after He began His ministry, "many believed in His name, beholding His signs which He was doing." Yet, John goes on to say, "Jesus on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man" (John 2:23-25). The Lord had no faith in their faith because He knew it was not genuine. Those people were only committed to the wonder and excitement that accompanied His work, not to Him as Lord or to the work of the gospel itself. Jesus repeatedly refused to take advantage of temporary popularity, which He knew would soon turn to permanent rejection.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus gives a vivid illustration of such people. They are the rocky places that do not have much soil. The seed immediately springs up and gives the appearance of a strong and healthy plant. But because it has no root it is soon scorched by the sun and withers. "This is the man," Jesus says, "who hears the word, and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only

temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away” (Matt. 13:5-6, 20-21).

Jesus knew human nature is fickle, unstable, and self-centered, and that many people are attracted to Him by excitement, glamor, or the hope of personal benefit, such as being healed or fed. They are quick to jump on the bandwagon when things are going well, but as soon as the cause becomes unpopular or demands sacrifice they want to jump off. At first they look as if they are alive for Christ and often give glowing testimonies, but when their association with Him begins to cost more than they bargained for they lose interest and are never seen again in the church or in Christian work. As the Bible commentator R. C. H. Lenski observes, such a person “sees the soldiers on parade, the fine uniforms, and the glittering arms and is eager to join, forgetting the exhausting marches, the bloody battles, the graves, perhaps unmarked” (*The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961], pp. 338-39).

Jesus knew the **scribe** was too eager to declare his allegiance. He did not count the cost of discipleship, which involves self-denial, sacrifice, and quite possibly suffering. Jesus’ proverb about the **foxes** and **birds** represented the relatively minimal sacrifice of being homeless—yet even that cost was obviously too high, because the **scribe** simply disappears without another word said by or about him. The Lord’s words hit him where he was weak and unwilling, and his true loyalty only to his own comfort was quick to show itself.

Sugarcoating the message of the gospel, trying to make it appear to be less demanding than it is—or even not demanding at all—not only compromises God’s Word and does disservice to the Lord but also does disservice to those to whom we witness. Jesus did no such thing. He warned His disciples with sobering candidness, “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves” (Matt. 10:16). He then continued to tell them, “And brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents, and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all on account of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.... A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. It is enough for the disciple that he become as his teacher, and the slave as his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!” (vv. 21-22, 24-25).

Toward the end of His ministry the Lord said to His disciples, “They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God” (John 16:2). Paul assures us that “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). After presenting the long list of faithful Old Testament saints, the writer of Hebrews says of them that some “were tortured, not accepting their release, in order that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground” (11:35-38).

The **scribe** who came to Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee was not willing to pay any such price for his faith. He merely wanted to add excitement to his life, have the prestige of being identified with a popular leader, or some other equally self-centered objective.

An explorer may have many volunteers to go with him on an expedition—until he explains that the team will be working in scorching heat, sub-zero cold, or sweltering swamps, with only subsistence rations, few chances to take a bath, and little contact with the outside world for months at a time. A young athlete may dream of winning a gold medal in the Olympics—until he learns about the rigorous training, strict diet, limited social life, and fierce competition he would have to face for many years.

There is no thrill like the joy of knowing and following Christ, but it is not a thrill that the world can understand or appreciate. Jesus Christ gives great peace to those who belong to Him, but His peace is not the kind the world gives or seeks (John 14:27). His joy and peace come by the way of ridicule, suffering, and the cross, which His disciples must take up when they follow Him. “If anyone wishes to come after Me,” He said, “let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Matt. 16:24). The Christian life is not adding Jesus to one’s own way of life but renouncing that personal way of life for His and being willing to pay whatever cost that may require.

THE BARRIER OF PERSONAL RICHES

And another of the disciples said to Him, “Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father.” (8:21)

This man, like the scribe of verse 19, was one of Jesus’ **disciples** in the sense of being a follower who was unofficially identified with Him. He was not one of the twelve, but a hanger-on who had perhaps followed Jesus about the countryside for a few weeks or months.

Like the scribe, he assumed that his relationship to Jesus was all it should be, and he made what seems to have been a reasonable request: **Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father.** Since the Jews did not practice embalming, a dead body had to be quickly prepared and buried. Not only that, but Jewish tradition required that a person mourn for his deceased father or mother for a period of thirty days. The final act of devotion to parents was seeing that they were properly buried. Since Jesus was about to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, a burial obviously could not wait until His return.

The man’s asking for permission to **bury** [his] **father**, however, did not mean that his father was already dead. The phrase was a common Near Eastern figure of speech that referred to a son’s responsibility to help his father in the family business until the father died and the inheritance was distributed. Obviously such a commitment could involve a long period of time, thirty or forty years or more if the father was relatively young.

The expression is still used in parts of the Middle East today. A few years ago a missionary asked a rich young Turkish man to go with him on a trip to Europe, during which time the missionary hoped to disciple the man. When the young man replied that he must bury his father, the missionary offered his sympathy and expressed surprise that the father had died. The man explained, however, that his father was alive and healthy and that the expression “bury my father” simply meant staying at home and fulfilling his family responsibilities until his father died and he received his share of the inheritance.

Since a man’s inheritance was customarily lost or reduced if he did not fulfill his expected responsibilities to the family, the phrase “I must

bury my father” was frequently equivalent to “I want to wait until I receive my inheritance.”

This second superficial disciple did not want to risk losing his inheritance by committing himself fully to Jesus. He wanted to be associated with Jesus in name, but the focus of his life was on his personal prosperity and well-being, not on serving the Lord. Jesus therefore **said to him, “Follow Me; and allow the dead to bury their own dead.”** Like “foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests” (v. 20), the seemingly nonsensical expression **allow the dead to bury their own dead** was a proverbial figure of speech. It meant, “Let the world take care of the things of the world.” The spiritually dead can take care of their own things.

In his parallel account of this story, Luke adds Jesus’ further instruction, “As for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God” (9:60). The man’s primary responsibility as a disciple of Jesus Christ would be to proclaim the gospel, to bring the good news of eternal life to the spiritually **dead**. The Christian’s responsibility is not to follow and mimic the world but to be a witness to the world in Christ’s name and power. His citizenship is in the living, eternal kingdom of God, not in the dead and decaying realm of this world.

Again like the scribe, this second of the **disciples** who approached Jesus on this occasion also disappears without further mention. Apparently neither man wanted to discuss the matter further. Jesus’ demands were too high, and the appeal of discipleship vanished. Like the rich young man who asked Jesus what good thing he must do to inherit eternal life (Matt. 19:16-22), when this professing disciple heard Christ’s answer, he lost his enthusiasm for the things of the Lord.

For **Jesus** to say, **Follow Me**, is for Him to say, “Deny yourself and take up your cross” (Matt. 16:24). It is not that any amount of self-denial or sacrifice can earn salvation, but anything that is held more dearly than Christ is a barrier to Christ and will stand between the unsaved person and salvation.

Luke tells us of a third man who came to Jesus on this occasion and made a profession of discipleship. “I will follow You, Lord,” he said; “but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home” (9:61). As with the other two men, this man’s statement seems perfectly reasonable. It would take

but a few days, or a few weeks at the most, for him to pay his parents the simple courtesy of saying good-bye.

But Jesus knew the man's heart and that his motivation was weak and his loyalty divided. He was not yet ready to give himself wholeheartedly to Jesus as Lord. He was still tied to his parent's apron strings and was under their dominance and control. The decision to follow Jesus Christ is the most uniquely personal decision that can be made. It is wonderful when friends and relatives encourage someone to decide for Christ, and it is tragic when they advise against Christ. But whatever the outside influences may be, the commitment is the individual's alone to make. Jesus therefore replied, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (v. 62). These words were perhaps adapted from a proverb attributed to the famous Greek poet Hesiod, who lived around 800 B.C.—"You can't plow a straight furrow when looking backward." A person cannot satisfactorily do the job at hand if he is continually looking back to his past work and loyalties. A person cannot follow Jesus Christ if he still longs for the ways of the old life.

Of these three men who came to Jesus and then disappeared, William MacDonald aptly says, "They left Christ to make a comfortable place for themselves in the world and to spend the rest of their lives hugging the subordinate."

Jesus made it clear that commitment to Him is total and unreserved or it is not commitment at all. "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth," He said. "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household. He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me" (Matt. 10:34-38). If a person allows anything to hold him back from full allegiance to Christ, he is not worthy of the kingdom of God. Jesus is not here talking about Christian service but about salvation. God will save no one who comes to Him with strings attached.

Throughout the centuries many people have marveled at Jesus, acclaiming His authority, His love, His wisdom, His purity, His power, His provision, His healing, and even His deity—but have failed to give

themselves to Him. They praise and profess Jesus, and then walk away. Bishop J. C. Ryle wrote, “The saddest road to hell is the one that runs under the pulpit, past the Bible, and through the middle of warnings and invitations.”

Jesus’ response to the three men who came to Him on the shore of Galilee seems to contradict His promise that “all that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out” (John 6:37). Those men personally came to Christ, and they seemed to come positively, speaking well of Him and proclaiming their desire to follow Him. But Jesus’ further words in John 6 explain why so many people who profess to come to Christ do not really come to Him at all. He said, “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (v. 54). In other words, belief in Jesus Christ is total identity with Him. There is no such thing as partial belief or partial salvation. A person who does not totally commit himself to Christ disbelieves in Him, no matter how many positive things he may have to say about Him. Jesus therefore went on to say, “There are some of you who do not believe,” and shortly after that we are told that “as a result of this [that is, of all of the hard sayings Jesus had just given], many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore” (vv. 64, 66).

Coming to Jesus Christ is coming on His terms, not our own. The person who comes to Christ comes in humility, meekness, a needy beggar in spirit who hungers and thirsts for God’s righteousness, who cries for mercy, and is willing to be hated, reviled, and persecuted for the sake of his Lord (Matt. 5:3-12). The Lord may not take away comforts, money, or relationships with others, but all of those things—and everything else besides—must be given over to Him, to do with as He pleases. Otherwise He is not Lord, no matter how much allegiance to Him is professed.

Jesus' Power over the Natural (8:23-27)

And when He got into the boat, His disciples followed Him. And behold, there arose a great storm in the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves; but He Himself was asleep. And they came to Him, and awoke Him, saying, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing!" And He said to them, "Why are you timid, you men of little faith?" Then He arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and it became perfectly calm. And the men marveled, saying, "What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?" (8:23-27)

At creation God ordained man to be king of the earth, to "rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" (Gen. 1:26). But when man fell into sin, he was dethroned and lost his sovereignty over the earth. He lost his God-given majesty along with his innocence. With the rest of the earth man was cursed and corrupted. He lost his dominion, and both man and earth lost their glory. The control of earth fell into the hands of the usurper, Satan, who now reigns as ruler of this world and age (John 12:31; 14:30). Man's sin, earth's corruption, and Satan's rule have brought sickness, pain, death, hardship, sorrow, war, injustice, falsehood, hunger, natural disaster, demonic activity, and every other evil that plagues the world.

But from the beginning, and even before the beginning, God planned the redemption of both man and the earth, reversing the curse. According to His divine plan, God's own Son would come to earth twice in the process of that redemption—the first time to redeem man and the second time to redeem the earth. In His first coming Jesus Christ came in humility, going to the cross and rising from the grave to redeem man from

sin. In His second coming He will come in blazing glory and establish His thousand-year kingdom, the Millennium, and after that a completely new heaven and earth—redeeming the whole of creation for all eternity.

In the coming kingdom of God, His ultimate plan for earth will be restored—without sin, pain, disease, hatred, hardship, sorrow, disaster, or demons. There will be only holiness, righteousness, truth, peace, love, and beauty. Everything that now blights man's happiness, that breaks his heart, that frustrates his hopes, that disrupts and perverts his dominion will be removed forever. For all time and eternity the universe will be redeemed.

As we look at mankind and the present earth, however, it is glaringly obvious that man himself could never effect such changes. Man cannot solve the natural problems of environment, weather, droughts, famines, disease, and sickness. Someone has said that for every problem science solves, six others are created in its place. The greater our advancements, the more severe the complications.

Even less can man solve his moral and spiritual problems. As we become more advanced in psychology, sociology, criminology, and diplomacy, we also become more engulfed in psychological disorders, sociological problems, and in crime and war.

The power to reverse the curse and bring a new heaven and a new earth not only is infinitely beyond man but is inconceivable to man. We cannot imagine the power necessary to make such a radical recreation of the universe, any more than we can imagine the power it took to create it in the first place and to sustain it. Man has the capability to destroy his world, but not the power to perfect it.

The psalmist tells us that “power belongs to God” (Ps. 62:11). He speaks of “the greatness of Thy power” (79:11) and of the one “who dost establish the mountains by His strength, being girded with might” (65:6). David cried out, “O God, Thou art my God; I shall seek Thee earnestly; my soul thirsts for Thee, my flesh yearns for Thee, in a dry and weary land where there is no water. Thus I have beheld Thee in the sanctuary, to see Thy power and Thy glory” (Ps. 63:1-2). Paul reminds us that, “since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made” (Rom. 1:20).

The more man delves into the universe, the more amazing and awesome the wonder of creation becomes. Telescopes can take us some

four billion light years—about twenty-five sextillion miles—into space, and yet we have not come near the edge of the universe. We have discovered certain gravitational principles that keep the stars and planets in their orbits, yet we are far from fully explaining those principles, much less duplicating them. The earth spins on its axis at a thousand miles an hour at the equator, travels in a five-hundred-eighty-million-mile orbit around the sun at about a thousand miles a minute, and, with the rest of its solar system, careens through space at an even faster speed in an orbit that would take billions of years to complete. The energy of the sun has been estimated to be equivalent to five-hundred-million-million-billion horsepower. There are at least one-hundred-thousand-million other suns in our galaxy, most of them larger than ours.

God is also creator and sustainer of the microcosm. A teaspoon of water contains a million-billion-trillion atoms, which themselves are composed of still smaller particles of energy. Smaller subparticles of those particles are still being discovered.

We know Jesus Christ “upholds all things by the word of His power” (Heb. 1:3). He energizes every atom and every atomic particle and subparticle in the universe. That is the power of our God and Savior! If He has power to create and sustain the earth, surely He has power to recreate it. He has the power to bring back Eden and, indeed, create a new earth that far surpasses Eden.

Jesus Christ came into the world, in part, to demonstrate that power, to show for all who would see it that He was indeed the Son of God. The promised Messiah and King had power to redeem man from sin and to give him renewed sovereignty over a renewed earth. As noted in the previous chapter, Matthew has already shown that Jesus had the right genealogy, the right birth, the right baptism, the right success over temptation, and the right message. God had said that the One who would reverse the curse would come through the line of David, and Jesus did. God had said this Deliverer would be born of a virgin, and Jesus was. God had said He would be approved by the Father, and Jesus was. God had said He would be more powerful than Satan, and Jesus proved that He was. God had said His Son would speak the truth, and Jesus did. God had said He would have power over disease and death, and Jesus proved that He did.

Above all else the miracles were foretastes of kingdom power. When Jesus healed diseases and restored broken bodies, He previewed the

kingdom, in which there would be no sickness or deformity. When He cast out demons, He previewed the kingdom, in which there would be no demonic activity. When He raised the dead, He previewed the kingdom, in which there would be no death.

After Jesus had both forgiven and healed the paralytic, He said that He had done so “in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth” (Matt. 9:6). When the multitudes saw Jesus’ miracles, “they were filled with awe, and glorified God, who had given such authority” (9:8). To prepare them for His transfiguration, Jesus told His disciples, “ ‘Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.’ And six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up to a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; and His garments became radiant and exceedingly white” (Mark 9:1-3). As He taught in the Capernaum synagogue one Sabbath, the people “were amazed at His teaching, for His message was with authority” (Luke 4:32). When He cast a demon out of a man in that synagogue, they were still further amazed and exclaimed, “With authority and power He commands the unclean spirits, and they come out” (v. 36). In the opening words of his letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of Jesus’ being “declared the Son of God with power” (1:4), and in First Corinthians speaks of Him as “Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1:24). The supreme proof of Jesus’ divinity and messiahship was His absolute authority and power over everything on earth.

In Matthew 8:23-27 Jesus demonstrates His unlimited power over the natural world. His stilling the storm is the first miracle of the second group of three miracles presented in chapters 8 and 9.

THE PARTICULARS

And when He got into the boat, His disciples followed Him. And behold, there arose a great storm in the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves; but He Himself was asleep. (8:23-24)

After confronting the three superficial followers with the true cost of discipleship (8:18-22; Luke 9:61-62), Jesus **got into the boat** to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is about 13 miles long and as much as 8 miles wide.

The **disciples** who **followed Him** included the twelve, some of whom were in the same boat as Jesus, along with other followers who went in separate boats (Mark 4:36). Because Jesus healed many people and talked with the three professing disciples after “evening had come” (v. 16), it was probably well into the night when the small flotilla departed.

Mathētēs (**disciple**) simply means a follower, learner, or pupil. The word itself has no spiritual connotation, and it is used of superficial followers of Jesus as well as of genuine believers. Because the Sermon on the Mount is essentially a message on salvation, the disciples who gathered on the mountain to hear Jesus (Matt. 5:1) obviously included unbelievers. The two men who approached Jesus just before He entered the boat are called disciples (Matt. 8:21; cf. v 19), but their leaving Him proved them to be false disciples. The men of Jesus’ inner circle are often referred to as disciples (Matt. 10:1), yet unbelieving Judas ended up betraying the Lord.

At least four categories of disciples are seen in the gospels. The broadest group were the curious, those who followed Jesus for a while simply to find out what He was like. They were fascinated and intrigued by what He said and did, but they would not surrender to Him as Lord and Savior. We see some of these disciples in John 6. When Jesus proclaimed, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves, . . . Many therefore of His disciples, when they heard this said, ‘This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?’ . . . As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore” John 6:53, 60, 66).

The second category of disciple included those who were intellectually convinced of Jesus’ divine message and power. When Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, he said, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him” (John 3:2). But at that point he was not yet committed to Jesus. As the Lord went on to point out, Nicodemus was not

born again and consequently had no spiritual relationship to God, no participation in His kingdom, and no eternal life (vv. 3-15).

The third category of disciple was composed of secret believers. Joseph of Arimathea was such a clandestine follower until he asked Pilate for permission to bury Jesus in his own tomb and thereby proclaimed allegiance to his Savior (Matt. 27:57-58).

In the fourth category of disciples were the true and open believers, those who were publicly and permanently committed to Jesus Christ. The small group of **disciples** who **followed Him** was more than just the twelve and no doubt included all four kinds.

The **boat** was probably a small, open fishing craft of the type commonly used by fishermen such as Peter, James, and John. The Sea of Galilee lies just over 600 feet below sea level, near the northern end of the Jordan River. Mt. Hermon rises 9,200 feet to the north, and strong northerly winds often plummet down the upper Jordan valley with great force. When they meet the warmer air over the Galilee basin, the intensity is increased. Hitting the cliffs on the eastern shore, the winds swirl and twist, causing the waters beneath them to churn violently. The fact that they come quickly and with little warning makes the storms all the more dangerous and frightening.

Seismos (**storm**) literally means a shaking and is the term from which we get seismic, seismograph, and related terms. The storm was so violent that it shook the water in the lake as if it were a glass of water in the hands of a great giant. The exclamation **behold** intensifies the rapid and surprising manner in which **there arose a great storm in the sea**. The storm became so fierce that **the boat was covered with the waves**, and Mark explains that “the waves were breaking over the boat so much that the boat was already filling up” (Mark 4:37).

Yet Jesus **Himself was asleep**, no doubt being exhausted from the long day’s work of healing and teaching. Just before we see one of His most awesome demonstrations of deity, we see a touching picture of His humanness. The Lord was bone weary, and He slept so soundly that not even the tossing of the boat, the noise of the wind, or the blowing water in His face awakened Him. He was soaked to the skin while lying on hard planks with only a cushion for His head (Mark 4:38).

Yet this was all part of the divine plan. The storm was howling, the wind and waves were about to swamp the boat as it tossed about on the

water like a cork—and the Creator of the world slept soundly in the midst of it all. Although in His divinity He was omniscient, in His humanness He was at this time oblivious to the turmoil that surrounded Him.

THE PANIC

And they came to Him, and awoke Him, saying, “Save us, Lord; we are perishing!” And He said to them, “Why are you timid, you men of little faith?” (8:25-26a)

Several of the twelve disciples were fishermen, and we can be certain they had done everything possible to save themselves. They were probably just as tired as Jesus was, but were far too afraid to sleep. They had nowhere else to turn but to Jesus and were exactly where God wanted them to be. Sometimes the Lord has to bring us to a point of absolute desperation before He can get our attention, and that is what He did with those disciples whose boat was about to be swamped or torn to pieces. They had run out of human solutions and had only Jesus to turn to. Perhaps the one who could cleanse lepers, restore sight to the blind, and heal every other sort of disease also had power over the wind and the sea. Their great fear was mixed with a glimmer of faith as **they came to Him, and awoke Him, saying, “Save us, Lord; we are perishing!”** Had they had the confidence in Jesus that He had in His Father, they would have been as calm and unconcerned as He.

The story is told of a hardened old sea captain who was quite vocal about his atheism. One night during a storm he was washed overboard and his men heard him crying out to God for help. When he was finally rescued one of the men asked him, “I thought you didn’t believe in God.” He replied, “Well, if there isn’t a God, there ought to be one for times like this.” Many people turn to the Lord only when every other resource has been exhausted. When sickness, death, loss of job, or some other tragedy comes, they cry out to God much as the disciples did to Jesus.

God is always pleased when men turn to Him, especially for salvation. People can be healed, comforted, saved from financial ruin, and

helped in many other ways without God's direct intervention, but the person who is not saved has absolutely no resource but the Lord. God loves to hear a sinner's cry of desperation, because realizing one's own inadequacy is the first step in turning to Him. He also loves to hear His own people cry out to Him, even in desperation, because that is a sign they remember to whom they belong.

Even the greatest saints of God have at times forgotten their heavenly Father and become swamped by circumstances. The psalmist cried, "Why dost Thou stand afar off, O Lord? Why dost Thou hide Thyself in times of trouble?" (Ps. 10:1). The writer of Psalm 44 lamented: "But for Thy sake we are killed all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. Arouse Thyself, why dost Thou sleep, O Lord?" (vv. 22-23). Even Isaiah was dismayed at God's seeming inability to help His people. "Awake, awake," he cried out, "put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake as in the days of old, the generations of long ago" (Isa. 51:9). Like the disciples during the storm, he wondered why God slept while His people were perishing.

Jesus' first response to the disciples' plea was to rebuke them gently for their lack of faith. **He said to them, "Why are you timid, you men of little faith?"** *Deilos* (**timid**) has the basic meaning of being fearful or cowardly, and the disciples must have wondered why Jesus wondered at them. How could He ask why they were afraid and **timid**, when they obviously had everything to be afraid of? The great question in their minds was why *Jesus* was *not* afraid. It was the middle of the night, the storm was sure to wash them overboard or sink the boat, and any response but fear seemed foolish and unnatural. Jesus' calmness so perplexed the disciples that they accused Him of insensitivity: "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" (Mark 4:38).

But Jesus turned the rebuke back upon them. **Why are you timid**, He asked, and then gave the answer as part of the question: **you men of little faith?** They were fearful because they were faithless, **timid** because they had **little faith**. "Don't you believe in Me and in My power?" He asked, in effect. "Haven't you seen enough of My power and experienced enough of My love to know you are perfectly safe with Me? You have seen Me perform miracle upon miracle, even on behalf of those who never trusted in Me or even bothered to thank Me. You have seen My power and My compassion, and you should know that because of My power I *can*

help you and that because of My compassion I *will* help you. Even if you should drown, don't you know that would mean instant heaven? What, then, do you have to be worried about?"

The disciples knew the Psalms. Many times they had heard and repeated the words of Psalm 89: "O Lord God of Hosts, who is like Thee, O mighty Lord? Thy faithfulness also surrounds Thee. Thou dost rule the swelling of the sea; when its waves rise, Thou dost still them" (vv. 8-9). They had sung, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea: though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride" (Ps. 46:1-3). They knew well the majestic and comforting words of Psalm 107:

Those who go down to the sea in ships, who do business on great waters; they have seen the works of the Lord, and His wonders in the deep. For He spoke and raised up a stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea. They rose up to the heavens, they went down to the depths; their soul melted away in their misery. They reeled and staggered like a drunken man, and were at their wits' end. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and He brought them out of their distresses. He caused the storm to be still, so that the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because they were quiet; so He guided them to their desired haven. (Ps. 107:23-30)

It was a literal fulfillment of those verses that Jesus was about to accomplish on the Sea of Galilee.

The believer who is aware of God's power and love has no reason to be afraid of anything. Because God both can and will take care of His children, there is no hardship or danger through which He cannot or will not take them. God's power and love will see us through any storm, and

that is the essence of what we need to know and consider when we are in trouble.

Yet every believer realizes from his own experience that knowing about God's power and love and trusting in them do not always go together. Our weaknesses and frailties are so much a part of us that, even after we have witnessed God doing marvelous things, we still fall into doubt and fear. In fact, like Elijah after the great miracle on Mt. Carmel and the disciples after the great miracles in Capernaum, we sometimes are most afraid just after we have been overwhelmed with God's greatness. We marvel at His greatness, but as soon as trouble comes we forget His greatness and see only the trouble.

Faith needs constant strengthening, as the disciples eventually came to realize. "Increase our faith!" they pleaded of Jesus (Luke 17:5). Even believers are subject to disbelief, and the more we believe, the more we also want to cry out with the father of the boy with the unclean spirit, "I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). We know God can provide, but we also know how easily we can fail to trust in His provision. We know God loves us, but we also know how easily we can forget His love. We know He gives peace that passes understanding, but we also know how easily we can fall into worry and despair. When it is coupled with **little faith**, even much knowledge about God leaves us **timid** and afraid when trouble comes.

THE POWER

Then He arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and it became perfectly calm. (8:26b)

Jesus **arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea**, saying, "Hush, be still" (Mark 4:39). At the word of the Creator the storm could do nothing but become **perfectly calm**. The winds stopped, the waves ceased, the air cleared, and the water became as glass. Storms normally subside gradually, with winds and waves diminishing little by little until calm is restored. But this storm subsided faster even than it had come; it came

suddenly and ceased instantly. Though small in comparison to hurricanes and typhoons, that storm on the Sea of Galilee had generated multiplied millions of units of horsepower. Yet Jesus stopped it with a word—an easy feat compared to His bringing the entire world into existence with a word.

The one who had control over diseases and demons also had control over nature. And as Matthew would proceed to show, He also had power to forgive sins and to raise the dead.

THE PORTENT

And the men marveled, saying, “What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?” (8:27)

Thaumazō (**marveled**) refers to extreme amazement and can carry the idea of portending. **The men** could not imagine **what kind of a man** Jesus was, **that even the winds and the sea obey Him**. Mark reports that, along with their great amazement, the men were also “very much afraid” (4:41). They were now more afraid of the one who had stilled the storm than they had been of the storm itself. Many of them had encountered dangerous storms, but none had encountered such supernatural power as Jesus here displayed.

After God had declared His great power and majesty, Job exclaimed, “I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees Thee; therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5-6). When Isaiah “saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple,” he declared, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isa. 6:1, 5). After Daniel beheld the Lord, he testified: “No strength was left in me, for my natural color turned to a deathly pallor, and I retained no strength. But I heard the sound of his words; and as soon as I heard the sound of his words, I fell into a deep sleep on my face, with my face to the ground” (Dan. 10:8-9). When Peter saw Jesus miraculously provide the great catch of fish, “he fell down at Jesus’ feet, saying, ‘Depart from me,

for I am a sinful man, O Lord!’” (Luke 5:8). When Paul encountered the risen Christ on the Damascus road, “he fell to the ground. . . . And though his eyes were open, he could see nothing” (Acts 9:4, 8).

God’s majesty is so overwhelming that when He displays Himself in even a small part of His glory men cannot stand in His presence. These disciples suddenly realized that God was standing in the very boat with them, and they were terrified by His power and His holiness. On a similar and later occasion Peter walked on the water. But when the wind came up, he became afraid, and Jesus not only held up His faithless disciple but also caused the wind to stop. “And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, ‘You are certainly God’s Son!’” (Matt. 14:29-33).

Isaac Watts wrote:

We sing the mighty power of God,
Who bade the mountains rise.
Who spread the flowing seas abroad,
And built the lofty skies.
We sing the wisdom that ordained
The sun to rule the day.
The moon shines full at His command,
And all the stars obey.
Lord, how Thy wonders are displayed
Where e’er we turn our eyes,
When e’er we view the ground we
tread,
Or gaze upon the skies.
There’s not a plant nor flower below,
But makes Thy glories known,
And clouds arise and tempest blow,
By order of Thy throne.

He closes with the beautiful lines:

On Thee each moment we depend,
If Thou withdraw we die.
O may we ne'er that God offend,
Who is forever nigh.

The same Christ who stilled the Sea of Galilee is the Christ who keeps every atom and every star in its orbit. He keeps the universe in balance and provides for each plant and animal. One day He is coming to restore the world that sin defiled, to make completely new the heavens and the earth. Even now He is the God who gives eternal life to those who trust in Him, and who will calm their every storm and give strength for their every tragedy.

Jesus' Power over
the Supernatural
(8:28-34)

And when He had come to the other side into the country of the Gadarenes, two men who were demon-possessed met Him as they were coming out of the tombs; they were so exceedingly violent that no one could pass by that road. And behold, they cried out, saying, "What do we have to do with You, Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?" Now there was at a distance from them a herd of many swine feeding. And the demons began to entreat Him, saying, "If You are going to cast us out, send us into the herd of swine." And He said to them, "Begone!" And they came out, and went into the swine, and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and perished in the waters. And the herdsmen ran away, and went to the city, and reported everything, including the incident of the demoniacs. And behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw Him, they entreated Him to depart from their region. (8:28-34)

Matthew adds to the convincing evidence of Jesus' messiahship and divinity by showing His power over the supernatural as well as over disease, deformity, and the natural world. For Jesus to redeem the earth and reverse the curse, He would have to have total power over Satan and his demon hosts. In order to rescue fallen humanity He would have to be able to overpower the evil forces that hold men in physical, mental, and spiritual bondage. Throughout the gospel record, therefore, we repeatedly find accounts of Jesus' ability to cast out demons from those under their evil control. He exercised His power instantaneously, authoritatively, and

with total success—often by the use of but a single word, as in the present instance.

In the wilderness temptations Jesus demonstrated His power to resist Satan; now He demonstrates His power to overcome and completely subdue Satan. In His dealing with the kingdom of darkness He not only would not bend to Satan but made Satan bend to Him. As the apostle John tells us, “The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). The Lord became a Man and came into the world in order to destroy the works of Satan. When He comes again to establish His kingdom He will incarcerate Satan for a thousand years, at the end of which, after a brief freedom, he and his evil co-workers will be cast into the lake of fire, where “they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev 20:2,7-10). By casting out demons during His earthly ministry, Jesus gave dramatic, powerful, and repeated evidence of His power over Satan. As He explained to a multitude near Jerusalem, “If I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:20).

When the disciples tried to cast out demons they found out how extremely difficult it is. Although Jesus had given them “power and authority over all the demons” (Luke 9:1), they discovered that casting out demons was not as easy for them as for Him (Matt. 17:16, 19). Many Jews of New Testament times were involved in exorcism by means of various formulas and rituals, with no real success. That is why Jesus’ total success was so surprising. “What is this? A new teaching with authority!” exclaimed the incredulous Jews at Capernaum. “He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him” (Mark 1:27). Because Jesus cast out demons with such ease, some of the people concluded that He must therefore be in collusion with the devil, and they declared, “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons” (Luke 11:15). When the seven sons of Sceva tried to cast an evil spirit out of a man by the power of “Jesus whom Paul preaches, . . . the evil spirit answered and said to them, ‘I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?’ And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded” (Acts 19:13-16).

In the account of the two demon-possessed men, Matthew first describes the possession by the demons, then the power of Christ over the

demons, and finally the perspective of the people in regard to Jesus.

THE POSSESSION BY THE DEMONS

And when He had come to the other side into the country of the Gadarenes, two men who were demon-possessed met Him as they were coming out of the tombs; they were so exceedingly violent that no one could pass by that road. And behold, they cried out, saying, “What do we have to do with You, Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?” Now there was at a distance from them a herd of many swine feeding. And the demons began to entreat Him, saying, “If You are going to cast us out, send us into the herd of swine.” (8:28-31)

After the miraculous stilling of the storm, Jesus and His disciples continued across the Sea of Galilee **to the other side**. By now it was daylight and the group of boats (see Mark 4:36) landed in **the country of the Gadarenes**. Those whom Matthew calls **Gadarenes** were also called Gerasenes (Mark 5:1; Luke 8:26) or Gergesenes, as found in some Greek texts. The small town of Gerasa, or Gergesa (from which come *Gerasenes* and *Gergesenes*, respectively) was on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee, about six miles across the water from Capernaum, and the steep cliffs nearby fit the geographical setting described here. The town of Gadara (from which comes **Gadarenes**) is located farther south and is inland; but the general region, including Gerasa, was often referred to as **the country of the Gadarenes**.

THE RECEPTION BY THE DEMONS

two men who were demon-possessed met Him as they were coming out of the tombs; they were so exceedingly violent that no one could pass by that road. (8:28b)

In their accounts of this incident, Mark (5:2) and Luke (8:27) mention only one demon-possessed man but do not state that only one was present. For their particular purposes they chose to focus on the more dominant of the **two men**. *Daimonizomai* (**demon-possessed**) simply means to be demonized, to be under the control of a demonic spirit, without regard to the kind or degree of control. Although its accounts of demonized people reflect many different conditions and degrees of control, Scripture does not clearly distinguish between being possessed, obsessed, or oppressed by demons.

Demonization may be defined as a condition in which one or more demons inhabit and gain control over a human being. Demons can attack men spiritually, mentally, and physically. In the spiritual realm they promote false religions, demon worship, the occult, and innumerable kinds of immorality, including murder (Rev. 9:20-21; 18:23-24). In the intellectual and psychological realm they promote such things as false doctrines; insanity and masochism, as in this **demon-possessed** man, who gashed himself with stones (Mark 5:5); and inability to speak and suicidal mania (see Mark 9:17-22).

Demon domination was a common affliction in New Testament times, even among God's chosen people, the Jews. In the apostolic church, the gift of miracles, or powers, was the ability to cast out demons. It is interesting, however, that we read of no account of demon possession in the city of Jerusalem. Throughout history, including modern times, that particular aspect of Satan's activity seems to appear more commonly in rural and unsophisticated areas than in sophisticated urban society. It is also more common where animistic religion and its accompanying fear and worship of evil spirits are strong. In more advanced societies, a person who is seriously deranged by demons is likely to be considered insane and placed in a mental institution, and it seems certain that many people who are diagnosed as mentally ill are actually demonized.

It is significant that Jesus never blamed a person for being either diseased or demon controlled. He recognized them as victims of powers beyond their own control and as in need of deliverance, not exhortation or condemnation.

As we see with these **two men who were demon-possessed**, the personality and voice of a demon can at will, and sometimes continuously, eclipse the personality and voice of the occupied person. When Jesus

asked one of the men, “What is your name?” the demon responded through the man’s mouth, saying, “My name is Legion; for we are many” (Mark 5:9).

These men lived in burial chambers that were commonly hewn out of rock hillsides or cliffs on the outskirts of a town or city, and as they saw Jesus approaching they **met Him as they were coming out of the tombs**. It is possible they were Jews, for whom touching a dead body was the greatest ceremonial defilement. If so, their being forced by the demons to live in a cemetery was an additional humiliation and torment.

They were so exceedingly violent that no one could pass by that road. We learn from the other gospel accounts that at least one of the men wore no clothes and that he had such great strength that no chain could keep him bound. He was often driven into the desert by the demons and spent much of his time ranting and raving, “crying out and gashing himself with stones” (Mark 5:4-5; Luke 8:27-29).

THE RECOGNITION BY THE DEMONS

And behold, they cried out, saying, “What do we have to do with You, Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?” (8:29)

What do we have to do with You meant, “What are You doing here and why are You bothering us?” By addressing Jesus as **Son of God** the demons showed that they immediately recognized who He was. Mark reports that one of the men “ran up and bowed down before Him” (5:6). The word from which “bowed down” comes (*proskuneō*) is usually translated “worship,” because it represents the most common Near Eastern act of adoration and reverence. The term carries the idea of profound awe and respect. Demons hate and loathe everything about God, yet they are powerless to do anything but bow down before Him when in His presence—just as one day at His name every knee will “bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth” (Phil. 2:10).

Demons are fallen angels, and before they joined Satan in his rebellion against God they knew intimately each member of the Trinity.

Though they had never before seen Him in human form, they instantly recognized Jesus as the second Person of the Godhead. As spirits, they recognized His spirit. They knew intuitively that they were standing in the presence of the **Son of God**, the “Son of the Most High God,” as Mark (5:7) and Luke (8:28) report. As we learn from another encounter of Jesus with demons, they also “knew Him to be the Christ,” that is, the Messiah (Luke 4:41).

They knew Jesus was their divine antagonist and that He had full power and authority to destroy them at will. By their question, **Have You come here to torment us before the time?** they acknowledged that they knew there was a divinely appointed **time**, not yet come, when He would indeed judge them and punish them with eternal damnation. Their eschatology like the rest of their theology was factually correct. As James tells us, “the demons also believe, and shudder” (James 2:19). They shudder because their belief is that of recognition but not acceptance, and they fully *realize* the consequence of rejecting God.

In light of their knowledge about His divine power and plan it seems strange that Satan and his fallen hosts bothered to tempt and attack Jesus. But the supreme deceivers are also supremely self-deceived, and in their evil delusions they somehow hoped to frustrate Christ in His humanity. By inducing Him to sin, perhaps they could drag Him down to the lake of fire with them when judgment came. Perhaps they thought He was somehow less powerful and righteous on earth than they knew Him to have been in heaven. In any case, it is the nature of Satan and of those who belong to him to oppose God, no matter what the consequences or prospect for success.

The demons understood much more about Jesus’ identity and about the divine plan of redemption and judgment than did the twelve disciples at that time. It was much later that Peter confessed before Jesus, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,” a truth he came to know only by divine revelation (Matt. 16:16-17).

The demons knew they were not destined for judgment until after the Millennium and they consequently wondered why Christ now had dealings with them. It was much too early for their scheduled **time of torment**, and yet they sensed that Jesus was about to interrupt and destroy their present evil work.

THE REQUEST OF THE DEMONS

Now there was at a distance from them a herd of many swine feeding. And the demons began to entreat Him, saying, “If You are going to cast us out, send us into the herd of swine.” (8:30-31)

In desperation the demons looked around for a way of escape, and they spotted **a herd of many swine feeding** in a pasture. The great size of the **herd**, which numbered 2,000 animals (Mark 5:13), indicates that the number of demons was also large (see also Mark 5:9). **If You are going to cast us out** was not a statement of uncertainty or mere possibility. The idea is, “In light of the fact that You are about to cast us out,.” Knowing Jesus’ compassion for men and His divine plan to destroy the works of the devil, the demons knew He would not let them continue to inhabit and torment the two men.

The request of the demons seems bizarre, and we are not told why they asked to be sent **into the herd of swine**. Perhaps they thought the Lord had changed His timetable for judgment and would otherwise immediately throw them into the great abyss. Even inhabiting pigs would be immeasurably better than that. Because **swine** were the most unclean of all unclean animals to the Jews, perhaps the demons thought Jesus would not care if the demons took control of them. Or, by inhabiting and then destroying the pigs, perhaps they could cause the pigs’ owners and others in the area to turn against Jesus. Perhaps Jesus would be killed for killing the pigs. Whatever the reason for the demons’ request, it was predicated on the clear understanding that Jesus would not allow them to remain where they were.

THE POWER OF CHRIST

And He said to them, “Begone!” And they came out, and went into the swine, and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and perished in the waters. (8:32)

When the disciples cast out demons even with God's commissioning and empowering, it often required considerable time and persistence as well as prayer and fasting (Matt. 17:21; Mark 9:29). But Jesus cast the entire legion of demons out of the two men with but a word: **Begone!** He gave permission to the demons (see Luke 8:32) in the form of a command which they were powerless to disobey, and immediately **they came out, and went into the swine.**

Again we can only wonder at the demons' reason for doing what they did. Whether they directed **the whole herd** to rush **down the steep bank into the sea** where they **perished in the waters**, or whether that was simply the animals' frenzied response to being inhabited by the evil spirits, it seems likely the demons knew the outcome in advance. But we do not know why they did what they did or what happened to them after the pigs drowned.

As fallen angels, demons are extremely powerful beings (see 2 Kings 19:35; Ps. 103:20; 2 Pet. 2:11). When an angel was sent with a message for the prophet Daniel, he was delayed by a demon (called "the prince of the kingdom of Persia") for three weeks, and the Lord had to send the archangel Michael to his aid (Dan. 10:13). It is therefore hardly surprising that Paul warns us that even as God's own children we cannot withstand the attacks of demons apart from the Lord's armor, especially the shield of faith (Eph. 6:16).

Demons have superior intelligence (Ezek. 28:3-4), superior strength (Mark 5:4; Acts 19:16), superior supernatural powers to perform "signs and false wonders" (2 Thess. 2:9), and the superior experience of having existed long before the creation of the world, first as holy angels and then as fallen. They not only have great knowledge of God's nature and power but also great knowledge of man's nature and weaknesses. As spirit beings they are not limited by time, space, or form. Only the Lord Jesus Christ has the power to bruise Satan's head and it will only be by the Lord's power that he will be bound and cast into the abyss and eventually into the lake of fire and brimstone (Rev. 20:3,10). It required tremendous power to cast out so many demons as Jesus did in the country of the Gadarenes, yet He did it in an instant.

Many people wonder why Jesus would allow so many animals, even unclean pigs, to be destroyed just to cater to the bizarre request of a

bunch of demons. But animals were created for man's use and consumption, and those pigs were destined for slaughter anyway. Their being drowned brought considerable financial loss, but if the owners were Jews—as they may well have been—they had no business raising pigs in the first place. But the souls of the two possessed men were of infinitely greater value than the two thousand animals, and Jesus did not hesitate to permit such a relatively small sacrifice to be made on the men's behalf.

The primary lesson of this passage, however, does not have to do with the right to raise or eat pigs or with the relative value of pigs and human beings. The Lord's supreme purpose in casting out the demons and Matthew's purpose in reporting it were to demonstrate Jesus' authority and power over Satan and his forces. The fact that the demons **went into the swine** and the swine reacted in the frenzy they did was dramatic and convincing evidence that they had left the two men. Their fierceness and violence was transferred to the pigs and there could be no doubt in the minds of observers as to what had happened.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PEOPLE

And the herdsmen ran away, and went to the city, and reported everything, including the incident of the demoniacs. And behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw Him, they entreated Him to depart from their region. (8:33-34)

When **the herdsmen** saw what happened to their pigs, they **ran away**. The fact that they **reported everything, including the incident of the demoniacs**, indicates they realized the connection between the two demon-possessed men and what had happened to the animals. The pigs' mass suicide proved that Jesus had indeed cast the demons out of the men. Further evidence, which the **herdsmen** and the others discovered when they returned to the scene, was that one of the men—and presumably the other as well—was clothed and sat in his right mind at Jesus' feet (Luke 8:35).

The townspeople, probably including the owners of the pigs, were so amazed by the report that **the whole city came out to meet Jesus**. That they came specifically **to meet Jesus** shows that He was the focus of attention. He was of greater concern to them than either the pigs or the two previously possessed men. Contrary to the suggestion of many interpreters through the centuries, there is no indication in the text that the response of the people was due to their materialistic concern over the loss of so many pigs. Though they were possibly present, the owners of the pigs are not mentioned in any of the three gospel accounts. The issue was not the demons, the pigs, or the two men, but **Jesus**.

The people of the **city** (probably Gerasa) did not even give Him the reluctant reverence shown by the demons. They did not seem the least interested in finding out who He was or why He had come to their area. They wanted nothing to do with Him, and **entreated Him to depart from their region**. They had at first simply come out “to see what it was that had happened,” but when “they came to Jesus and observed the man who had been demon-possessed sitting down, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had the ‘legion’;... they became frightened” (Mark 5:14-15). They were not angry or resentful but scared.

When unholy men come face-to-face with the holy God, they are terrified. Again we are reminded that when Isaiah “saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted,” he exclaimed, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isa. 6:1,5). After Peter witnessed Jesus’ miraculous provision of fish that nearly swamped two fishing boats, “he fell down at Jesus’ feet, saying, ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord’”(Luke 5:8). When the storm came on the Sea of Galilee, the disciples were afraid, but when they saw Jesus still the storm they were even more afraid (Mark 4:38-41). They were more afraid of Jesus than the storm, because they realized that God Himself was in the boat with them. The sinner who knows he faces God can only see his sin, and the result is fear.

We are not told exactly what the people from the **city** thought of Jesus. We only know that they had a glimpse of the supernatural and it caused them to panic. They saw One who could control demons, who could control animals, and who could restore shattered minds to sanity—and they wanted nothing to do with Him.

Here we find the first opposition to Jesus recorded in the gospels. The people did not ridicule or persecute Jesus; they simply asked Him to leave them alone. Perhaps they resented His righteousness exposing their sin, His power exposing their weakness, or His compassion exposing their hardness of heart. Perhaps they could not tolerate Jesus because of His perfection. But unlike the scribes and Pharisees, these people showed no interest at all in who Jesus was or in His teaching or work. They seemed totally indifferent to His person and ministry. They did not care if He was the Messiah. They did not seem to care whether His powers were good or whether He was from God. They did not care anything about Him, except that He would go away. Their rejection of Jesus was in the form of great indifference, the same indifference to God shown by most men throughout history—the indifference that wants to let God alone and to be left alone by God. The Lord was an intrusion with whom they did not want to be bothered.

In great contrast to the attitude of those people, one of the men who had been demon-possessed begged Jesus “that he might accompany Him” (Mark 5:18). He was so grateful to Jesus for deliverance and so drawn to Him in love and adoration that he could not bear to be separated from Him. But Jesus had other plans for the man, and “He did not let him, but He said to him, ‘Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He had mercy on you’” (v. 19). Jesus sent the man back to his own people—quite probably the very people who had asked Jesus to leave—to testify to them of the Lord’s love and mercy. The man was to be an evangelist and missionary to his own people, living testimony that the One whom they had rejected nevertheless loved and sought to redeem them. Even to those who entreat **Him to depart**, Jesus extends His grace.

Jesus' Power **over Sin (9:1-8)**

And getting into a boat, He crossed over, and came to His own city. And behold, they were bringing to Him a paralytic, lying on a bed; and Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, "Take courage, My son, your sins are forgiven." And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, "This fellow blasphemes." And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, "Why are you thinking evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, and walk'? But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—then He said to the paralytic—"Rise, take up your bed, and go home." And he rose, and went home. But when the multitudes saw this, they were filled with awe, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men. (9:1-8)

The most distinctive message of Christianity is the reality that sin can be forgiven. That is the heart and lifeblood of the gospel, that men can be freed from sin and its consequences. The Christian faith has many truths, values, and virtues, each of which has countless applications in the lives of believers. But its supreme, overarching good news is that sinful man can be fully cleansed and brought into eternal fellowship with holy God. That is the message of Matthew 9:1-8.

Matthew has been focusing on various miracles of the Lord, all of which are meant to demonstrate Jesus' divinity. Even more specifically, they precisely and completely fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah's kingdom work. The miracles recorded by Matthew under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit therefore have a uniquely Jewish and Old Testament character and significance.

Concerning the natural realm, the Old Testament prophesied that the Messiah would have power over the curse in the physical world. Isaiah predicted there would be in His reign an abundance of rain and crops not known since the Fall (Isa. 30:23-24) and that one day even the wilderness would blossom profusely, as waters break forth and the scorched land and thirsty ground become pools and springs of water (35:1-2, 7; cf. 41:17-18; 51:3; 55:13; Ezek. 36:29-38; Joel 3:18). Animals which had been natural enemies of man and of other animals would no longer destroy or devour, and human longevity would increase so that a person who died at a hundred years of age would be considered to have died young. By the stilling of the storm (Matt. 8:23-27) Jesus gave a foretaste of His eventual taming of the entire natural world.

Concerning the supernatural realm, the Old Testament speaks of Satan and his evil forces who have so long oppressed and persecuted God's people (Dan. 7:24-27; 8:23-25; 11:36-12:3; Zech. 3:1-2) and who the Messiah would have to conquer before His righteous kingdom could be established on earth. By resisting Satan's temptations and casting out his demon servants (Matt. 8:28-34) Jesus proved His power was superior to Satan's.

Concerning the spiritual realm, the Old Testament tells us that Messiah's kingdom will be marked by forgiveness and redemption (Isa. 33:24; 40:1-2; 44:21-22; Ezek. 36). By His forgiveness of the paralytic recorded in this passage and many others Jesus further demonstrated power that is reserved to God alone and that Scripture had prophesied would characterize the Messiah.

It was Jesus' specific, complete, and dramatic fulfillment of these and all other messianic prophecies that made His rejection by the Jews—especially that of the scribes and Pharisees, who were students of Scripture—so heinous and inexcusable.

Matthew's arrangement and presentation of the three sets of miracles in chapters 8 and 9 show progressive development in revealing Jesus' credentials as the divine Messiah. First we see Him heal a leper with the touch of His hand (8:3), heal a centurion's servant without having seen the afflicted person (8:13), and then heal Peter's mother-in-law of a serious fever (8:15). Next He went beyond physical afflictions and demonstrated His authority and power over the spiritual kingdom of Satan by casting out many demons with a word (8:16), by demonstrating His

power over the great natural forces by stilling the storm on Galilee (8:26), and by again demonstrating His authority over Satan by casting out a legion of demons from two possessed men of Gadara (8:32).

In the first of the last three miracles in these two chapters Jesus ascends still higher in the drama of supernatural acts as He deals with sin, the root of all man's physical and spiritual troubles and misery as well as the cause of his separation from his Creator. Christ Jesus demonstrates His power to remove the pollution and guilt of sin in those who trust in Him. The Great Physician not only can heal the sick, still the storm, and cast out demons, but can bring to the human soul the thing that it needs most: forgiveness of sin.

Matthew majors on the authority of Christ. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount he reports that Jesus "was teaching them as one having authority and not as their scribes" (7:29). Those great teachings demonstrate His moral and theological authority. Throughout the book His miracles demonstrate His authority over both the natural and spirit worlds, and at the end of the book He declares, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth," and then sends out His disciples to teach and minister in that authority (28:18-20).

In all of those ways Jesus declared and demonstrated His sovereign authority to rule. In the present passage He demonstrates His sovereign authority to redeem.

We do not know how much time elapsed between Jesus' healing of the two demoniacs and His **getting into a boat**, by which He **crossed over** to the west shore of the Sea of Galilee **and came to His own city**. Matthew's concern here is not so much with the chronology or full details of Jesus' ministry as with the significance and progression of His miraculous signs.

Although Nazareth was the city of Jesus' childhood, He had been rejected by the people there, who would have thrown Him over a cliff to His death had He not passed through their midst unnoticed. From there "He went His way" a few miles east "and He came down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee" (Luke 4:29-31), as a prophet rejected in His own country (see Matt. 13:57). At this time He probably took up temporary residence with Peter, in whose home He healed Peter's mother-in-law (8:14-15). Jesus' **own city** was therefore now Capernaum (cf. Mark 2:1).

The events and teachings of Matthew 9:2-8 can be represented by six key words: faith, forgiveness, fury, forensic, force, and fear.

FAITH

And behold, they were bringing to Him a paralytic, lying on a bed; and Jesus seeing their faith (9:2a)

Before He went across the Sea of Galilee to the country of the Gadarenes, Jesus had generated massive interest in His ministry, and it was partly to get away from the crowds for a while that He took the trip (8:18). It was natural, therefore, that when He returned, the news quickly spread and the crowds returned.

We learn numerous additional details about this story from Mark and Luke. As already noted, Jesus had now made Capernaum His home city and was staying in Peter's house, where Jesus "was at home" (Mark 2:1). Two-story houses were common in Palestine and it is likely that the room with the overflow crowd (see v. 2) was on the second floor, where most visiting and socializing were done. Such upper rooms were common, and it was in one of these that the Lord ate the Last Supper with His disciples. The roof of the house was often used as a place for relaxation in the cool of the day, and frequently for sleeping on hot nights. The outside stairs were therefore usually built all the way to the roof.

Because the afflicted man's friends could not get into the crowded room where Jesus was, they carried the litter up to the top of the house and proceeded to dismantle the roof until they made enough room to lower the man into Jesus' presence (Mark 2:3-4; Luke 5:19). It is to these four friends or relatives that **they** refers.

Because the **paralytic** (*paralutikos*) had to be brought to Jesus **lying on a bed**, his paralysis obviously was severe, and he may well have been a quadriplegic. No wheelchairs or other such equipment were available to those who could not walk, and they had to rely on others to carry them around. Cripples have always suffered social stigma and neglect, but in the Jewish culture of Jesus' day the stigma was made

immeasurably worse by the belief of most Jews that all disease and affliction was the direct result of someone's sin. The idea was common even in the days of Job, who may have lived as early as the time of Abraham. Eliphaz asked Job, "Who ever perished being innocent?" (Job 4:7) and Bildad said to him, "If your sons sinned against Him, then He delivered them into the power of their transgression" (8:4). The same attitude was clearly reflected in the disciples' question to Jesus as they passed a man who had been blind from birth: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?" (John 9:1-2).

Though it is true that affliction, pain, and hardship of every sort are the result of the presence of sin in the world, they are not necessarily brought on by some specific sin of the person who is suffering. Not all sickness is chastening, but all sickness is a graphic demonstration of the destructive power at work in the world because of sin.

Like his fellow Jews, the **paralytic** no doubt believed his paralysis was direct punishment for his own sin or that of his parents or grandparents, and that thought must have added immensely to his suffering. In his own mind and in the minds of most of the people who saw him his paralysis was a vivid representation of his own sinfulness and of God's judgment. That belief gave crippled and diseased people even more reason to shun crowds.

But this man was determined to see Jesus at any cost. Because he associated the paralysis with his sin, his first concern was for forgiveness, which to his thinking would have automatically brought healing. And although his theology may have been erroneous, he was right in believing that his first and greatest need was spiritual.

By their persistence, the man and his four friends evidenced their strong conviction that Jesus could help. They had carried the man to the house, and when they could not get into the room with Jesus, they carried the stretcher all the way up to the roof, tore the roof open, and lowered the man on his **bed** down to Jesus' feet. Jesus not only saw this outward evidence but also saw their hearts. And **seeing their faith** by their aggressive approach to Him, the omniscient Lord also read the believing hearts of these five men just as He read the unbelieving hearts of the scribes who thought He was blaspheming (vv. 3-4).

Because the **paralytic** said nothing to Jesus it is possible to conclude that the paralysis had affected his vocal chords or his tongue. Or

the man, despite his **faith**, may have been overcome with awe as he came face-to-face with the One who had power to heal all kinds of disease. Perhaps he now wondered if He could also heal hearts. In any case, he willingly and silently exposed himself to Jesus and to the whole crowd in all his physical, moral, and spiritual ugliness. He was literally at Jesus' feet, and in his heart he threw himself on Jesus' mercy. He approached the Lord in true humility, in the poverty of spirit God requires of the seeking heart (Matt. 5:3).

Jesus sometimes healed people who had little faith and even some who had no faith, but He was especially disposed to heal those with great faith, such as this man and his friends demonstrated. It was the kind of great faith shown by the centurion (8:10) and that would soon be shown by the man whose daughter had died (9:18).

FORGIVENESS

said to the paralytic, "Take courage, My son, your sins are forgiven."
(9:2b)

Jesus' first words **to the paralytic** were, **Take courage, My son.** Knowing the man's fearful heart from being overwrought with sin and now being thrust into the very presence of incarnate God, Jesus spoke tender words of comfort and encouragement. How thrilling it must have been to hear the holy One who knew his sin, grief, and humiliation to say **take courage.**

Tharseō (**take courage**) refers to subjective courage, that which is deep and genuine—in contrast to *tolmaō*, which refers to outward boldness. *Tolmaō* would be characterized by gritting the teeth to help endure pain or whistling in the dark to stave off fear. It is the kind of courage that tries to master fear by sheer will power and determination. But *tharseō* represents the **courage** that eliminates fear. Jesus was saying, "Don't be afraid, because you no longer have anything to be afraid of." It was not that the man's fears had not been real and well founded. An unrepentant sinner is separated from God and under divine judgment. But

when he repents in faith he no longer has reason to fear, because he is no longer under judgment. Knowing the paralytic's faith, Jesus therefore said to him, **take courage**.

Addressing the man as **My son** gave further comfort. *Teknon (son)* refers to a child of any age or sex. It is here translated **son** because Jesus was speaking to a man. **Son** was used in that day as it often is in our own, as a term of friendship and identity—sometimes even with a person just met. Because the paralytic repentantly identified himself with Jesus, Jesus lovingly identified Himself with the paralytic.

But Jesus' supreme words to him were, **your sins are forgiven**. Those words represent a divine miracle that is perhaps the greatest of all miracles and certainly the most desirable for the recipient—holy God forgiving the sins of an unholy man. Just as with a word Jesus stilled the storm, with a word He dismissed the paralytic's sins and gave him His most gracious gift to meet his greatest need.

Aphiemi, the verb behind **are forgiven**, has the basic idea of sending or driving away, of doing away with. "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us," David declared (Ps. 103:12). When God forgives sins He casts them "into the depths of the sea" (Mic. 7:19). Paul rejoiced that, even though he "was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor," he was yet "shown mercy" (1 Tim. 1:13). "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance," he goes on to say, "that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all" (v. 15).

When missionaries in northern Alaska were translating the Bible into the language of the Eskimos, they discovered there was no word in that language for forgiveness. After much patient listening, however, they discovered a word that means, "not being able to think about it anymore." That word was used throughout the translation to represent forgiveness, because God's promise to repentant sinners is, "I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (Jer. 31:34).

When I was in college I was asked to visit a girl in the hospital who had been accidentally shot in the neck. The bullet severed her spinal cord and she was paralyzed from the neck down. I had never met the girl but was told she was a cheerleader at her school and had been very active and vivacious. When I came into the hospital room she was lying on a sheepskin pad, unable to do anything but speak. After we talked a while

she confessed that, if she were able, she would commit suicide, because she did not want to face a future of helplessness. I presented Christ to her and, after some questions and discussion, she received Christ as her Lord and Savior. I went back to visit her several times, and one day she said to me, “I can honestly say now that I’m glad the accident happened. Otherwise I may never have met Christ and had my sins forgiven.”

Forgiveness of sin is God’s greatest gift because it meets man’s greatest need. Sin is a transgression of God’s law (1 John 3:4) and defiles His image in man, staining his soul with Satan’s image (John 6:70; 8:44). Sin is hostility and rebellion against God (Lev 26:27; 1 Tim. 1:9). It is ingratitude toward God (Josh. 2:10-12), is incurable by man himself (Jer. 13:23), affects all men (Rom. 3:23), and affects the total man (Jer. 19:9), body, mind, and spirit. It brings men under the dominion of Satan and the wrath of God (Eph. 2:2-3), and it is so persistent in the heart of man that even the regenerate person needs to continually fight against it (Rom. 7:19). It subjects man to trouble (Job 5:7), emptiness (Rom. 8:20), lack of peace (Isa. 57:21), and to eternal hell if he does not repent (2 Thess. 1:9).

Because of that bleak picture, the best news anyone can receive is the word that his **sins are forgiven**. When Jesus spoke those words to the paralytic, He must have tasted the bitterness and agony of Calvary, knowing that the words could be effective only because He would take the man’s sins upon Himself. Every time He forgave sin He knew and anticipated the cost.

FURY

And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, “This fellow blasphemes.” (9:3)

Luke tells us that some Pharisees were also present with **the scribes** and that they thought within **themselves** Jesus was blaspheming by claiming to forgive sins (5:21; cf. Mark 2:7). They were right that only God can forgive sins (Isa. 43:25; Mic. 7:18-19), but because they refused

to recognize Jesus' divinity, they could only conclude that **this fellow blasphemes**.

Unlike the paralytic, those men saw no need for forgiveness, because they considered themselves already to be righteous. They resented Jesus' offering forgiveness, not only because they did not believe He was God but also because they considered it unjust for a person to be forgiven simply by asking for it—instead of by earning it, as they thought they had done. The two great barriers to salvation have always been refusal to recognize the need for it and the belief that it can be earned or deserved.

These **scribes** had probably seen many miracles of Jesus and heard the testimony of others who had been healed of disease and cleansed of demons. But they refused to recognize His power as coming from God, much less that He Himself was God. Their thinking **this fellow blasphemes** reflected the pattern of growing rejection and persecution by the Jewish leaders that led ultimately to Jesus' crucifixion. They accused Him of being immoral because they saw Him "eating with the tax-gatherers and sinners" (Matt. 9:11) and they even declared the greatest blasphemy themselves by accusing Jesus of being satanic, of casting "out the demons by the ruler of the demons" (v. 34).

Their hearts were so hardened against Christ that every miraculous evidence of His divinity and messiahship drove them to deeper unbelief rather than to repentance. Even His most gracious and loving words and acts drove them to greater fury against Him.

FORENSIC

And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, "Why are you thinking evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, and walk'? But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (9:4-6a)

The word that best describes the fourth aspect of this event is forensic, which refers to discussion, debate, or argument. Because only Jesus' words were spoken aloud, we know the scribes' side of the

interchange only because the Lord omnisciently revealed to us what was in **their thoughts**.

Jesus “did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man” (John 2:25). “The Lord looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7) and knows the hearts of all men (1 Kings 8:39). He even “searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts” (1 Chron. 28:9; cf. Jer. 17:10; Ezek. 11:5). When Ananias and Sapphira tried to deceive God, Peter told them, “Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?” (Acts 5:3).

An **evil ... heart** is a heart that plots against God (see Acts 5:3-4,9; 8:20-22), and in saying those words to the scribes and Pharisees Jesus not only laid bare *what* they were **thinking** but exposed the wickedness behind the thoughts. In claiming to defend God’s holiness they showed themselves to be utterly against it, because they were **thinking evil** of the Son of God whom they refused to acknowledge.

Jesus’ first argument was in the form of a rhetorical question: “**For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, and walk?’**” The scribes and Pharisees had seen irrefutable evidence of Jesus’ power to heal disease. “Why, therefore,” He asked in effect, “do you think it impossible for Me to forgive sins? Is one **easier** than the other?” Sin and disease are inseparable, just as are sin and demons, sin and death, sin and disaster, and sin and the devil. The One who brought the kingdom would have to deal with sin or else He could not deal with the rest; and the One who could deal with the rest could also deal with sin. If Jesus could not deal with sin by putting it away, He could not deal with anything else related to sin. But He could deal with both sin and its symptoms.

His opponents said nothing, but the answer was obvious: both things are equally impossible for men and both are equally possible for God. The point was that no one but God could either heal disease with a word or could forgive sins, and He can do both with the same divine ease. Even their own distorted theology should have led the scribes and Pharisees to believe in Jesus’ divinity. If, as they believed, sickness and disease were the consequences of sin, then removing disease would be connected to dealing with the sin that caused it. In their thinking, *all* healing of disease would have to involve at least some forgiveness of sin—which by their own declaration only God can grant. They were trapped in their own theology and logic.

Jesus may have emphasized the word **say**. If so, His point was that *saying* something is always easier than *doing* it. It is also much easier to make a claim that cannot be verified than to make one that can be. The scribes and Pharisees had no visible way to verify the paralytic's forgiveness, but they were about to receive abundant evidence of his healing, which would force the conclusion that Jesus could and did deal with sin.

“But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,” Jesus continued, “I will demonstrate again My power to heal disease. You cannot see the results of My forgiveness,” He implied, “but you can easily see the results of My healing.” So in order that they might know He could forgive sin, which they could not see, He did what they *could* see—by dealing with sin's symptoms.

The scribes and Pharisees knew well the Old Testament predictions that miraculous healings would accompany the Messiah when He came to **earth**, and **the Son of Man** (the title of His humiliation) was now about to give them a special, front-row view of one of those miracles. If all He said were, “Your sins are forgiven,” no one could verify what happened. But to make the paralyzed man able to walk would give proof for everyone to see—just as seeing the two thousand pigs run off the cliff to their deaths gave proof that the demons had indeed gone from the two possessed men into the animals, just as Jesus gave them permission to do (8:32).

Many individuals and groups through the centuries have claimed the power to absolve sins, but they have had no proof. Any pretender can utter the words, “Your sins are forgiven,” but only God's divine power can both tell a paralytic to walk and then make it happen.

FORCE

**then He said to the paralytic—“Rise, take up your bed, and go home.”
And he rose, and went home. (9:6b-7)**

As far as we know, no one but Jesus spoke during the whole episode. Neither the believing paralytic and his four friends nor the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees said a word. The scribes and Pharisees may have mumbled among themselves about the matter, and the healed man and his friends may have thanked Jesus, but we have no record of it.

As soon as Jesus **said to the paralytic—Rise, take up your bed, and go home**, that is exactly what the man did. The command to **rise** suggests that when Jesus spoke the healing had already taken place. No description of this act of healing is recorded, only the command to the paralytic to take advantage of it.

At Jesus' word, the man **rose, and went home**. Mark adds that he "immediately took up the pallet and went out in the sight of all" (Mark 2:12), a living testimony to Jesus' power both to heal and to forgive sins.

FEAR

But when the multitudes saw this, they were filled with awe, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men. (9:8)

When the multitudes saw this, they realized that such a miracle could only be done by God's power, and **they were filled with awe**. *Phobeō* (**filled with awe**) is the term from which we get *phobia* and is often translated "fear." But the most common use of it in the New Testament represents reverential awe, not cringing fright. It expresses the feeling of a person who is in the presence of someone infinitely superior.

Phobeō is used to describe the reaction of the disciples when they saw Jesus walking on the water (Matt. 14:26) and to describe the reactions of the people after the raising of the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7:16) and after the healing of the demoniacs at Gerasa (Luke 8:37). It is used to describe Zacharias's response to the appearance of the angel (Luke 1:12) and the spectators' response when he regained his speech (v. 65). It is used of the shepherds when they heard the angels sing (Luke 2:9), of the guards at the garden tomb when the angels rolled the stone away (Matt. 28:2-4), and of the women after they visited the empty tomb (v. 8). It is used to

describe the feelings of the people who witnessed the signs and wonders of Pentecost (Acts 2:43) and of men in the midst of the shattering events of the last days (Luke 21:26). It is used of the response of the people to the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:5, 11) and to the demons overpowering the unbelieving sons of Sceva who tried to cast the demons out in Jesus' name (19:16-17).

In the synoptic gospels and Acts the term is never used to speak of anything other than the feeling in a person's heart when he is confronted with divine power, and it is declared to be a part of the Christian's attitude as he seeks to faithfully serve the Lord (Acts 9:31). Reverential **awe** of God is a part of the truly repentant life (2 Cor. 7:10-11), the chaste life (1 Pet. 3:2), the holy life (2 Cor. 7:1), and the godly life (Phil. 2:12). Mutual ministry, love, and respect, as well as powerful evangelism and proper church discipline, are all grounded in reverential **awe** of the Lord (see 2 Cor. 5:11; Eph. 5:21; 1 Tim. 5:20). It is the substance out of which all right Christian worship, behavior, and service must come.

The multitudes' response to the great miracle of healing and forgiveness was commendable: they **glorified God, who had given such authority to men**. We do not know how much the crowd knew about Jesus, but they knew that what He did had to have been empowered by God and that He **had given such authority to men**, since Jesus was obviously a man. If they did not realize that He was the God-Man, they at least realized He was an extraordinarily godly man.

**Receiving the
Sinner/Refusing the
Righteous** (9:9-17)

And as Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man, called Matthew, sitting in the tax office; and He said to him, “Follow Me!” And he rose, and followed Him.

And it happened that as He was reclining at the table in the house, behold many tax-gatherers and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, “Why is your Teacher eating with the tax-gatherers and sinners?” But when He heard this, He said, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means, ‘I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,’ for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do men put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out, and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved.” (9:9-17)

God’s receiving the sinner and refusing the righteous is central to the Christian faith. The gospel is not for good people but for bad people who know they are bad and who come to God for forgiveness and cleansing.

From the earliest part of his gospel, Matthew gives the message of God's forgiveness of repentant sinners. In the genealogy of Jesus in chapter 1 he specifically mentions a number of people whose lives were marked by terrible sin. Both Rahab and Ruth were from pagan, idolatrous, Gentile nations, and Rahab was even a prostitute. Although David was a man after God's own heart, he was also a murderer and adulterer.

As the forerunner of the Lord, John the Baptist prepared the people for the Messiah by preaching repentance from sin, and as they confessed their sins, he baptized them as a symbol of God's cleansing (3:2, 6, 11). Jesus began His own ministry with the preaching of repentance (4:17), and in the Sermon on the Mount He proclaimed God's offer of forgiveness for those who sincerely and humbly hunger and thirst for righteousness (5:3-6). In His model prayer He taught His followers to continue to ask God for forgiveness (6:12). From the day of Pentecost on, the early church preached repentance from sin as an integral part of the gospel message (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31).

The object of men's repentance is God's forgiveness, and that is the dual theme of the gospel—men must turn from sin in order for God to forgive, cleanse, and save them. The only people who ever receive salvation and enter God's kingdom are those who acknowledge their sinfulness and repent of it. It follows, then, that those who consider themselves already to be righteous see no need for repentance or forgiveness—and thereby shut themselves out from salvation in the kingdom of God.

That is the central truth of Matthew 9:9-17. Here one discovers one of the most definitive, dramatic, insightful, and comprehensive statements our Lord ever made. It gives the divine perspective on His ministry and the basic rationale of the incarnation. It is among the most important statements ever recorded in the Bible: "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (v. 13 *b*). That truth gives the essence of the gospel and the purpose for the incarnation. Jesus came into the world to call sinners to Himself. For those who know they have a terminal spiritual illness and who have no trust or hope in themselves to be cured, Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

Those who are pleasing to God testify with the penitent tax-collector in the Temple: "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" (Luke 18:13). Augustine pleaded, "Lord, save me from that wicked man,

myself.” John Knox, perhaps the greatest preacher in the history of Scotland, confessed, “In youth, in middle age and now after many battles, I find nothing in me but corruption.” John Wesley wrote, “I am fallen short of the glory of God, my whole heart is altogether corrupt and abominable, and consequently my whole life being an evil tree cannot bring forth good fruit.” His brother Charles, who penned so many great hymns, confessed, “Vile and full of sin I am.” Augustus Toplady, who wrote the beloved hymn “Rock of Ages,” said of himself, “Oh, that such a wretch as I should ever be tempted to think highly of himself. I am myself nothing but sin and weakness, in whose flesh naturally dwells no good thing.”

As he beheld Jesus’ great power and glory, Peter declared, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” (Luke 5:8). In his first letter to Timothy, Paul summed up the confession of every honest believer: “It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all” (1 Tim. 1:15).

Had Jesus come to save the righteous, His incarnation would have been pointless. Righteous people need no salvation. But even more relevant to man’s situation is the fact that there *are* no righteous people apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ. “There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one” (Rom. 3:10-12).

Many people, like the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day, *consider* themselves to be righteous, and for them Jesus offers no hope or help, because they admit no need. The first declaration of the gospel is negative—that every man is sinful, separated from God, and condemned to hell. A person will not seek to be saved until he realizes he is lost. Therefore the first step in proclaiming the gospel is to tell men of their lostness, and the first step in receiving the gospel is to confess that lostness. A person will not seek healing until he is convinced he is sick; he will not seek life until he acknowledges he is dead. Conversion, then, occurs in one who is willing to accept the death sentence and also the acquittal of God. The man who does not recognize his condemnation to death has no hope for new life.

In the midst of his carefully selected accounts of Jesus’ miracles that show His credentials as the predicted Messiah, Matthew presents that

central truth of the gospel. The first three miracles (see Matt. 8:1-17) dealt with disease and displayed Jesus' power over sickness and the infirmities of the body. After those miracles came the response of three would-be disciples, whose unwillingness to pay the price of discipleship betrayed their lack of genuine faith (8:18-22; cf. Luke 9:57-62). The second group of three miracles displayed Jesus' power over nature, over demons, and over sin (see 8:23-9:8).

The response to those three miracles is set forth in the present text. The first part of the response is positive, evidenced in the acceptance of the gospel by a penitent sinner. The second part of the response is negative, evidenced in the rejection of the gospel by those who thought themselves already to be righteous.

After Jesus forgave the paralytic's sin (9:2), the questions in the minds of many people no doubt were: "How much sin is God willing to forgive? Whose sin can be forgiven, and whose not? What are the parameters and limits of His forgiveness? What are its conditions and how far does it go?" Those are the questions answered in verses 9-17.

THE POSITIVE RESPONSE

And as Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man, called Matthew, sitting in the tax office; and He said to him, "Follow Me!" And he rose, and followed Him.

And it happened that as He was reclining at the table in the house, behold many tax-gatherers and sinners came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples. (9:9-10)

As He left Capernaum, "His own city" (v. 1; cf. 4:13), **Jesus passed on from there and saw a man, called Matthew.** Mark calls **Matthew** by the name of Levi and identifies him as "the son of Alphaeus" (Mark 2:14; cf. Luke 5:27). It was not uncommon for men to be known by more than one name. Thomas was also called Didymus (John 11:16), Mark was

sometimes called John (Acts 12:12), and Peter was also known as Simon (Matt. 4:18). It may be that the Lord renamed Levi as **Matthew** (which means, “gift of Jehovah, or Yahweh”) just as He renamed Simon as Peter (which means, “stone”; see Matt. 16:18; John 1:42).

When we realize that **Matthew** penned these two verses about himself, we get a glimpse of his modesty and humility. In his own mind, the most important truth about the writer’s former character is given in the words, **sitting in the tax office**. To Jews of his day, that single phrase established **Matthew** as the most despised, vile, and corrupt man in Capernaum.

Matthew was a *publicani* (whence the title *publican* in some translations), a man who served occupying Rome against his own people as a collector of taxes. By the nature of his position, his first loyalty had to be to Rome. Nationals of a country or province occupied by Rome could buy franchises that entitled them to levy certain taxes on the populace and on travelers. A franchise required collecting a specified amount of taxes for Rome and allowed anything collected beyond that figure to be kept as personal profit. Because his power of taxation was virtually unlimited and was enforced by the Roman military, the owner of a tax franchise in effect had a license for extortion. For those reasons the *publicani* were understandably considered traitors by their own people and were usually even more despised than Roman officials or soldiers.

Many tax collectors would accept bribes from the wealthy to reduce and falsify their taxes and would then exact proportionately more from the middle and lower classes, making themselves hated still more. They amassed great fortunes under the authority of the oppressor and at the expense of their own countrymen.

Most Jews believed that the only proper government over them was a theocracy—the rule of God through His appointed leaders such as they experienced under Moses, the judges, and the Jewish monarchy. Because they considered any foreign rule over them to be illicit, they considered taxation by any such government as both unjust and unholy. Taxation by Rome was therefore not only extortive but also made them compromise both their patriotism and their religion. It was those convictions that prompted the Pharisees to ask Jesus if it was proper to pay taxes to Caesar (Matt. 22:17). For Jesus to have answered yes would in their minds have marked Him both as a traitor and a reprobate.

The noted Jewish scholar Alfred Edersheim reports that a Jewish *publicani* was barred from the synagogue and was forbidden to have any religious or social contact with his fellow Jews. He was ranked with the unclean animals, which a devout Jew would not so much as touch. He was in the class of swine, and because he was held to be a traitor and a congenital liar, he was ranked with robbers and murderers and was forbidden to give testimony in any Jewish court.

Edersheim states that there were two categories of *publicani*. The first, whom the Jews called *gabbai*, collected general taxes, which included those on land and other property, those on income, and those referred to as poll, or registration, taxes. The basic land tax (the amount paid to Rome) was a tenth of one's grain and a fifth of one's fruit and wine. Income tax amounted to one percent of one's earnings, and the amount of the poll tax varied.

The second type of tax collector was called a *mokhes*, who collected a wide variety of use taxes—taxes similar to our import duties, tollway fees, boat docking fees, business license fees, and the like. The *mokhes* had almost unlimited latitude in their taxing powers and could attach a tax to virtually any article or activity. They could, for instance, levy a tax on a person's boat, on the fish he caught with it, and on the dock where he unloaded it. They could tax a traveler's donkey, his slaves and servants, and his goods. They had authority to open private letters to see if a taxable business of some sort might be related to the correspondence.

There were two kinds of *mokhes*. One kind, called the great *mokhes*, hired other men to collect taxes for them and, by virtue of partial anonymity, protected at least some of their reputation among their fellow countrymen. The other kind, called small *mokhes*, did their own assessing and collecting and therefore were in constant contact with members of the community as well as with all travelers who passed their way. The *gabbai* were despised, the great *mokhes* were more despised, and the small *mokhes* were despised most.

Matthew was obviously a small *mokhes*, because he himself was **sitting in the tax office** as Jesus passed through the outskirts of Capernaum. It was to that man, the most despised of the despicable, to whom Jesus said, **Follow Me!** It was clear to early readers of Matthew's gospel, as it was clear to those who witnessed this amazing encounter, that Jesus extended His forgiveness even to the outcasts of society.

Although we are given no details of any words Matthew may have uttered in reply to Jesus' call, it seems evident from the context that he had been under deep conviction of sin and spiritual need. Because of Jesus' considerable teaching and miracle working in the region around Capernaum, Matthew would have been well acquainted with His ministry, whether or not he had personally listened to Jesus preach or seen Him perform a miracle. And although he did not seek Jesus out as did the centurion (Matt. 8:5) and the paralytic (9:2), Matthew seems to have been yearning for the forgiveness that the perverted system of Judaism told him he could never have. Therefore, when the Lord called him, he immediately **rose, and followed Him.**

Because of his modesty, Matthew does not mention the fact, but Luke tells us that the moment Jesus called him, Matthew "left everything behind, and rose and began to follow Him" (Luke 5:28). That simple call by Jesus was more than enough reason for Matthew to turn his back on everything he was and possessed. Because of his position as an agent of Rome, he knew that once he forsook his post he would never be able to return to it. He knew the cost and willingly paid it. Of all the disciples, Matthew doubtlessly made the greatest sacrifice of material possessions; yet he himself makes no mention of it. He felt with Paul that "whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ" (Phil. 3:7).

When a person is truly converted, he cannot leave his old life fast enough. His old habits, standards, and practices no longer appeal to him and he gladly longs to leave them behind. Edersheim says of Matthew, "He said not a word, for his soul was in the speechless surprise of unexpected grace." Far from being depressed about what he left behind, his heart overflowed with joy. He lost a career but gained a destiny, lost his material possessions but gained a spiritual fortune, lost his temporal security but gained eternal life.

In one of her loveliest poems Amy Carmichael wrote,

I hear Him call, "Come, follow";
That was all!

My gold grew dim.
My heart went after Him.
I rose and followed,
That was all.
Would you not follow,
If you heard Him call?

Like many new converts, Matthew's first thought was to tell his friends about the Savior. He was so overwhelmed that he threw a banquet to present Jesus to his friends—all of whom, as **tax-gatherers and sinners**, were social and religious outcasts. We learn from Mark (2:15) and Luke (5:29) that the banquet was in Matthew's own house, another fact that he modestly omits in his own account.

The **tax-gatherers** no doubt included the local *gabbai* of Capernaum and perhaps even some fellow *mokhes* from neighboring communities. The **sinners** doubtlessly included robbers, murderers, drunkards, prostitutes, and other irreligious and ungodly people. They were the riffraff of the area and must have been intrigued and touched by the prospect of **dining with Jesus**, whom they knew to be a teacher of righteousness, **and His disciples**.

It was probably because of this banquet that Jesus first gained the reputation among His opponents as “a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners” (Matt. 11:19; cf. Luke 15:2). Most religious Jews, and especially the proud and self-righteous scribes and Pharisees, could not conceive of any Jew socializing with such a group of **sinners** unless he were one of their own kind.

The Jews of Jesus' day used the term *hamartōloi* (**sinners**) almost as a technical term for people who had no concern or respect either for the Mosaic law or rabbinic traditions. They were looked on as the vilest and most wretched and worthless of all people. Yet it was some of these that **Jesus and His disciples** joined at the banquet in Matthew's house.

Matthew's response to Jesus' call was immediate and positive, and his sincerity was evidenced by his eagerness to share his new faith and his

new Master. In a similar way, the genuine faith of Zaccheus, another despised and wealthy tax-gatherer, was evidenced by his voluntary determination to share half his possessions with the poor and to repay four times whatever he had defrauded anyone (Luke 19:8).

We are not told what the group of **tax-gatherers and sinners** thought of Jesus either before or after the meal, but their response to Him was at least positive enough to eat with Him and listen to Him. The main point of the incident, however—and what most offended the Pharisees—was not that the **tax-gatherers and sinners** were willing to associate with Jesus but that *Jesus* was willing to associate with *them*.

THE NEGATIVE RESPONSE

And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, “Why is your Teacher eating with the tax-gatherers and sinners?” (9:11)

The response of the **Pharisees** was quite different from Matthew’s. They were outraged that this **Teacher** who claimed to uphold standards of righteousness even higher than their own (see Matt. 5:20) would willingly sit down and eat with such a flagrantly sinful group. No doubt they were also resentful and humiliated that Jesus had never shown them such favor. If He were really a man of God, they reasoned, why had He not given a banquet for them, the exemplars and self-appointed custodians of religious purity?

The **Pharisees** did not confront Jesus head-on but instead cornered **His disciples**. Having learned of the banquet, these Jewish leaders waited outside to see what would happen and to exact an explanation of the unorthodox activity. The words **Why is your Teacher eating with the tax-gatherers and sinners?** were more a rebuke than a query. In the Pharisees’ own minds the question was largely rhetorical, and because they did not believe a satisfactory answer could be given, they were not asking a sincere question but were venting their hostility. The purpose was to put the **disciples** and their **Teacher** on the spot. As with their many other questions to and about Jesus, their motive was not to learn the truth but to

entrap and convict this presumptuous upstart who was turning their religious system upside down.

Even at this relatively early stage in Jesus' ministry, the **Pharisees** were becoming resentful and vindictive. Jesus had already said and done more than enough to establish Himself as an iconoclast who was at complete odds with almost everything they stood for and held sacred. They could see no defects in themselves and no good in those who were not like them. They were so pleased with themselves that they considered their enemies to be God's enemies. They were so convinced of their own doctrinal rightness that any belief or standard contrary to their own was by definition heretical and ungodly. They were so convinced of their own moral and spiritual righteousness that anyone who questioned their holiness questioned God's. The only thing Jesus could do that was worse than snubbing them, the religious and moral elite, was to befriend **tax-gatherers and sinners**, the religious and moral dregs. And He did both.

The **Pharisees** did not think they needed God's forgiveness and were certain that **tax-gatherers and sinners** did not deserve it. Their "ministry" was not to help but to judge, not to restore but to condemn. They wanted no part of a Man who, contrarily, condemned their self-righteousness and offered forgiveness to obvious **sinners**.

THE ARGUMENTS

But when He heard this, He said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice,' for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (9:12-13)

When Jesus heard this accusatory question, He answered it for the disciples. His doing so doubtlessly embarrassed the Pharisees and added to their indignation. The fact that they had approached His disciples suggests that the Pharisees were afraid to confront Jesus Himself, and His overhearing and responding to their obvious indictment of His actions was more than a little disconcerting.

Although Jesus was fully aware of the Pharisees' true intent (cf. 9:4), He took their question at face value and explained exactly why He had done what He did. In His brief reply, He gave three arguments in defense of His gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation, the gospel that was reflected in His willingness to eat with the ungodly and immoral tax-gatherers and sinners.

THE ARGUMENT FROM HUMAN LOGIC

First of all, Jesus **said**, “**It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick.**” “If,” He was saying to the Pharisees, “you are really as spiritually and morally perfect as you claim to be, you do not need any help from God or other men. If you are indeed spiritually **healthy**, you do not need a spiritual **physician**. On the other hand, these tax-gatherers and sinners—who you declare, and they themselves admit, are spiritually **sick**—are the self-confessing sinners who need God’s way of salvation presented to them. They are the one’s who seek the spiritual **physician**, and that is why I am ministering to them.”

The analogy is simple. Just as a **physician** is expected to go among people who are **sick**, a forgiver should be expected to go among those who are sinful. Jesus was giving Himself to those who recognized their deepest need. What sort of doctor would spend all his time with **healthy** people and refuse to associate with those who are **sick**? “Are you doctors,” He implied to the Pharisees, “who diagnose but have no desire to cure? Will you tell a person what his disease is and then refuse to give him medicine for it?” What an indictment of their self-righteous hardheartedness! Those whom they diagnosed as sinful they were quite willing to let remain sinful.

As the Lord charged them later, the scribes and Pharisees were hypocrites who were careful to “tithe mint and dill and cummin” but had no regard for the matters of true righteousness, the “weightier provisions of the law” such as “justice and mercy and faithfulness” (Matt. 23:23). They had outward form but no inward holiness, much ritual but no righteousness. They loved to condemn but not uplift, to judge but not help, They loved themselves but not others, and proved themselves to be

without the compassion and mercy that God's law required—the law they vigorously claimed to teach, practice, and defend.

How could the Pharisees have missed or forgotten God's wonderful and merciful declarations such as, "I, the Lord, am your healer" (Ex. 15:26). How could they neglect, and even resent, the healing of those whom God Himself desired to heal? Those who claimed to be well proved themselves to be sickest of all!

THE ARGUMENT FROM SCRIPTURE

Jesus' second argument was directly from Scripture. "**Go and learn,**" He said, "**what this means, 'I desire compassion, and not sacrifice.'**" He pinned the Pharisees to the wall with their own Scripture. The phrase **go and learn** was commonly used in rabbinic writings to rebuke those who did not know what they should have known. Jesus used the Pharisees' own most honored authorities to rebuke them for their ignorance of God's true nature and of their failure to follow His clear commandments.

Jesus here quotes the prophet Hosea, through whom God said, "I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (Hos. 6:6). "It is the perfect Word of God and not the flawed words of men that you should be concerned about," Jesus was saying; "and His Word calls you to be merciful and forgiving, not judgmental and condemning."

The fact that the quotation was from Hosea made it all the more pointed. The story of Gomer's unfaithfulness to her husband Hosea was a living illustration of Israel's own unfaithfulness to God; and Hosea's continuing love and forgiveness of Gomer was a picture of the continuing love and forgiveness God offered Israel. And just as God then desired **compassion** rather than **sacrifice**, He still did. Without **compassion**, all the rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices of the Pharisees were unacceptable to God. Without **compassion** they proved themselves to be more ungodly even than the despised tax-gatherers and sinners, who made no pretense of godliness.

God had divinely instituted the sacrificial system, and when the prescribed offerings were made to Him in a spirit of humility, penitence,

and reverence, they were pleasing to Him. But when offered insincerely and in a spirit of self-righteousness and self-satisfaction, they became instead an abomination. The rituals and ceremonies were only as valid as the contriteness of the worshiper. And the person who sacrificed to God in genuine reverence would serve his fellow man in genuine **compassion**. Conversely, the person who is cold toward other people proves he is also cold toward God, no matter how orthodox his theology and how impeccable his external moral standards. The person who sees obvious sinners as those only to be condemned proves himself to be a greater sinner than they. Those who are furthest from giving mercy are furthest from receiving it (see Matt. 6:15; 18:23-35).

God is never pleased with religious routine and activity that does not come from sincere love of Him and of other people. Ritual separated from righteousness is a sham and an affront to God. “I hate, I reject your festivals,” God declared to Israel. “Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; and I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:21-24).

THE ARGUMENT FROM HIS OWN AUTHORITY

Third, Jesus defended His work on the basis of His own authority: **I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners**. He gladly associated and identified with tax-gatherers and other **sinners**, because they are the ones who needed Him. The parallel passage in Luke 5:32, and some Greek texts and English translations of Matthew 9:13, include the ending phrase, “to repentance.” It is the repentant person, the person who is sinful and who acknowledges and turns from his sin, who is the object of Jesus’ divine **call**. The person who is sinful but thinks he is **righteous** shuts himself out from God’s mercy, because he refuses to acknowledge his need of it. He rejects Jesus’ **call** to salvation because he rejects the idea of his lostness.

In response to a later similar charge by the Pharisees and scribes that He “receives sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2), Jesus gave

three illustrations of God's concern for and forgiveness of the penitent sinner. Through the stories of the lost sheep and lost coin He pointed up the truth that "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (v. 7; cf. v. 10). In the story of the prodigal son He dramatically illustrated the double-sided truth that God is overjoyed with a humble sinner who repents and is grieved by the self-righteous person (represented by the older brother) who is himself unforgiving of others and even resents God's forgiveness of them (see espec. vv. 21-32).

Kaleō (to **call**) was often used of inviting a guest to one's home for food and lodging. The inference here is clear. Jesus did **not come to call** the **self-righteous** to salvation for the same reason He did not call the Pharisees to recline with Him at the dinner in Matthew's house. They were too good in their own eyes to condescend to such humiliation. And because they would not identify themselves with fellow **sinners**, they could not be identified with Christ, who offers salvation only to sinners who willingly acknowledge they are **sinners**.

"Because you consider yourselves already **righteous**," the Lord was saying, "I have not come to **call you**. Because you are satisfied with yourselves, I will leave you to yourselves." The Pharisee who stood proudly in the Temple and thanked God for his own goodness saw no need for forgiveness and thus was not forgiven. But the penitent, heart-broken tax-gatherer who beat his breast and cried out, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!... went down to his house justified" (Luke 18:10-14). At that same Temple, Jesus said to a group of Pharisees, "I go away, and you shall seek Me, and shall die in your sin; where I am going, you cannot come" (John 8:21; cf. v. 24). The one who thinks he is **righteous** and spiritually safe without Christ has no part in Christ, who came **to call... sinners**. He cannot seek and save those who will not recognize they are lost (see Luke 19:10). Logic, Scripture, and Jesus Himself together affirm that forgiveness is for the sinful and salvation is for the lost.

In one of His last parables Jesus graphically portrayed that truth. He pictured His kingdom as a great royal wedding feast for the king's son, for which the king had sent out many invitations. When the previously invited guests, who represented Israel, were called at the appointed time but were unwilling to come, the king several times sent his servants out again to plead with them to reconsider. When they still refused, and

mistreated and killed some of the servants, the enraged king ordered his armies to destroy the murderers and set their city on fire. He then sent servants throughout the rest of the kingdom, even to the most out-of-the-way places, to gather all they could find and bring them to the feast (see Matt. 22:1-10; cf. 21:33-46). That was the message He gave to the Pharisees at Capernaum. As Jews, they were the already invited guests to the Lord's banquet, but they refused to attend and acted with hostility toward the messengers. Therefore, just as they stood outside Matthew's house and watched the tax-gatherers and sinners eat with Jesus, they would also stand outside God's kingdom and watch every sort of repentant sinner and outcast be welcomed into it.

The kingdom of God is for the spiritually sick who want to be healed, the spiritually corrupt who want to be cleansed, the spiritually poor who want to be rich, the spiritually hungry who want to be fed, the spiritually dead who want to be made alive. It is for ungodly outcasts who long to become God's own beloved children.

THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do men put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out, and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved." (9:14-17)

We do not know how long after Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees **the disciples of John came to Him**, but the logical relation of their question to that of the Pharisees is clear. Unlike that of the Pharisees, the question of John's disciples was sincere, but it reflected a similar concern

about Jesus' teaching and activities that did not conform to the accepted religious standards.

Shortly after he baptized Jesus, **John** the Baptist in effect turned his disciples over to Jesus, saying, "You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.' . . . He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:28, 30). Not all of **the disciples of John** began to follow Jesus, however, and even long after Pentecost the apostle Paul encountered some of them in Ephesus who knew no more of the faith than "John's baptism" (Acts 19:1-3).

John the Baptist was then in prison (see Matt. 4:12), and those of his **disciples** who had not begun to follow Jesus were left only with their traditional Jewish ceremonies and practices. Unlike the Pharisees outside Matthew's house, they **came to Him** (Jesus) directly, **saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"** The Old Testament prescribed only one fast, the one on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (see Lev. 16:29,31, where the phrase "humble your souls" [from the Heb. *'ānā*"to afflict or humble"] commonly included the idea of refraining from food). But Jewish tradition had come to require fasting twice a week (see Luke 18:12), and these **disciples** were careful to follow that practice.

Along with alms giving and certain prescribed prayers, twice-weekly fasting was one of the three major expressions of orthodox Judaism during Jesus' day. The scribes and Pharisees looked on these practices with great seriousness and were careful not only to follow them faithfully but to do so as publicly and ostentatiously as possible—ostensibly as a testimony to true godliness but in reality as a testimony to their own self-styled piety. When they gave alms, they blew trumpets "in the synagogues and in the streets" in order to "be honored by men" (Matt. 6:2). When they prayed "in the synagogues and on the street corners," they did so "to be seen by men" (v. 5). And when they fasted, they "put on a gloomy face" and neglected their "appearance in order to be seen fasting by men" (v. 16). They did not see religion as a matter of humility, repentance, or forgiveness, but as a matter of ceremony and proud display. And therefore the external rituals which they paraded as badges of godly righteousness actually marked them as ungodly hypocrites, as Jesus declared in each of the three verses just cited (cf. 5:20).

Religious ritual and routine have always been dangers to true godliness. Many ceremonies, such as praying to saints and lighting a candle for a deceased relative are actually heretical. But even if it is not wrong in itself, when a *form* of praying, worshiping, or serving becomes the focus of attention, it becomes a barrier to true righteousness. It can keep an unbeliever from trusting in God and a believer from faithfully obeying Him. Even going to church, reading the Bible, saying grace at meals, and singing hymns can become lifeless routines in which true worship of God has no part.

Jesus first replied to John's disciples by saying, **The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.**

In those days a wedding would usually last seven days, and the **bridegroom** would choose his best friends as **attendants** to be responsible for the festivities. The wedding celebration was not a time for them to **mourn** but to rejoice. Jesus' point was that it was inappropriate for His followers to **mourn** and **fast** while He was with them in person. The insincere, superficial, and hypocritical fasting practiced by the Pharisees was, of course, always out of place. But even sincere fasting was out of place as long as Jesus, the divine **bridegroom**, was still among His people. Their fasting was out of harmony with what God was then doing in their midst. There was no connection between their ritual and spiritual reality.

A fast is always meaningless if it is performed from habit and does not result from deep concern and mourning over some spiritual need. Going to church on Sunday is hypocritical if it is done apart from a genuine desire to worship and glorify God. Singing a hymn is only a pretense of worship if it does not come from a heart that seeks to praise the Lord.

The days will come, Jesus explained, **when the bridegroom is taken away**. **Taken away** is from *apairō*, which can carry the idea of sudden removal, of being snatched away violently. Jesus was obviously referring to His crucifixion, which would abruptly and violently take Him away from His followers, His faithful **attendants**. That will be the time for mourning, and **then they will fast**.

But for the present time, He was saying, fasting was inappropriate. When there is no reason to mourn there is no reason to fast. Fasting

springs naturally from a broken and grieving heart, but fasting as a shallow spiritual ritual apart from such brokenness is an affront to God.

But an even more important issue was behind the question of John's disciples. Since they obviously had not become disciples of Jesus as John had instructed them to do, they had no basis for genuine faith. But it was clear to them, as it was to the Pharisees, that Jesus' teaching and activities were radically different from those of traditional Judaism. Consequently, behind their question about fasting may have been a deeper concern about forgiveness. "Why," they may really have been wondering, "do You emphasize internal things such as forgiveness, while our recognized religious leaders only emphasize external things such as fasting?"

Jesus' next two illustrations deal with that issue. He made clear that He was not teaching a reformed Pharisaism or a reformed rabbinicalism but an entirely different way of believing, thinking, and living. He did not come to improve the old system but to renounce and undermine it. His way had nothing to do with the old ways, and the old ways had no part in the new. The two ways cannot be connected to one another or be contained one in the other.

To illustrate the truth that His new way cannot be *connected* to the old way, Jesus went on to say, **No one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Cloth** of that day was primarily wool or linen, and both would shrink when washed. If a **patch of new, unshrunk, cloth** is sewn **on an old garment**, Jesus reminded them, then the first time the garment is washed, the new **patch** shrinks and **pulls away from the garment**, making a **worse tear** than before. In the same way, Jesus' new and internal gospel of forgiveness and cleansing cannot be attached to the old and external traditions of self-righteousness and ritual.

To illustrate the truth that His new way also cannot be *contained* in the old way, Jesus said, **Nor do men put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out, and the wineskins are ruined.**

Wine was often stored in animal skins that were specially prepared for that purpose. The hide would be uncut except at the legs and neck, and sometimes would be turned inside out. The leg openings would be stitched closed and sealed, and the neck was used as a spout, which was tied with a

leather thong or string. **Old wineskins** would eventually dry out and become brittle, and if someone then **put new wine into** them, they would crack and **burst**, spilling **the wine . . . out**. The only suitable container for **new wine** is a **fresh wineskin**. In the same way, the only life that can contain true righteousness is the new life given by God when a person repents of his sin and trusts in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

The pharisaical, legalistic, external, self-righteous system of traditional Judaism could neither connect with nor contain the ministry and message of Christ. Consequently, that system had only one option—to oppose and seek to eliminate Christ, which is what it did.

It should be made clear that Jesus' doing away with the old and bringing in the new did not refer to setting aside the divine law and ushering in grace—as many interpreters have claimed throughout church history, and as some still claim today. Nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus categorically declared that He did *not* come to destroy the law but to fulfill it and that any opponent of the law was an opponent of God (Matt. 5:17-19). God's law and His grace have always coexisted and have always been perfectly compatible. The **old wineskins** were not the teachings of the Old Testament but the rabbinical traditions that had come to overshadow, supersede, and often contradict the divinely revealed truths of the Old Testament.

In this passage we can discover three marks of the true believer. First, like Matthew, the true believer follows the Lord. He leads a life of unquestioning obedience. Matthew made no conditions or excuses; he simply “rose, and followed Him” (v. 9). During a postresurrection appearance, Jesus said to Peter, “Follow Me!” But “Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; . . . [and] therefore seeing him said to Jesus, ‘Lord, and what about this man?’ Jesus said to him, ‘If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!’” (John 21:19-22). The true believer is not always questioning God's truth and resisting His standards for living.

Second, the true believer has compassion on the unsaved. Like Matthew, he has a deep desire to lead others to Christ. That desire may sometimes get cluttered over with selfish concerns, but it will be there. Because we know “the fear of the Lord, we persuade men” to come to Him for salvation (2 Cor. 5:11); and if “the love of Christ controls us” (v. 14), that love will prompt us to witness of Him to others. Both our love of the

unsaved and our love of Christ motivate us to be His instruments as He seeks and saves the lost (Luke 19:10). The indwelling Spirit of Christ gives compassion for the lost, and the person who has no desire to win the lost has no basis for claiming Christ or His Holy Spirit.

Third, a true believer forsakes legalism and ritualism. He fasts only as an expression of genuine spiritual concern, and he does not try to attach his new life in Christ to his old ritual or religion or try to fit it somehow into his old patterns. He knows they are incompatible and utterly contrary. He knows that what is begun in the Spirit cannot be completed in the flesh (Gal. 3:3). The genuine righteousness of a forgiven and cleansed heart cannot be enhanced or supplemented by external religious works. Freedom in Christ has no part in the bondage of legalism.

In a hymn that chronicles his own conversion, John Newton movingly describes the transforming power of Christ:

In evil long I took delight,
Unawed by shame or fear,
Till a new object struck my sight,
And stopped my wild career.
I saw One hanging on a tree,
In agony and blood;
He fixed His loving eyes on me,
As near His cross I stood.
How can it be, upon a tree
The Savior died for Me?
My soul is thrilled, my heart is filled,
To think He died for me.

Jesus' Power over Death (9:18-26)

While He was saying these things to them, behold, there came a synagogue official, and bowed down before Him, saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay Your hand on her, and she will live." And Jesus rose and began to follow him, and so did His disciples. And behold, a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years, came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His cloak; for she was saying to herself, "If I only touch His garment, I shall get well." But Jesus turning and seeing her said, "Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well." And at once the woman was made well. And when Jesus came into the official's house, and saw the flute-players, and the crowd in noisy disorder, He began to say, "Depart; for the girl has not died, but is asleep." And they began laughing at Him. But when the crowd had been put out, He entered and took her by the hand; and the girl arose. And this news went out into all that land. (9:18-26)

Perhaps no man in modern times has seemed before the eyes of the world to have been more at peace with himself and others than Mahatma Gandhi. He was the image of a tranquil soul who possessed perfect inner harmony. Fifteen years before he died, he wrote, "I must tell you in all humility that Hinduism as I know it entirely satisfies my soul. It fills my whole being and I find a solace in the Bhagavad and Upanishad that I miss even in the Sermon on the Mount." But just before his death he wrote, "My days are numbered. I am not likely to live very long, perhaps a year or a little more. For the first time in fifty years I find myself in the slew of despond." Even the tranquil Gandhi had to face the reality of death and the

inability of his man-made religion to give him answers or comfort in face of it.

A Turkish watchmaker decided to build a special grave for himself that had an eight-inch window on top, an electric light, and a button beside the window connected to an outside alarm. In case he was accidentally buried alive and managed to revive, he could press the button to summon help. He instructed his friends to leave the light burning for seven days after his death and to turn it off only if they were sure he was actually dead.

Cemeteries have been a companion of man throughout history, a constant reminder that he is mortal. And as the earth's population grows, grave space is becoming extremely scarce in some places, and more and more people are turning to cremation. We live in a dying world, where before all of us looms the inevitability of death. We are deteriorating human beings in a deteriorating world that is marked by tragedy, sorrow, pain, and death. Since the Fall, there has been a curse on the earth, and that curse has sent the earth and all of its inhabitants careening and spiraling into disasters, tears, sickness, and the grave.

Most of us could recite a long list of those we know who have recently suffered painful illness, serious accident, loss of a loved one, breakup of a family, or some other tragedy. Children have lost a mother, parents have lost a child or are watching him daily grow weaker from a debilitating disease. Many people suffer continual pain for which even the strongest medicine has lost its effectiveness. Others face long months and years of rehabilitation as they seek to adjust their lives to the loss of limb, sight, hearing, or motor function.

When Mary came out to meet Jesus as He was approaching Bethany after the death of Lazarus, John reports that when He "saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her, also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit, and was troubled." Jesus Himself wept, and, "again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb" (John 11:33-38). Not only was the Lord touched by the grief of Mary, Martha, and her friends, but in the infinity of His mind He could also stretch His thinking back throughout all the eons of human history and perceive the immeasurable pain that sin brought to man. As a sympathizer beyond anything we could imagine, Jesus was deeply grieved, because He could see clearly and completely the pain and power of sin.

Sin was not God's purpose for man. All things in the world were created for the good and blessing of man, but sin corrupted that goodness and blessing and brought a curse in its stead. In God's time sin will one day have run its course and be forever destroyed. "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away" (Rev. 21:3-4).

The Old Testament prophets predicted that the Messiah would have power to bring back wholeness to life (Isa. 30:26; 35:5-6; 53:5; Mal. 4:2; etc.), and when Jesus came into the world He demonstrated that power. Though the final fulfillment of the prophecies regarding His power would be in the future, Jesus fully proved His ability to fulfill them during His ministry in Palestine—where He virtually banished disease, changed water into wine, multiplied food, calmed storms, cast out demons, forgave sins, and raised the dead. He gave a sampling of the great and glorious future kingdom in which there would no longer be need for healing or food or calming of storms or raising from the dead. When John the Baptist was facing imminent death in Herod's prison and sent his disciples to ask Jesus if He were truly the Messiah, Jesus told them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up" (Matt. 11:4-5).

Jesus' miracles were the verification of His divine might which He would reveal some day to reverse the curse and to restore righteousness, harmony, and peace in all of His creation. Already the people had "brought to Him many who were demon-possessed; and He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were ill in order that what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, 'He Himself took our infirmities, and carried away our diseases'" (Matt. 8:16-17; cf. Isa. 53:4). "Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life," Jesus said, "even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes" (John 5:21).

Although Jesus had great compassion on the suffering and afflicted people who came to Him (Mark 1:41; Matt. 9:36; 14:14), He did not heal and cleanse them and raise their dead simply for their own sakes. He performed those miracles to demonstrate His deity and to establish His

credentials as the Messiah predicted by the Old Testament prophets (see Matt. 8:16-17; 9:35; 11:5).

In 9:18-26, Matthew gives the first miracle in his third set of three miracles (see 8:1-22 and 8:23-9:17)—a miracle that was actually a double miracle, a miracle within a miracle. He raised a young girl from the dead, and during the process restored health to a woman who was considered by society all but dead. He demonstrated His power to restore life to the whole body and to restore wholeness to any part of the body.

The Canadian scientist G. B. Hardy one time said, “When I looked at religion I said, I have two questions. One, has anybody ever conquered death, and two, if they have, did they make a way for me to conquer death? I checked the tomb of Buddha, and it was occupied, and I checked the tomb of Confucius and it was occupied, and I checked the tomb of Mohammed and it was occupied, and I came to the tomb of Jesus and it was empty. And I said, There is one who conquered death. And I asked the second question, Did He make a way for me to do it? And I opened the Bible and discovered that He said, ‘Because I live ye shall live also.’”

That is the supreme, two-part question that all mankind faces. Has anyone conquered death? And if so, did he provide a way for others to conquer death? That is the question dealt with in the present passage.

Within this text we not only see a miracle within a miracle but also a beautiful picture of Jesus’ response to people in need. We see the dual portrayal of His power and His sensitivity, His authority and His gentleness, His sovereignty and His openness, His majesty and His lovingkindness. We see in particular that Jesus was accessible, touchable, and impartial as well as powerful. Of the two principal characters in this account besides Jesus, one was an influential ruler and the other an outcast. The one was wealthy and the other poor. Yet in common they had great needs and a great Helper.

JESUS WAS ACCESSIBLE

While He was saying these things to them, behold, there came a synagogue official, and bowed down before Him, saying, “My daughter

has just died; but come and lay Your hand on her, and she will live.”
(9:18)

While He was saying these things refers to the conversation Jesus had just been having with the critical Pharisees and confused disciples of John the Baptist (vv. 11-17), in which our Lord made clear that He had come to save only those who acknowledge and confess their sins and that the ways of the old life of the flesh and the new life of the spirit are totally incompatible.

Mark (5:22) and Luke (8:41) explain that the man who came up to Jesus was named Jairus and that he not only was an *archōn* (**synagogue official**) but was the chief official, or elder, of the synagogue, the *archisunagōgos* (Heb., *rosh hakeneseth*). He was therefore the highest ranking religious **official** in Capernaum, responsible for the total administration and operation of the synagogue. He supervised the worship services and oversaw the work of the other elders, which included teaching, adjudicating disputes, and other such leadership duties.

As the ranking member of the Jewish religious establishment in Capernaum, which would have included scribes and Pharisees, Jairus may well have been a Pharisee himself. As is clear from the earlier sections of Matthew and of the other gospels, the religious establishment in general was already developing strong opposition to Jesus even in this relatively early stage of His ministry. Jairus could not have escaped being aware of this opposition, and when he came to Jesus for help he knew he would face criticism and pressure from his peers.

Yet when he faced Jesus he did not seek to protect himself by going at night, as Nicodemus did, or by disguising his true motive and need with an involved and veiled religious question. We are not told what he then thought about Jesus' messiahship, but to have **bowed down before Him** was to offer an act of great homage and reverence—and the Greek term behind **bowed down** (*proskuneō*) is most often rendered “worshiped” (see Matt. 4:10; John 4:21-24; 1 Cor. 14:25; Rev 4:10; etc.). The act involved prostrating oneself before the honored person and kissing his feet, the hem of his garment, or the ground in front of him.

Such acts of reverence were not, of course, always completely sincere. *Proskuneō* is also used of the mother of James and John, who

“came to [Jesus] with her sons, *bowing down*” (Matt. 20:20, emphasis added). Her seeming act of reverence was entirely external and self-serving. She did not desire Jesus’ honor and glory but only that He would grant that “in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left” (v. 21).

By contrast, everything Jairus did proved his humility and sincerity. Like that of the mother of James and John, his request was in behalf of his child, but it was a selfless request that, by its very asking for the humanly impossible, honored Jesus’ power, compassion, and grace. Whatever thoughts he may have had about the reaction of his fellow religious leaders, he knew that Jesus was the only source of help for his **daughter**, who had just **died**. Nothing else mattered as he came to the Lord in anguish and utter desperation.

From the more detailed accounts of Mark and Luke we learn that when Jairus first came to Jesus, his daughter was not yet dead but was “at the point of death” (Mark 5:23; cf. Luke 8:42). A short while later messengers from his house informed him that she had died and counseled him not to “trouble the Teacher anymore” (Mark 5:35). Matthew begins his story at that point.

The **daughter** was twelve years old, in the first year of her womanhood according to Jewish custom. The day after his thirteenth birthday a Jewish boy was recognized as a man, and a day after her twelfth birthday a Jewish girl was recognized as a woman. Jairus’s **daughter** had just come into the flower of womanhood, but to her father she was still his little girl, whose life was dearer to him than his own. The sunshine of her childhood had turned into the shadow of death.

The Jewish establishment had no resources that would help a father facing such tragedy, and Jairus knew that the only hope for his daughter lay in the Man whom that religious establishment ridiculed and was coming to despise. God obviously had already been working in the father’s heart, because his request evidences absolute conviction that Jesus was able to do what was asked: **Come and lay Your hand on her, and she will live**. His faith was without reservation or a hint of doubt. He swallowed his pride and his fear. He did not care what his neighbors, his family, or even his fellow religionists thought. Nothing would keep him from seeking Jesus’ help.

So the first thing that brought Jairus to Jesus was deep need. Often some great tragedy drives a person to Christ. The person who feels no needs in his life has no hunger for God. That is why the first step in witnessing is to convince people of their need of salvation and therefore of Christ as the only means for obtaining it. As noted in the previous chapter, the person who does not see his sin and his lostness sees no reason to be saved from them. Similarly, the person who has a need but thinks it can be met by human resources sees no reason for coming to the supernatural Lord for help.

Jairus was already convinced that human resources could not save the life of his daughter, and he was also already convinced of Christ's power to do it. It may have been that, until it was obvious she was dying, he hesitated seeking Jesus' help. But now he knew he had only one hope for help. He did not come to Christ out of an entirely pure motive, because his first concern was his daughter's life and his own despair. He did not come primarily to adore or glorify Jesus but to seek life for his daughter and relief of pain and anguish for himself. But he trusted in Jesus for that help, and he found Him to be accessible.

That is the second thing that brought him to Jesus, his faith. He believed Jesus had the power to do what he asked of Him. Such great faith is especially amazing in light of the fact that Jesus had not yet performed a resurrection miracle. He had healed many life-threatening diseases, but He had not brought anyone back to life after dying. Yet without hesitation or qualification, Jairus asked Jesus to do just that—raise his daughter from death. **Come lay Your hand on her, and she will live.**

Jesus marveled at the faith of the centurion who believed that He could heal the man's servant by simply saying the word. "Truly I say to you," Jesus said, "I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel" (Matt. 8:9-10). But Jairus even believed that a touch of Jesus' **hand** could raise his daughter from the dead. His faith also surpassed that of Martha, who believed Jesus could have kept her brother Lazarus from dying but gave up hope once he was dead (John 11:21). Even when Jesus said, "Your brother shall rise again," she thought the promise could only be fulfilled in "the resurrection on the last day" (vv. 23-24). With such great faith in Jesus' power to restore life, it is hard to believe that Jairus did not also trust that Jesus was as able to forgive his sins and raise him to spiritual life as He was able to raise his daughter to physical life.

Jesus was not a religious guru surrounded by servants to do His every bidding, nor was He a monastic who removed Himself from the life and activities of ordinary people. Nor did he establish a hierarchy of intermediaries through whom people would have to go before seeing Him, if they saw Him at all.

Even though He was the Son of God, Jesus “became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14), as a Man among men. He walked the streets of the cities, and visited the smallest villages. He talked with the great among men and with the humble, with the rich and poor, the healthy and the sick, the noble and the outcast. He talked with the educated and successful and the uneducated and deprived. He talked with young and old, male and female, Jew and Gentile.

Almost everywhere Jesus went He was in the midst of a crowd, because the people would not let Him alone. Among those crowds were three kinds of people—the critical and resentful religious leaders, especially the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees; the curious and uncommitted onlookers who saw Jesus only as a powerful, authoritative, and fascinating contrast to those religious leaders; and the guilty, hurting, desperate people who came to Jesus for help from sin, sickness, and tragedy. These people asked Jesus their deepest questions and brought to Him their profoundest needs, because He listened, cared, and acted in their behalf. The Creator of the universe, the Master of the world, the King of kings and Lord of lords was not too busy to stoop in mercy to serve His creatures.

JESUS WAS AVAILABLE

And Jesus rose and began to follow him, and so did His disciples.
(9:19)

Jesus responded to Jairus by being available as well as accessible. Jesus could just as well have sent the power to raise the girl from where He was, but in a demonstration of self-giving love and compassion He **rose and began to follow** the grieving father to where his daughter now

lay dead. Jesus was willing to be interrupted and to go out of His way to serve others in His Father's name. There were doubtlessly many other sick and hurting people where Jesus was, but the need of the moment demanded that He go with Jairus.

In somewhat similar fashion, in the midst of a highly fruitful ministry in Samaria, the Lord sent an angel to Philip saying, "Arise and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza" (Acts 8:26). As soon as Philip arrived there, he met "an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship" (v. 27). When the Holy Spirit told Philip to join the Ethiopian, Philip found an eager inquirer about God and proceeded to lead the man to faith in Jesus Christ (vv. 35-37). As soon as the new believer was baptized, "the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and... Philip found himself at Azotus" many miles away (w 39-40).

God not only is sensitive to the needs of the multitude but to the cry of an individual. He sometimes leads His servants, as He often led His own Son, to temporarily put a seemingly larger ministry aside in order to concentrate on one person. The Lord makes certain His promise that "the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37).

Joining Jesus in the short trip to Jairus' house were **his disciples**, along with "a great multitude" (Mark 5:24).

JESUS WAS TOUCHABLE AND IMPARTIAL

And behold, a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years, came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His cloak; for she was saying to herself, "If I only touch His garment, I shall get well." But Jesus turning and seeing her said, "Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well." And at once the woman was made well. (9:20-22)

The multitude that followed Jesus and the disciples was "pressing in on Him" (Mark 5:24*b*), and in the crowd was **a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years**. As Jesus was on His way

to minister to a single desperate person among a large number of needy persons, His attention was called to still another single individual—one whom a less sensitive person might never have noticed. Again, an interruption became an opportunity.

Like Jairus, this **woman** knew that only Jesus could help her. And just as Jairus' daughter had known twelve years of life and laughter with her family, this woman had known **twelve years** of misery and ostracism from her family. The girl had known twelve years of sunshine and happiness, while the woman had known twelve years of shadow and tears.

The woman's **hemorrhage**, perhaps caused by a tumor or other disease of the uterus, caused her to be ceremonially unclean according to Old Testament law. Because she continually bled, she could not even be temporarily cleansed and was therefore continually unclean. Mark, not seeking to protect the medical profession, tells us that she "had endured much at the hands of many physicians, and had spent all that she had and was not helped at all, but rather had grown worse" (Mark 5:26). The physician Luke, perhaps concerned about the reputation of his profession, says that this particular case was humanly incurable, that she "could not be healed by anyone" (Luke 8:43).

The stigma and humiliation of such a **hemorrhage** were perhaps second only to those of leprosy. Such affliction was not uncommon, and the Jewish Talmud prescribed eleven different cures for it. Among the remedies, most of them superstitious, was that of carrying the ashes of an ostrich egg in a linen bag in the summer and in a cotton bag in the winter. Another involved carrying around a barleycorn kernel that had been found in the dung of a white female donkey.

The Mosaic law specified that a woman who suffered from such "a discharge of her blood many days, not at the period of her menstrual impurity, or if she has a discharge beyond that period, all the days of her impure discharge ... shall continue as though in her menstrual impurity; she is unclean. Any bed on which she lies all the days of her discharge shall be to her like her bed at menstruation; and every thing on which she sits shall be unclean, like her uncleanness at that time. Likewise, whoever touches them shall be unclean and shall wash his clothes and bathe in water and be unclean until evening" (Lev. 15:25-27). After seven days without any bleeding a woman was considered ceremonially clean and could then offer the prescribed sacrifices (vv. 28-29).

But the **woman** who approached Jesus at Capernaum had had no remission of bleeding **for twelve years** and was therefore perpetually in a state of ceremonial uncleanness. Her condition caused her to be excluded from the synagogue and Temple, because she would contaminate anyone and everything she touched and render them unable to participate in worship. Even her associations with her own family, including her husband if she was married, had to be carried on from a distance. In addition to her social and religious isolation she was also penniless, having spent all her resources on ineffective treatments and probably a few charlatans.

According to biblical requirements, Jewish men were to “make for themselves tassels on the corners of their garments” and “put on the tassel of each corner a cord of blue” (Num. 15:38; cf. Deut. 22:12). The threads of the tassels and cords were woven in a pattern that represented faithfulness and loyalty to the Word of God and holiness to the Lord. Wherever a Jew went, those tassels reminded him and testified before the world that he belonged to the people of God. Consistent with their typical hypocrisy and pretension, the Pharisees lengthened “the tassels of their garments” in order to call attention to their religious devotion (Matt. 23:5). In much later times, persecuted Jews in Europe wore the tassels on their undergarments for the very opposite reason—to avoid identification and possible arrest. Modified forms of the tassel are still sewn on the prayer shawls of orthodox Jews today.

It was probably such a tassel that the woman with the hemorrhage took hold of. Having nowhere else to turn, she **came up behind Jesus and touched the fringe of His cloak**. The phrase **She was saying to herself** is more precisely rendered, “She kept saying to herself,” which conveys the idea of repetition. She was saying over and over to herself, **If I only touch His garment, I shall get well**. The single thought on her mind was to get close enough to Jesus just to **touch His garment**.

When the godly Sir James Simpson lay dying, a friend said to him, “Well, James, soon you will be able to rest on the bosom of Jesus.” In typical humility he replied, “I don’t know that I can quite do that, but I do think I can take hold of His garment.”

In her embarrassment and shame the woman who followed Jesus in the crowd wanted to be unnoticed. She would simply **touch His garment**, confident that even that indirect contact with Him was enough. Her

confidence was not in vain, and in the touching she was immediately cleansed of her defilement.

Jesus turning and seeing her said, “Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well.” Luke tells us that she was healed before Jesus spoke. As soon as she touched His cloak, “immediately the flow of her blood was dried up; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction” (Mark 5:29). Before Jesus Himself knew of her specifically (cf. Luke 8:46), she was healed. He became aware of the miraculous occurrence only when He realized that power had gone out of Him (Luke 8:46). His words of assurance, **your faith has made you well**, simply confirmed what had already happened. Jesus did not care that her touching even His clothing would make Him ceremonially unclean in the eyes of fellow Jews. He was touchable even by the untouchable.

Throughout His earthly ministry thousands of people came in contact with Jesus, and many hundreds of them talked with Him and touched Him; but many of them were not touched by Him. Throughout the history of the church, countless others—such as Mahatma Gandhi, mentioned above—have also come in close contact with Jesus; and many of them, too, have remained untouched by Him. He knows the difference between the person who approaches Him out of mere religious curiosity or a sense of adventure and the one who comes to Him in desperation and genuine faith.

The woman’s expectations seem to have been almost superstitious, as she perhaps thought there was some power even in the clothing of this miracle worker. Yet Jesus spoke to her with words of tenderness, warmth, and intimacy: **Daughter, take courage.** Whatever else may have been in her mind, her **faith** was genuine and was acceptable to the Lord. It was enough to make her **well**.

The common Greek word for physical healing was *iaomai*, the term used by Mark when he explains that this woman “was healed of her affliction” (Mark 5:29, cf. 34). In saying that she “could not be healed by anyone,” Luke used another word for physical healing, *therapeuō* (Luke 8:43), from which we get *therapeutic*. But the three references to being made **well** in Matthew 9:21-22, as well as those in the parallel passages of Mark 5:34 and Luke 8:48, use *sōzō*, the usual New Testament term for being saved from sin.

When the blind beggar Bartimaeus asked Jesus to restore his sight, Jesus replied, “Go your way; your faith has made you well” (Mark 10:52). Here *sōzō* (“has made you well”) is also used in connection with the healed person’s faith. Bartimaeus had repeatedly called Jesus the “Son of David” (vv. 47-48), a common messianic title. It therefore seems probable that his being made well, like that of the woman with the hemorrhage, included spiritual salvation as well as physical healing.

After Jesus forgave the sins of the prostitute who washed His feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair, He spoke to her exactly the same words (*he pistis sou sesoken se*) that He spoke to the woman with the hemorrhage and to Bartimaeus, although the English translations of that phrase are not always the same. In Luke 7:50 it is rendered, “Your faith has saved you,” clearly indicating that the restoration was entirely spiritual (because no physical healing was involved) and that it resulted from the forgiveness of sins based on trust in the Lord (v. 48).

In his account of the ten lepers who pleaded with Jesus to cure them, Luke reports that all ten “were cleansed” (from *katharizō*; Luke 17:14) but that it was only to the one man who glorified God and returned to give thanks that Jesus said, “Your faith has made you well” (*he pistis sou sesoken se*; v. 19). Ten men were cleansed, but only one was saved.

It is unfortunate that most English translations do not make clear that all of the renderings of “made well” and “saved” just mentioned—which in each case the Lord Himself specifically said resulted from the person’s faith—come from the same Greek verb (*sōzō*). That fact strongly implies that a redemptive aspect was involved in each of those incidents.

In the gospel accounts we read of multitudes of people being healed completely apart from any faith on their part or the part of another person. Jesus performed His miracles of healing by His sovereign will, often in response to faith, but not conditioned by it. The centurion’s servant was healed without having any contact with Jesus and perhaps even without being aware that he might be healed. Jairus’ dead daughter obviously could not have had faith. But no one is ever *saved* apart from faith, and there seems reason to believe that the woman who touched Jesus’ garment that day trusted Him for spiritual as well as physical healing.

The two things that bring men and women to Jesus Christ are deep-felt personal need and genuine faith, and the woman with the hemorrhage

had both.

The fact that Jesus ministered equally to the outcast woman and the leading elder of the synagogue certainly reveals His divine impartiality. He was not offended by the woman's taking hold of His tassel with her unclean hands. He did not resent her presuming to seek His help while He was engulfed by a demanding multitude and on His way to raise a young girl from her deathbed. No person in need ever interfered with Jesus' ministry, because "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). And as He had just declared to the self-righteous Pharisees, He "did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt. 9:13). He came to seek and save sinners who knew they were sinners—and such persons have always been more likely to be the poor and insignificant of the world. "For consider your calling, brethren," Paul reminds the Corinthian believers, "that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are" (1 Cor. 1:26-28).

In their book *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, Paul Brand and Phil Yancey quote from the novelist Frederick Buechner, who wrote:

Who could have predicted that God would choose not Esau, the honest and reliable, but Jacob the trickster and heel, that He would put the finger on Noah, who hit the bottle, or on Moses, who was trying to beat the rap in Midian for braining a man in Egypt and if it weren't for the honor of the thing, he'd just as soon let Aaron go back and face the music, or the prophets, who were a ragged lot, mad as hatters most of them . . . ?

Then Brand and Yancey add:

The exception seems to be the rule. The first humans God created went out and did the only thing God asked them not to do. The man He chose to head a new nation known as “God’s people” tried to pawn off his wife on an unsuspecting Pharaoh. And the wife herself, when told at the ripe old age of ninety-one that God was ready to deliver the son He had promised her, broke into rasping laughter in the face of God. Rahab, a harlot, became revered for her great faith. And Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, went out of his way to break every proverb he so astutely composed.

Even after Jesus came the pattern continued. The two disciples who did most to spread the word after His departure, John and Peter, were the two He had rebuked most often for petty squabbling and muddleheadedness. And the apostle Paul, who wrote more books than any other Bible writer, was selected for the task while kicking up dust whirls from town to town sniffing out Christians to torture. Jesus had nerve, in trusting the high-minded ideals of love and unity and fellowship to this group. No wonder cynics have looked at the church and sighed, “If that group of people is supposed to represent God, I’ll quickly vote against Him.” Or, as Nietzsche expressed it, “His disciples will have to look more saved if I am to believe in their Savior.” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980, pp. 29-30)

How wonderful that God is more gracious than men. God never excuses disobedience, unfaithfulness, or any other sin. But He will forgive every sin that is placed under the atoning death of His Son, Jesus Christ. Position, prestige, or possessions give no advantage with Him, and lack of those things gives no disadvantage. As Peter learned only after much resistance to the idea, “God is not one to show partiality” (Acts 10:34; cf. 1 Pet. 1:17). In Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female” (Gal. 3:28).

JESUS WAS POWERFUL

And when Jesus came into the official's house, and saw the flute-players, and the crowd in noisy disorder, He began to say, "Depart; for the girl has not died, but is asleep." And they began laughing at Him. But when the crowd had been put out, He entered and took her by the hand; and the girl arose. And this news went out into all that land. (9:23-26)

It is Jesus' power that most uniquely sets Him apart from other men. We can be accessible, available, touchable, and impartial, reflecting to some extent those qualities that He perfectly exemplified. But only He has power to heal leprosy, restore sight, overpower demons, forgive sins, and raise the dead.

After the interlude involving the woman with a hemorrhage, Jesus continued on His way and **came to the official's house**, where the young daughter of Jairus lay dead. We are not told how long she had been dead, but it was obviously long enough to have summoned the professional **flute-players** and for **the crowd** of mourners already to be **in noisy disorder**.

In great contrast to those in the western world of our day, funerals in most ancient cultures, including that of Israel in the time of Christ, were not occasions for quiet whispers and soothing music. They were instead characterized by the loud wailing of voices and the harsh dissonance of musical instruments such as those of the hired **flute-players** on this occasion. The result, not unintended, was great **noisy disorder**.

Jewish funerals involved three prescribed ways of expressing grief and lamentation. First was the tearing, or rending, of one's garment, for which tradition had developed some thirty-nine different regulations and forms. Among other things, the tearing was to be done while standing up, and the tear was to be directly over the heart if the mourner was the father or mother of the deceased. Otherwise it was to be near the heart. The tear had to be large enough to put a fist through, but could be sewn up with large, loose stitches for the first thirty days—to provide covering of the

body while allowing the tear to be clearly noticeable. For sake of modesty, women would rip their undergarments and wear them backwards.

The second way of expressing grief was by the hiring of professional women mourners, who would loudly wail the name of the one who had just died. They would also intermingle the names of other family members who had died in the past. Sorrow was intentionally intensified as memories of old grief were added to the new. Every tender chord was touched, and agony was magnified with loud shrieks, wailing, and groanings.

The third way of expressing grief involved hiring professional musicians, most often flute-players, who, like the hired mourners, would play loud, disconcerting sounds meant to reflect the emotional discord and confusion of grief.

The Talmud declared that “the husband is bound to bury his dead wife and to make lamentations and mourning for her according to the custom of all countries. Also the very poorest among the Israelites will not allow her less than two flutes and one wailing woman.” Reflecting such “customs of all countries,” the Roman statesman Seneca reported that there was so much screaming and wailing at the death of the emperor Claudius that some onlookers felt Claudius himself probably heard the noise from his grave.

Because Jairus was the highest ranking religious leader in Capernaum and was no doubt a man of means, the number of paid mourners and musicians at his daughter’s funeral was probably large. When Jesus came upon them He said, **Depart; for the girl has not died, but is asleep. Depart** was more a command than a request, the same command Peter used a number of years later when he sent the mourning widows out of the room where their dear friend Dorcas lay dead (Acts 9:40).

Jesus surprised and annoyed the mourners first of all by His asking them to leave. They were following the long-established and revered traditions set down by respected rabbis centuries earlier. What they were doing was not only proper but required. Jesus surprised and annoyed them even more, however, by daring to suggest that **the girl has not died, but is asleep**. In scorn and derision, **they began laughing at Him**. It was the hard, haughty laughter of those who gloat over a foolish act or statement by someone to whom they feel superior. That their weeping could so

quickly turn to laughter, even mocking laughter, betrayed the fact that their mourning was a paid act and did not reflect genuine sorrow. It also betrayed their complete lack of faith in Jesus' power to raise the girl from the dead.

Jesus knew the girl was dead, just as He knew Lazarus was dead when He said to His disciples, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, that I may awaken him out of sleep" (John 11:11). As He explained to His incredulous disciples on that occasion, His reference to sleep signified actual death—though it was temporary—and not "literal sleep." Jesus then "said to them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead'" (vv. 13-14).

When the crowd of hired mourners had been put out, Jesus entered the room and took her by the hand. Mark informs us that Jesus allowed only Peter, James, John and the girl's parents to go into the room with Him, and that, as He **took her by the hand**, He also said to her, "Talitha kum!" (which translated means, 'Little girl, I say to you, arise')" (Mark 5:40-41). At that time, "her spirit returned, and she rose immediately" (Luke 8:55). Jesus could just as easily have raised her by only speaking the words, or by saying nothing at all. But His touching and speaking to her manifest a compassion and tenderness that far exceeded what was only necessary.

It is hardly surprising that when Jesus performed His first miracle of resurrection **this news went out into all that land.** It was now evident that Jesus not only had power to heal disease, cast out demons, and forgive sins, but had power even to raise the dead! This account is the pinnacle of Matthew's presentation of Jesus' messianic credentials. The Son of Man has demonstrated His power over every enemy of man, including Satan and death. He truly holds "the keys of death and Hades" (Rev. 1:18).

In Christ there is no longer reason to fear sickness, disease, demons, deformity, tragedy, or even death. As believers, we can even rejoice in dying, because our Lord has conquered death. Though we will not be brought back to this life, we will be raised to new life. In Him is fullness of joy and life everlasting. "No longer must the mourners weep," a poet reminds us, "nor call departed children dead, for death is transformed into sleep and every grave becomes a bed."

When as a young man D. L. Moody was called upon to preach a funeral sermon, he began to search the gospels to find one of Jesus' funeral messages—only to discover that He never preached one. He found

instead that Jesus broke up every funeral He attended by raising the dead person back to life. When the dead heard His voice, they immediately came to life.

Arthur Brisbane has pictured the funeral of a Christian as a crowd of grieving caterpillars, all wearing black suits. As they crawl along mourning their dead brother and carrying his cocoon to its final resting place, above them flutters an incredibly beautiful butterfly, looking down on them in utter disbelief.

Death can strike God's saints in unexpected, painful, and seemingly senseless ways. Yet He does not promise to give explanations for such tragedies. Instead He gives the wondrous assurance that "he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies" (John 11:25).

Miracles of Sight and Sound (9:27-33a)

And as Jesus passed on from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out, and saying, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” And after He had come into the house, the blind men came up to Him, and Jesus said to them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” They said to Him, “Yes, Lord.” Then He touched their eyes, saying, “Be it done to you according to your faith.” And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned them, saying, “See here, let no one know about this!” But they went out, and spread the news about Him in all that land.

And as they were going out, behold, a dumb man, demon-possessed, was brought to Him. And after the demon was cast out, the dumb man spoke; (9:27-33a)

When God created man He gave him dominion over the earth. Adam was king of the earth, with full right to rule it under God. He was given authority to name the animals and to care for this incredibly amazing and wonderful creation of the infinite mind of God. As God presented it to Adam, it was a kingdom of great light, life, beauty, harmony, health, happiness, goodness, and glory. But when Adam sinned and lost his innocence, he also lost his crown and his dominion. Adam’s sin allowed Satan to usurp man’s dominion and to turn the kingdom of light into a realm of darkness: The beauty of God’s creation became corrupted by ugliness, its harmony by confusion and disorder, its health by disease and decay, its happiness by sorrow and pain, its goodness by sin and evil, and its glory by guilt and shame. Sin turned man’s life into the path to death.

Yet almost as soon as man fell, God promised He would some day use man to restore the kingdom of earth to its beauty and goodness and to

restore man himself to his rightful dominion over it. The Lord declared that the seed of the woman would bruise Satan's head (Gen. 3:15), and from that point on the Old Testament is filled with increasingly more explicit promises about the Lord's great plan of redemption and restoration. God promised to send a King to restore the kingdom and to reestablish the rule of God and to destroy sin and its consequence, death. Disease, hardship, sorrow, pain, disappointment, and every other evil would be destroyed. Again and again the prophets tell of His coming as the Anointed One, the great King of kings, the destroyer of sin and death, the Healer, and the Righteous Ruler. The Jews knew Him as the Messiah (Greek, "Christ"), who would one day establish His eternal kingdom of righteousness; and earth, like heaven, would forever be under the perfect rule of God.

The gospels present a dazzling preview of Jesus' coming eternal kingdom. When He was transfigured on the mountain, the veil of His flesh was pulled back to reveal before the eyes of Peter, James, and John a glimpse of His divine majesty, a microcosmic display of His eternal reign in majestic glory (Matt. 17:2). The climax of Jesus' divine preview came at Pentecost, as the outpouring of His promised Holy Spirit fulfilled the prophecy of Joel that "it shall be in the last days," God says, "That I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all mankind" (Acts 2:16-17; cf. Joel 2:28). Throughout His entire ministry Jesus displayed a series of glimpses of the ultimate power He will demonstrate when He establishes His thousand-year rule on the present earth and then His eternal rule in the new heaven and the new earth.

As Matthew continues to present the third set of miracles that demonstrate Jesus' claim to messiahship (begun with the dual miracles of 9:18-26), he shows Jesus' power to restore sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. In raising Jairus's daughter from the dead, the Lord demonstrated His ultimate power over death. And because death is the ultimate and inescapable penalty of sin, Jesus' power over death also demonstrated even more than did His power to heal disease that His claim to forgive sin (9:2-6) was not empty. In healing the woman with the hemorrhage (9:20-22), and now healing the blind and the deaf men, He continued to demonstrate His power over the physical evils and corruption that sin produces. Through the miracles of restoring sight to blind eyes and sound

to deaf ears the Messiah again affirmed His ability not only to restore life to a body but also to restore life and function to any of its individual parts.

HEALING THE TWO BLIND MEN

And as Jesus passed on from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out, and saying, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” And after He had come into the house, the blind men came up to Him, and Jesus said to them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” They said to Him, “Yes, Lord.” Then He touched their eyes, saying, “Be it done to you according to your faith.” And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned them, saying, “See here, let no one know about this!” But they went out, and spread the news about Him in all that land. (9:27-32)

When He left Jairus’s house in Capernaum after raising his daughter from death, **Jesus passed on from there and two blind men followed Him**, seeking deliverance from their great affliction. In this brief account we are shown a number of truths about these two men: their condition, their cry, their confrontation, their conversion, the command to them, their contrariness, and their commitment.

THE CONDITION OF THE MEN

Blindness was common in ancient times, as it still is in most underdeveloped parts of the world. The fact that Jesus healed more cases of blindness than any other kind of disease reflects its pervasiveness. Unsanitary conditions, infectious organisms, blowing sand, accident, war, malnutrition, and excessive heat all combined to make blindness a constant danger. Many infants were born blind because of various diseases suffered by the mother during pregnancy, and many others became blind a few days after birth by being exposed to venereal disease, especially gonorrhea, as they passed through the birth canal.

It was not uncommon for blind people to associate with others who were blind, and it is possible that these **two blind men** had been companions in darkness for many years.

THE CRY OF THE MEN

As they **followed** after Jesus, these men were continually **crying out** to the Lord, hoping somehow to gain His attention amidst the noise and confusion that usually accompanies a large group of people. Because they could not see Jesus, they could only guess as to how close to Him they might be. *Krazō* (from which comes **crying out**), basically carries the idea of shouting or screaming with great intensity, and the word had a broad range of application in New Testament times. It is used of the unintelligible babbling of a deranged person such as the demoniac of Gadara (Mark 5:5) as well of the shouts of the children in the Temple who were praising Jesus (Matt. 21:15). It is used of the Lord Himself on the cross, as He “uttered a loud cry, and breathed His last” (Mark 15:37). It is used in Revelation 12:2 of a woman screaming in the pains of childbirth.

The two blind men were **crying out** to Jesus in great anxiety and desperation and were determined to be heard over the hubbub of the crowd, knowing He was their only hope of deliverance from their afflictions. What they said as they cried out indicates they had both the right knowledge about Jesus and the right attitude toward Him.

The right knowledge about Jesus. The fact that the blind men addressed Jesus as **Son of David** indicates they acknowledged Him as the Messiah, because **Son of David** was one of the most common Jewish titles for the promised Deliverer. It was a royal title, denoting His lineage from the family of the great King David and His right to reestablish and rule over the coming kingdom of God.

As mentioned above, the first Old Testament promise of God’s great Deliverer declared that He would be a man, the seed of woman. Later in the book of Genesis God reveals that the Messiah would be a descendant of Abraham (Gen. 12:3), specifically through his son Isaac (21:12) and his grandson Judah (49:10). Through the prophet Nathan, the Lord told David, “When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come

forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me;... And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam. 7:12-14a, 16). When the angel Gabriel announced Jesus’ birth to Mary, he said of Him, “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end” (Luke 1:32-33). In his beautiful Spirit-directed song of praise and prophecy, Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, exulted, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David His servant” (Luke 1:68-69). When he registered in Caesar’s census, Joseph took his expectant wife Mary with him “to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David” (Luke 2:4).

Again and again the New Testament declares Jesus to be the promised descendant of David who would deliver God’s people and establish His eternal kingdom (John 7:42; Acts 2:29-30; Rom. 1:3; 2 Tim. 2:8; Rev 5:5; 22:16). The multitudes who threw down their garments and branches before Jesus as He made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem sang, “Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; hosanna in the highest!” (Matt. 21:9). To call Jesus the Son of David was to proclaim Him the Messiah, the Christ—as the unbelieving and envious Jewish leaders well knew (see Matt. 22:42).

Every Jew who heard the blind men call Jesus the **Son of David** recognized it as a clear confession of their belief in His messiahship. Publicly and boldly they affirmed Jesus as the promised Deliverer of Israel, and they came to Him seeking their own deliverance.

The right attitude toward Jesus. The cry of the blind men also reveals they had the right attitude toward Jesus. They pleaded, **have mercy on us**, by which they may have acknowledged their need not simply for physical help but for forgiving **mercy**. Although one cannot be dogmatic in assuming so, it seems reasonable to suggest that they felt a spiritual need that only Jesus could meet, and they came to him in hungering humility, openly throwing themselves on His grace. They knew they were undeserving of the Lord’s help, but they also must have known that “the

Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and great in lovingkindness,” that He “is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works” (Ps. 145:8-9). They heeded the call of Joel to “return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness” (Joel 2:13).

These two men came to Jesus not only with a right understanding of His great worthiness but also with a right understanding of their own great unworthiness. That is the attitude of heart that the Lord honors and accepts. Again it is made clear that the person who comes before God declaring his own goodness is rejected by Him, whereas the one who mourns over his sin and humbly cries out, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” is justified by the Lord (Luke 18:10-14).

The blind men came to the right person, because Jesus Christ was mercy incarnate. As I have written elsewhere,

He was the most merciful human being who ever lived. He reached out to the sick and healed them. He reached out to the crippled and gave them legs to walk. He healed the eyes of the blind, the ears of the deaf, and the mouths of the dumb. He found prostitutes and tax collectors and those that were debauched and drunken, and He drew them into the circle of His love and redeemed them and set them on their feet.

He took the lonely and made them feel loved. He took little children and gathered them into His arms and loved them. Never was there a person on the face of the earth with the mercy of this One. Once a funeral procession came by and He saw a mother weeping because her son was dead. She was already a widow, and now she had no child to care for her. Who would care? Jesus stopped the funeral procession, put His hand on the casket, and raised the child from the dead. He cared. (*Kingdom Living Here and Now* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1980], p. 107)

In behalf of himself and his fellow Israelites, Daniel prayed expectantly to God, “We are not presenting our supplications before Thee on account of any merits of our own, but on account of Thy great compassion” (Dan. 9:18). Jeremiah declared, “The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness” (Lam. 3:22-23). The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus was “made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest” (Heb. 2:17). Paul reminds us of “the surpassing riches of [God’s] grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:7) and that “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy” (Titus 3:5). Ours is a God of mercy, for healing and for saving.

It is interesting that Jesus at first showed no response to the pleas of the two blind men. They continued to cry out as the entire crowd moved along with Jesus and the disciples, and He let them keep pouring out their hearts as they persistently demonstrated their determination. He tested their faith, letting it run to the extremity that proved its sincerity.

Although we are not told specifically, the **house** to which Jesus went was possibly Peter’s, where Jesus probably made His home while He was in Capernaum (see 8:14). After a demanding day of teaching and healing, Jesus finally went to one of the two places that could be considered His earthly home after He began His ministry. The other was the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany. Our Lord endured three years of almost total lack of privacy. Not only were His disciples His constant companions, but throngs of people followed Him wherever He went.

THE CONFRONTATION OF THE MEN

It was not until **after He had come into the house that the blind men came up to Him**. They somehow managed to keep up with Him and then followed Him into the house where He was staying. Each of the healings recounted in chapter 9 involved such persistence. The paralytic and his friends were so intent on getting to Jesus that they actually tore a

hole in the roof of the house and lowered the afflicted man to Jesus' feet. The synagogue official continued to seek Jesus' help even after his daughter was dead, and the woman with the hemorrhage was determined to take hold of the tassel of His robe in order to be healed. In each case Jesus led the persistent seekers to affirm faith in Him.

Now He asks the two blind men pointedly, **Do you believe that I am able to do this?** The question seems strange and almost cruel in light of the obvious determination of these men, who, in spite of their great handicap, had managed to follow Jesus for a considerable distance while contending with a great multitude of sighted people who also wanted to be with Him. The men had already acknowledged Jesus' messiahship by continually addressing Him as Son of David; and because Jesus knew their hearts, He was already aware that their faith in Him was genuine. His asking them about their faith must therefore have been for the purpose of drawing out a more complete public confession. "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord," Paul wrote, "and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved" (Rom. 10:9).

Such a confession Jesus drew out of the blind men, and it became a public testimony to others of what is required for salvation. **Yes** affirmed their belief that He was able to do what they asked of Him, and **Lord** affirmed their belief that He was the divine Messiah, the coming Savior long promised by the prophets.

The men's testimony also separated them from those who expected the Messiah to be a merely human political and military deliverer who would throw off the yoke of Rome and set up an earthly kingdom like that ruled by their ancient King David. Their testimony also affirmed the belief that Jesus was more than a highly competent and charismatic human leader. More than that, their testimony pointed to His being above all a spiritual leader, whose first concern was delivering individuals from their bondage to sin. Though Jesus' compassion for physical suffering was great, His compassion for lost souls was immeasurably greater. His healing of diseases was first of all to demonstrate both the compassion and power of God for the purpose of establishing His divine credentials as God's promised Messiah—in order that men might be convinced to trust in Him as their spiritual Savior. He healed bodies for the infinitely greater purpose of saving souls.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the gospels make clear that faith was not necessarily present in all cases of physical healing. The majority of Jesus' healings were performed apart from the mention of any sort of faith. Some healings, such as that of the centurion's slave, were performed without the afflicted person so much as seeing Jesus. Others, such as the raising of Jairus's daughter and Lazarus, were performed on those who were already dead when Jesus' power did its work in their bodies.

But faith is *always* involved in salvation, and Jesus prompted the two blind men to openly confess their trust in Him surely for the sake of the their spiritual, not their physical, restoration. They came to Jesus acknowledging Him as God's Messiah, the Son of David; and they came to Him asking for mercy, beyond simply healing. Although the term **Lord** was sometimes used merely as a title of respect, much as our "Sir," the context here convinces one that the two blind men looked to Jesus as their divine Lord, not simply as a man of great dignity. By leading them to confess Him as **Lord**, Jesus brought them to conversion.

THE CONVERSION OF THE MEN

Without the fanfare or superficial drama so common with self-proclaimed faith healers, **Jesus simply touched their eyes, saying, "Be it done to you according to your faith."** **According to your faith** signifies that the extent of Jesus' ministry to these men was based on the measure of their personal faith in Him. Faith is the means by which men receive the salvation God graciously gives. In light of their confession and of Jesus' specific mention of their **faith**, it seems certain that more than **their eyes were opened**. Their trust in Jesus Christ likely brought salvation as well as healing. He gave them spiritual life as well as physical sight.

Writing about this passage, Archbishop Richard Trench commented,

The faith which in itself is nothing is yet the organ for receiving everything. It is the conducting link between

man's emptiness and God's fullness, and herein lies all the value faith has. Faith is the bucket let down into the fountain of God's grace, without which the man could never draw water of life from the wells of salvation. For the wells are deep, and of himself man has nothing to draw with. Faith is the purse which cannot of itself make its owner rich, and yet effectually enriches by the wealth which it contains. (*The Miracles of Our Lord* [London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, & Co., 1902], p. 212)

THE COMMAND TO THE MEN

At this point **Jesus sternly warned them, saying, "See here, let no one know about this!"** Jesus was not simply making a suggestion. *Embrimaomai* (**sternly warned**) is an intensified form of an already strong verb and could even carry the idea of scolding (see Mark 14:5).

Jesus' reason for this command was not, as some suggest, to keep His miracle-working power from becoming known. He had already performed hundreds of public miracles and had become famous for them. His miracles were *meant* to be publicized, because they demonstrated His divine messiahship.

Nor was the command given to keep this particular miracle from becoming known for some reason. Relatives and friends of the men would have known of the miracle the instant they saw the men. And because of His fame as a miracle worker, they would immediately have concluded that Jesus was the Healer.

Obviously Jesus had another reason for commanding the men's silence. The best explanation seems to be that He did not want His messiahship proclaimed prematurely. As already noted, the men's calling Jesus the Son of David was a clear acknowledgment of His messiahship—and it was a title He did not reject and that His act of healing in fact confirmed.

Because Jesus did not develop His ministry through the Jewish establishment or come wielding the political-military power that many Jews associated with the Messiah, Jesus' messiahship would not be

accepted by most Jews, especially the leaders. It was the very affirmation that He was indeed the prophesied King of the Jews that ultimately brought His crucifixion. But now was not the time for that truth to be spread abroad. He did not want to stir up premature opposition or encourage revolutionary Jews to begin rallying around Him as if He were a political deliverer.

It may also have been that Jesus commanded the men to be quiet in order not to overemphasize the miracle-working aspect of His ministry. Although His miracles were an essential part of His divine work, many people had come to see Him *only* as a great human healer and nothing more. Jesus chided the multitude who searched Him out after He miraculously fed the five thousand near Tiberias, telling them plainly, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled” (John 6:26). Most people did not perceive Jesus’ miracles in their intended purpose as “signs” of His messiahship but simply as a supernatural, perhaps even magical, means of gaining a free meal or some other temporary physical benefit.

And perhaps Jesus told the two men not to broadcast their healing in order that others might draw their own conclusions about His messiahship. If they had boldly called Him by the messianic title Son of David *before* they were healed, how much bolder their declaration must have been *after* they received their sight by the touch of His hand! When John the Baptist was imprisoned and sent His disciples to ask Jesus, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?” Jesus did not answer directly, but rather said, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matt. 11:3-5). Jesus was concerned that especially the Jews, as God’s chosen people, accept His messiahship on the basis of His fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, not simply on the basis of hearsay or mere verbal claims.

THE CONTRARINESS OF THE MEN

Despite Jesus’ strict command to the contrary, the two men immediately **went out, and spread the news about Him in all that land.** Most believers need to say more about the Lord, not less. But for His own

important reasons at this time, Jesus had ordered these two men to say nothing about what He had done for them; and yet they disobeyed. Because it was disobedience of the Lord, what they did was wrong; but it was a kind of sin that only a grateful, overflowing heart could commit. The men could not resist the overwhelming desire to tell everyone of their wonderful deliverance and of the Lord who delivered them.

THE COMMITMENT OF THE MEN

The translation **As they were going out, behold, a dumb man, demon-possessed, was brought to Him** suggests that other people brought the **dumb man** to Jesus while the two former blind men were leaving. But another possible rendering is: “As they went out, behold, they brought to him a dumb man” (KJV). The idea is that the two men themselves came across another needy person as they were leaving and immediately brought him to Jesus for healing. If this was the case, they evidenced genuine commitment to Christ by bringing others to Him.

The **dumb man** may have been a friend of the two blind men, who perhaps had acted as their eyes while they acted as his voice. In that case, the first thing they did after being healed and saved themselves was to bring their friend to Jesus for healing and salvation.

Kōphos (**dumb**) often included the idea of deafness (see Matt. 11:5), because inability to speak is frequently caused by inability to hear. As with blindness, deafness was common in the ancient world. Accidents and disease caused loss of hearing, and foreign matter could collect in the ear wax and become a breeding ground for infectious organisms that eventually destroyed hearing. In this man’s case, however, dumbness was caused by being **demon-possessed**, and when he was delivered from the demon he was delivered from deafness.

HEALING THE DEAF MAN

And after the demon was cast out, the dumb man spoke; (9:33a)

We are not told how **the demon was cast out**. Whether Jesus touched the man, as He had the two blind men; verbally commanded the demon to leave, as He had done with the demons who possessed the Gadarene men (8:32); or used some other means, the **demon** immediately left, and **the dumb man spoke**.

Nothing is said of this man's faith, and no intimation is given of his salvation. As far as we know, he made no profession of faith in Jesus and received nothing from Him except physical healing. Perhaps through the continued witness of his two friends, he may later have placed his faith in Christ and received eternal life. But at this time his healing seems only to have been physical.

The primary focus of the passage is on the two blind men, and their story gives a beautiful analogy of the pattern of salvation. Their physical blindness is a picture of spiritual blindness. First of all, they acknowledged their need.

Second, the blind men acknowledged Jesus as the Son of David, the Messiah, just as the saved person must acknowledge Him as Lord and Savior. Third, they came seeking God's mercy, knowing that what they needed they did not deserve. How much less do sinful men deserve God's forgiveness of their sin, and how much more do they therefore need His mercy? Fourth, they trusted in Jesus for healing, just as the lost must trust in Him for salvation. On the basis of their faith they were converted. Fifth, by disobeying the Lord, they displayed the well-meaning weakness that often follows conversion. As babes in Christ they were undiscerning and careless, placing their own judgment above the Lord's. But, sixth, they were also useful to the Lord, because they brought others to Him.

Long ago, George Lansing Taylor wrote,

O Saviour, we are blind and dumb,
To Thee for sight and speech we
come;

Touch Thou our eyes with truth's
bright rays,

Teach Thou our lips to sing Thy
praise.

Help us to feel our mournful night,
And seek, through all things, for Thy
light,

Till the glad sentence we receive,

“Be it to you as you believe.”

Then swift the dumb to Thee we'll
bring,

Till all Thy grace shall see, and sing.

Responding to **Jesus' Power (9:33b-35)**

and the multitudes marveled, saying, “Nothing like this was ever seen in Israel.” But the Pharisees were saying, “He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons.”

And Jesus was going about all the cities and the villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. (9:33b-35)

A contemporary British writer has commented, “The problem with humanity is this: humanity stands at the crossroads, and all of the signposts have fallen down.”

For Matthew, however—as for every other writer, preacher, and teacher of the New Testament and for every believer today—humanity’s needed spiritual signposts are very much in place and are entirely reliable. The problem with humanity is not with the signposts but with those who ignore or reject the signposts God has made abundantly evident (see Rom. 1:18-23).

Among those signposts are the miracles that demonstrated Jesus’ divine nature and messiahship, His power to save and His right to rule. In addition to demonstrating who Jesus was, His miracles also served to separate those who accept Him from those who reject Him. For some people, Jesus’ miracles were a sign of divine power and glory that drew them nearer to Him; for some they were supernatural marvels by a good man, but a man who had no claim on their lives; and for others they were an affront to religious propriety that drove them even further from the Lord.

Jesus is the dividing line of history and the demarcation point that determines the ultimate destiny of every individual on earth. When Jesus was only about forty days old, His parents took Him to the Temple in Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord as their first-born male child and to perform Mary's rite of purification after giving birth. While they were there, a godly man named Simeon, whom the Holy Spirit had promised "would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ," took the infant Jesus in his arms. He praised God for the Child, saying of Him, "My eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel" (Luke 2:26, 30-32). Then he blessed Mary and Joseph "and said to Mary His mother, 'Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel'" (v. 34).

Those who reject Jesus "fall" into God's judgment and consequently into hell, whereas those who accept Him are saved from sin and death and "rise" into eternal life with God in heaven. Those are the only two possible destinies for a human being. Those who trust God are saved and are "like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season," while those who reject God are lost and "are like chaff which the wind drives away" (Ps. 1:3-4).

Even while Jesus was still in her womb, Mary praised God as "the Mighty One . . . [whose] mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear Him. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who were humble. He has filled the hungry with good things; and sent away the rich empty-handed" (Luke 1:49-50, 52-53). From her knowledge of the Old Testament Mary knew that God receives those who come to Him humbly and penitently and rejects those who proudly and arrogantly trust in themselves and see no need for His mercy or deliverance. At the beginning of His ministry Jesus declared,

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and cast insults at you, and spurn your name as evil,

for the sake of the Son of Man. Be glad in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full. Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for in the same way their fathers used to treat the false prophets. (Luke 6:20-26)

Those who are blessed are the saved, and those who fall under God's woes are the lost.

Using other figures to teach the same truth, Jesus said the saved are like those who build their lives on the rock of the Lord's righteousness and the lost are like those who build their lives on the sand of man's religion. Those who build on the rock withstand God's judgment, whereas those who build on sand do not (Matt. 7:24-27). Using still another figure, the Lord said, "For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it" (Matt. 16:25). On another occasion He said, "Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32-33). Those who identify themselves with God's Son, Jesus Christ, God will identify as His own children. Jesus made clear that His peace is only for those who belong to Him. For those who reject Him, He does not "bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household" (vv. 34-36).

In a parable addressed specifically to the unbelieving chief priests and elders in Jerusalem, Jesus said, "A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in the vineyard.'" And he answered and said, "I will, sir"; and he did not go. And he came to the second and said the same thing. But he answered and said, "I will not"; yet he afterward regretted it and went. Which of the two did the will of his

father?’ They said, ‘The latter.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I say to you that the tax-gatherers and harlots will get into the kingdom of God before you’” (Matt. 21:28-31). The second son represents irreligious and ungodly people who come to recognize their sin and repent of it, turning to God for salvation. The first son represents religious hypocrites who make an outward profession of God but are inwardly rebellious against Him. Whether religious or irreligious, only those who turn to God through Jesus Christ can be saved.

The apostle Paul wrote often on the theme that the human race is divided into believers and unbelievers—into the heaven-bound and the hell-bound, the blessed and the cursed, the glorified and the damned—and that the determining issue between them is their response to the Lord Jesus Christ. “Thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place,” he wrote the Corinthian believers. “For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life” (2 Cor. 2:14-16). Christians touch all the world with the fragrance of God, but that fragrance is a pleasant blessing only to fellow believers. The more the saved hear and understand and fellowship with those who also believe the gospel that redeemed them, the more they rejoice and grow in their new life in Christ. But to those who are doomed to hell, who reject the good news about Christ, all that believers are and teach carries only the smell of death. The more they hear the gospel and see it manifested, the more repulsive it becomes to them and the deeper they entrench themselves in their lostness. Their continual rejection of the gospel serves to confirm their spiritual deadness.

The writer of Hebrews says, “How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?” (Heb. 10:29). The more the saving gospel of Jesus’ sacrificial atonement for sin is denied and purposely rejected, the deeper becomes the spiritual darkness and the severer the punishment of eternity.

In Matthew 9:33b-35 we are first shown two superficially different but basically similar responses to Jesus’ miracles, and then we are given a

brief summary of His Galilean ministry, which is also a summary of His entire ministry until the time of His crucifixion.

THE RESPONSES OF THE PEOPLE

and the multitudes marveled, saying, “Nothing like this was ever seen in Israel.”

(9:33b)

After the first group of three miracles, the general response of the people is characterized by three men, each of whom was attracted to Jesus but found an excuse for not following Him (see 8:19-22; cf. Luke 9:57-62). The first response after the next group of miracles was the call and conversion of Matthew (9:9), which was followed by the insincere questioning of Jesus by the unbelieving Pharisees (v. 11-13) and the sincere questioning of Him by the confused disciples of John the Baptist (vv. 14-17).

Throughout Jesus’ ministry—as throughout the New Testament and the history of the church—the responses to Jesus Christ show variations. Some people immediately recognize Him for who He is but fall short of seeking His salvation. Others acknowledge and trust Him and gain eternal life. Some at first reject Him but later accept Him, and some outwardly claim to accept Him but inwardly remain unchanged and unsaved. In every case, however, the response reflects one of only two basic decisions—that of true acceptance, which leads to salvation, or that of rejection, which leads to damnation.

In this text the Holy Spirit shows the responses given to Jesus after the third and last set of miracles recorded in Matthew 8-9.

THE RESPONSE OF THE MULTITUDE

The first response was that of **the multitudes**, who **marveled** at what Jesus was doing. They publicly testified that **nothing like this was**

ever seen in Israel. They knew of the many miracles God wrought while Moses appealed to Pharaoh to release the Israelites from bondage, and of the deliverance through the Red Sea and the provision of water and manna in the wilderness. They knew of God's giving the law on Mt. Sinai on tablets of stone inscribed with His own finger and of His dramatic crumbling of the walls of Jericho. They knew of the great miracles of Elijah and Elisha. But in less than a year's time, they themselves had witnessed miracles of a greater and absolutely unique magnitude. Here was a display of divine power unequalled not only in the history of **Israel** but in the history of the world.

Thaumazō (**marveled**) means to be greatly amazed and astounded, to be overcome with awe. The intensified forms of the verb found in Matthew 27:14 and Mark 12:17 carry an even stronger meaning. As Jesus' miracles increased so did the astonishment of the crowds. They became amazed beyond amazement. When Jesus stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee, the disciples were more afraid of the divine power that stilled it than they were of the storm itself. The vast number and variety of healings and other miracles made them both incontestable and incomprehensible. The people were therefore continually "amazed at the greatness of God" (Luke 9:43).

Yet, as astounded as the people were, most of them were fickle in their praise of Jesus. As He entered Jerusalem on the Monday preceding His death, "most of the multitude spread their garments in the road, and others were cutting branches from the trees, and spreading them in the road. And the multitudes going before Him, and those who followed after were crying out, saying, 'Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; hosanna in the highest'" (Matt. 21:8-9). But by Friday of that same week—persuaded by the religious leaders that Jesus was going against established Judaism and that He might even become a threat to their safety because of Rome—that same basic multitude chose to release Barabbas the criminal and to crucify Jesus the Savior (27:21). Because their fascination with Jesus' miracles was superficial and involved no submission to Him as Lord and Savior, the marveling multitude eventually screamed for His blood in death.

Great throngs of people praised Jesus and walked many miles along hot, dusty roads to see Him perform His amazing works; but they admired Him only from a distance. They did not lastingly identify with

Him or submit to Him. They were always astonished and sometimes afraid, but never committed. They were mere onlookers, willing to cheer but not willing to participate. They came to Jesus out of curiosity and to be entertained.

In John 6:26-27, for example, Jesus said to the crowd, “Truly, truly I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled. Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life.” They came to Jesus only for free food! And because that is all they sought, that is all they received. Eventually they turned away from Him and then turned against Him, because there is no other course for those who will not have Him as Lord and Savior.

History is replete with people who heap high praise on Jesus but who give no evidence of submitting to Him and in many cases flagrantly oppose the truth He taught. In front of Jesus’ sworn enemies, Pontius Pilate declared Him to be innocent of any wrong and then a short while later approved His death sentence. The French philosopher Diderot said Jesus was the unsurpassed, and the great French emperor Napoleon said He was the emperor of love. D. F. Strauss, the liberal German theologian, said Jesus was the highest model of religion. The English philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill called Him the guide of humanity. William Leckey the Irish historian, said He was the highest pattern of virtue, and James Martineau, the English theologian and philosopher, called Him the divine flower of humanity. The French historian Joseph Renan acknowledged Jesus to be the greatest among the sons of men. Theodore Parker, an American Unitarian clergyman, referred to Jesus as the youth with God in His heart, and the Welsh social reformer Robert Owen said He was the irreproachable. A popular musical refers to Him as a Superstar. Those are lovely sentiments, but they all fall short of saving truth.

The Pharisees and other leaders of Jesus’ day loudly praised the Old Testament prophets, but their counterparts who lived when the prophets were alive were the ones who put the prophets to death—just as the Pharisees led the people to reject and crucify Jesus. Many people today praise and identify with the great Christian leaders of church history yet reject the central doctrines and standards those leaders taught and often died for.

A few years ago a group of Christian students at a state university held a series of meetings to present and defend the biblical standards of morality. As long as the presentation remained in general terms it was received fairly well. But when statements were made condemning homosexuality as unequivocally sinful in God's sight, an avowed homosexual faculty member stormed down the aisle of the meeting hall shouting obscenities at the speaker. Afterward, many of the gay students spit on the Christians who had attended.

As long as Jesus can be kept at arms' length, and as long as His demanding and confrontational teachings are ignored or denied, He is often acceptable to the world. But when He accuses of sin and demands repentance and submission, the world turns away. When man's need for salvation is preached and Jesus' claims of lordship are pressed, that is another matter. Those who once praised Him become His critics, and those who once marveled at Him become His enemies. People will often give the highest praise to Jesus, even acknowledge His divinity and perfection—as long as no mention is made of His condemning to hell the liar, murderer, adulterer, homosexual, thief, and every other sinner who refuses to repent and receive Him as Savior and Lord.

THE REJECTING RELIGIONISTS

But the Pharisees were saying, “He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons.” (9:34)

From that statement it is clear that many of the Pharisees not only were suspicious and envious of Jesus but already had determined Him to be an absolute enemy of traditional Judaism, of which they were the chief custodians. And in their minds, the enemy of their religion was the enemy of God.

Because they could not deny the fact of Jesus' miracles, they chose to deny the source. And because they refused to recognize Jesus as the Messiah of God, they declared Him to be an agent of Satan who **casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons**. They could not assail the miracles themselves, because they were too numerous, public, and provable; instead, they foolishly assailed the One who performed them.

A short while later Jesus exposed the elemental illogic of the accusation (slightly revised from the one in 9:34) that He “casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons” (Matt. 12:24). Beelzebul was probably a form of Baalzebub (which means, “lord of the flies”), the pagan Philistine deity considered to be the prince of demons, Satan himself. But as Jesus pointed out, “Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself shall not stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then shall his kingdom stand?” (vv. 25-27). The darkness, hardness, and anger of the Pharisees’ hearts led them to attack Jesus with a foolish charge they hoped the people would believe—a charge that, in their blind and determined unbelief, they probably believed themselves. Truth cannot be contradicted with truth; it can only be denounced with falsehood.

When an unbeliever is determined not to believe, no fact or reason, no matter how obvious and convincing, can enlighten him. The person who is sold out to darkness refuses to recognize the light, even when it is blindingly clear. And the person who *praises* Jesus but rejects Him or *ignores* and rejects Him is just as damned as the person who *denounces* and rejects Him. Any response to Jesus but the response of faith amounts to rejection and results in damnation.

THE WORKS OF THE LORD

And Jesus was going about all the cities and the villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. (9:35)

Following his presentation of the responses to the third set of miracles, Matthew gives another brief summary of Jesus’ Galilean ministry (cf. 4:23).

We learn from the Jewish historian Josephus that at this time there were some two hundred cities and villages in the region of Galilee, an area about 40 miles wide and 70 miles long. “The cities are numerous and the multitude of villages everywhere,” he wrote, “crowded with men owing to

the fertility of the soil, so that the smallest of them contains above fifteen thousand inhabitants.” Based on that assessment, Galilee then contained at least three million people, most of whom could have had direct exposure to Jesus.

Cities of that day were distinguished by having high surrounding walls for fortification, whereas **villages** were unwalled. During His brief stay in Galilee, Jesus visited **all** of them as He fulfilled His threefold ministry of **teaching, . . . proclaiming the gospel . . . , and healing.**

TEACHING

teaching in their synagogues, (9:35b)

Synagogues developed during the Babylonian exile (which began in 586 B.C), and from that time on they were the centers of Jewish community life. The synagogue was a place of worship, a town hall, and a courthouse. Before the Exile all worship centered in the Temple at Jerusalem, from which every Jew in Palestine lived less than a hundred miles. But when they were separated from the Temple for those 70 years of captivity, they began to gather together in a synagogue, which simply means “place of assembly.” Wherever at least ten Jewish men lived, a synagogue could be formed, and many large cities of the ancient world had numerous synagogues.

The synagogue was usually located on a hill or by a river, and was frequently built roofless—as was most of the Temple—in order for the people to look up to heaven as part of their worship. The synagogue was often identified by a long pole that went high into the air, much as a church steeple. A stranger in town could always find his way to the synagogue simply by traveling toward the pole.

Members of the synagogue would meet for worship on the Sabbath and on the second and fifth days of each week. They also met there to celebrate their many feasts, festivals, and holy days. Regular worship services were simply structured. They began with a time of thanksgivings or blessings, which included songs of praise and spoken testimony of the Lord’s goodness. Prayer followed and was concluded by a congregational

“Amen,” a statement of affirmation that means “So be it.” Jesus often used the term *amēn* (translated, “truly,” or “verily”; see Matt. 16:28; Mark 9:1) to emphasize the truth of important teachings; and the early church, following the synagogue practice, used it as a response to prayer (see 1 Cor. 14:16).

After prayer was given in the synagogue service, a designated reader would stand up and read from the law of Moses, the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch). The passage was read in Hebrew and then translated into Aramaic, the common speech of Palestinian Jews (cf. Neh. 8:8). That would be followed by the reading, translation, and exposition of a passage from one of the prophets. The Jewish scholar Philo, who lived in Alexandria during the time of Christ, wrote, “Synagogues are mainly for the detailed reading and exposition of Scripture.”

The practice of reading and expounding Scripture therefore began as early as the time of Nehemiah and remains the soundest way to preach and teach God’s Word. The Master of such exposition was Jesus, and to the people of His hometown synagogue at Nazareth on one occasion He explained that He Himself was the fulfillment and true interpretation of Isaiah 61:1-2, which He had just read to them (Luke 4:16-21).

Because of the policy called “freedom of the synagogue,” the exposition of the Scripture passage could be given by any qualified man of the congregation, and the privilege was frequently extended to visiting rabbis or dignitaries. Both Jesus and Paul took advantage of that privilege, which became instrumental in the spread of the gospel during the first century (see Matt. 4:23; 13:54; Luke 4:15-21; Acts 9:20; 13:5; 18:4; 19:8).

The typical worship service was closed by a benediction and a final congregational “Amen.”

As already mentioned, the synagogue was also a place of instruction, as reflected in the Yiddish word for synagogue (*schul*, akin to our English *school*). It was the public school, or seminary, where Jewish boys were trained in the Talmud (the official commentaries on the law of Moses) and where many Jewish men (besides the elders and rabbis) often spent time studying the Scriptures (see Acts 17:11).

Religious and community affairs were administered by the ten elders, or rulers, of the synagogue, such as Jairus (Mark 5:22). All of the elders acted as judges, and from their number they selected a chief ruler, an interpreter of Hebrew for the worship services, a director of the school,

and other such officers. All religious disputes were settled in the synagogues, and in most countries and provinces during New Testament times the Roman government permitted the Jews to handle many of their own civil disputes and even to administer punishment. Cases would be tried, judged, and the punishment carried out in the synagogue (see Matt. 10:17).

PREACHING

and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, (9:35c)

Proclaiming is from *kērussō*, which is often translated “to preach” (Matt. 4:17; 10:7; Mark 16:15). The basic meaning is to herald a message, to make a public announcement for everyone to hear.

Jesus not only taught in the synagogues but He went about **proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom** wherever He went—in a synagogue, on a street corner, on a hillside, or on the seashore. It was through **proclaiming the gospel** that He made His major evangelistic thrust, calling on His hearers not simply to believe what He taught but to believe in Him. In preaching **the gospel of the kingdom**, Jesus was not expounding the Old Testament, as He did when teaching in the synagogues, but He was **proclaiming** the New Testament, the New Covenant which He would seal with His own blood (Matt. 26:28). He was unfolding the mysteries that were mentioned but not explained in the Old Testament, hidden even from the most faithful believers of previous times. He was thus giving new revelation about God’s plan of redemption.

Gospel (*euangelion*) means “good news,” and in the New Testament it is used in particular of the good news **of the kingdom** of God, which Jesus not only proclaimed but of which He was both the entrance and the Ruler (Matt. 16:28; 18:3; Luke 22:29-30; John 14:6; 18:36).

Jesus’ teaching about **the kingdom** was not just about the future kingdom, in its millennial and eternal states, but about His present spiritual kingdom, into which a person is born by forgiving, transforming grace the moment he trusts in the Son of God. Every Christian is a citizen of God’s kingdom in this present life. Christ is the King, the Lord, of every

believer. He rules our lives, supplies our needs, guarantees our salvation, and in every way is sovereign over us. **The kingdom** is the rule and reign of Christ—now in and over His saints on earth, eventually over all the earth during the Millennium, and ultimately and eternally over the new heavens and the new earth.

The dual tasks of teaching the Word and proclaiming the gospel are still the primary ministry of the church today. Our first calling is to teach men the truth of God's Word and to lead them to saving knowledge of Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:19-20).

HEALING

healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. (9:35d)

In his book *Counterfeit Miracles*, B. B. Warfield wrote, "When our Lord came down to earth, He drew heaven with Him. The signs which accompanied His ministry were but the trailing clouds of glory which He brought from heaven, which is His home" (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, [1918] 1983, p. 3).

Jesus' ministries of teaching and preaching were verified as divine and true by the display of supernatural power in His ministry of miracles, manifested especially through **healing**. Those three activities summarize the public ministry of our Lord.

The Harvest and the Laborers (9:36-38)

And seeing the multitudes, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.” (9:36-38)

At this point Matthew has concluded the section on Jesus’ attestation of His divine authority and His messianic credentials (chaps. 8-9). In chapter 10 Matthew focuses on Jesus’ commissioning of the disciples and His initial instruction and training for their apostolic ministry (see 11:1). Verses 36-38 of chapter 9 form a bridge between these two sections, as Jesus temporarily turns away from His public ministry to the multitudes and begins to concentrate exclusively on discipling the inner circle of twelve.

This text marks a significant transition in Jesus’ ministry. Until this point His disciples have simply been listeners and onlookers, observing and learning. All of the actual ministry—teaching, preaching, and healing—has been performed by Jesus Himself. Now Jesus shows the reason and need to begin involving the disciples (compare 9:35 and 10:1, 7-8, 27). In the three verses of our text we are given a glimpse of Jesus’ motives and methods in preparing the disciples for their joint ministry with Him.

His MOTIVES

And seeing the multitudes, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest is plentiful,” (9:36-37a)

Here is a marvelous disclosure of our Lord’s heart, a revelation of His divine motive for ministry. We discover what prompted the Son of God to come to earth to teach, preach to, and heal a sinful people who deserved only the condemnation of hell. Three elements of that motivation are His own divine compassion, man’s lost condition, and the coming consummation of judgment.

CHRIST’S DIVINE COMPASSION

And seeing the multitudes, He felt compassion for them, (9:36a)

Perhaps from the vantage point of a hillside, Jesus looked out over the great mass of people who had been His almost constant followers for many months. They were always there, wherever He went. If He entered a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee, they would either follow in other boats or run around the shore to the other side and meet Him there. They dogged Him from town to town, from house to house, from synagogue to synagogue, and gave Him no rest.

Many people came simply to watch and listen, eager to see and hear what the great miracle worker and teacher would do or say. They had never heard anyone speak the authoritative but gracious words He spoke, and they had never seen anyone perform the marvelous feats that He performed. Many other people, however, came to Him for specific needs in their own lives or in the lives of their loved ones or friends. Most of these came for physical healing or deliverance from demons.

But the divine eyes of Jesus saw infinitely greater need in their lives, a need that far surpassed a withered arm, a bleeding body, a possessed mind, or blind eyes and deaf ears. He sympathized with their physical pains, too, and would have been deeply moved had those been their only afflictions.

But in **seeing the multitudes** Jesus saw the deepness and pervasiveness of their sin and the desperate plight of their spiritual blindness and lostness. Consequently, **He felt compassion for them** as only God could feel. He cared for them because He was God incarnate and it is God's nature to love and to care, for "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Over and over in the gospel record we are told of Jesus' **compassion** and love for men. When He withdrew in a boat to be alone after hearing of the death of John the Baptist, the crowd discovered where He went and "followed Him on foot from the cities. And when He went ashore, He saw a great multitude, and felt compassion for them, and healed their sick" (Matt. 14:13-14). After He had healed a great number of people on a mountainside in Galilee, He privately told His disciples, "I feel compassion for the multitude, because they have remained with Me now three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not wish to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way" (15:32). It was not enough that He had healed the lame, the crippled, the blind, the dumb, and many others among them (vv. 30-31). When they were without food, He cared deeply about their hunger.

Splanchna, the noun form of the verb behind **felt compassion**, literally refers to the intestines, or bowels. In Scripture it is sometimes used literally, as when describing Judas's death (Acts 1:18). More often, however, it is used figuratively to represent the emotions, much in the way we use the term *heart* today. The Hebrews, like many other ancient peoples, expressed attitudes and emotions in terms of physiological symptoms, not in abstractions. As most of us know from personal experience, many intense emotions—*anxiety, fear, pity, remorse, and so on*—can directly, and often immediately, affect the stomach and the digestive tract. Upset stomach, colitis, and ulcers are a few of the common ailments frequently related to emotional trauma. It is not strange, then, that ancient people associated strong emotions with that region of the body. The heart, on the other hand, was associated more with the mind and thinking (see Prov. 16:23; Matt. 15:19; Rom. 10:10; Heb. 4:12). The heart was the source of thought and action, whereas the bowels were the responder, the reactor.

Jesus therefore used the common term of His day to express His deep **compassion** for the great crowds of people who were suffering. But His care was not merely figurative, because He felt in His own body the

symptoms of His deep caring. If our bodies literally ache in pain and nausea when we experience great agony, remorse, or sympathy, we can be sure that the Son of Man felt them even more. Matthew tells us that, in order to fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah, Jesus “Himself took our infirmities, and carried away our diseases” (Matt. 8:17). It was not, of course, that Jesus Himself contracted the diseases or infirmities, but that in sympathy and compassion He physically as well as emotionally suffered with those who came to Him for healing—just as a parent can become physically ill from worry and concern over a child who is desperately sick or in trouble or danger.

When Jesus saw Mary and her friends weeping over the death of her brother Lazarus, “He was deeply moved in spirit, and was troubled,” and He wept with them (John 11:33, 35). The phrase “deeply moved in spirit” carries the idea of physical as well as emotional and spiritual anguish. Jesus Himself was seized with grief as He saw His dear friend grieving; and He burst into tears. He knew that Lazarus would soon be alive again, and His grief was therefore not for the same reason as theirs. But it was the same feeling as theirs and even more intense. After some of the people there wondered aloud why Jesus had not prevented Lazarus’ death, He was again “deeply moved within” (v. 38), a phrase that carries the idea of shuddering, of being physically racked with emotion.

When Jesus was arrested in the Garden, His concern was not for Himself but for His disciples. He said to the soldiers, “If therefore you seek Me, let these go their way” (John 18:8). When He was hanging on the cross, facing death and suffering great physical agony from the crown of thorns and the nails in His hands and feet, His concern was for His mother. “When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, ‘Woman, behold, your son!’ Then He said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother!’” (John 19:26-27). In His incalculable compassion He would not give up His spirit until He had provided for His mother.

As He agonized over the rejection by His own people, He did not feel anger or vengeance but the deepest possible remorse for them. In one of the most poignant statements ever uttered, He lamented, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling” (Matt. 23:37). Luke

reports that when Jesus approached Jerusalem for the last time, “He saw the city and wept over it, saying, ‘If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes’” (Luke 19:41-42). As Isaiah had prophesied, Jesus was indeed “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3).

Jesus not only performed miracles of healings to establish His messianic credentials but also to show God’s infinite love. He demonstrated *compassionate* power, a kind of power completely foreign to pagans and even to most Jews—who had long ago lost sight of the lovingkindness of the God who had called, guided, protected, and blessed them as His chosen people. The people who witnessed Jesus’ healing touch and heard His healing words must surely have been as astonished by His **compassion** as they were by His power.

Dr. Paul Brand has spent many years in medical work among lepers. In his book *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, he writes,

[Jesus] reached out His hand and touched the eyes of the blind, the skin of the person with leprosy, and the legs of the cripple. . . .

I have sometimes wondered why Jesus so frequently touched the people He healed, many of whom must have been unattractive, obviously diseased, unsanitary, smelly. With His power, He easily could have waved a magic wand. But He chose not to. Jesus’ mission was not chiefly a crusade against disease . . . but rather a ministry to individual people, some of whom happened to have a disease. He wanted those people, one by one, to feel His love and warmth and His full identification with them. Jesus knew He could not readily demonstrate love to a crowd, for love usually involves touching.

Commenting on two statements about Jesus in the book of Hebrews (“For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our

weaknesses,” 4:15; and “Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered,” 5:8), Dr. Brand says,

A stupefying concept: God’s Son learning through His experiences on earth. Before taking on a body, God had no personal experience of physical pain or of the effect of rubbing against needy persons. But God dwelt among us and touched us, and His time spent here allows Him to more fully identify with our pain. (Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980], pp. 140, 146-48)

That sympathetic compassion is unique to Christianity, because it is unique to Christianity’s God. Hinduism is perhaps one of the most cruelly neglectful of all religious systems. Its caste system prohibits anyone from even touching those of an alien caste. Its treatment of the sick and dying is sometimes shocking and barbarous, because providing them help is thought to delay the process of karma and reincarnation. Brahmins, the Hindu priestly class, recognize no responsibility for the care of the afflicted and downtrodden. Islam, whose history runs red with secular and religious bloodshed, cannot be expected to show much pity for those in need. The primary motive behind Buddhist benevolence is that the act may lay up merit.

How different were Jesus’ teaching and example. In the parable of the slave who owed an unpayable debt to his king, Jesus illustrated God’s love through the grace of the king, who “felt compassion” on his slave “and released him and forgave him the debt” (Matt. 18:27). When the two blind men sitting by the road just outside of Jericho cried out to Jesus, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” He was “moved with compassion, . . . touched their eyes,” and restored their sight (20:30, 34). When the leper came to Him, declaring, “If You are willing, You can make me clean,” Jesus again was “moved with compassion,” and He cleansed the man of his tormenting disease (Mark 1:40-41).

G. Campbell Morgan wrote on this passage,

There is no reason in man that God should save; the need is born of His own compassion. No man has any claim upon God. Why, then, should men be cared for? Why should they not become the prey of the ravening wolf, having wandered from the fold? It has been said that the great work of redemption was the outcome of a passion for the righteousness and holiness of God; that Jesus must come and teach and live and suffer and die because God is righteous and holy. I do not so read the story. God could have met every demand of His righteousness and holiness by handing men over to the doom they had brought upon themselves. But deepest in the being of God, holding in its great energising might, both holiness and righteousness, is love and compassion. God said, according to Hosea, "How shall I give thee up, Ephraim?" It is out of the love which inspired that wail of the Divine heart, that salvation has been provided. (*The Gospel According to Matthew* [Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1979], pp. 99-100)

The great Puritan writer Thomas Watson said, "We may force our Lord to punish us, but we will never have to force Him to love us." The God of Scripture is the God of love and compassion. How different are the gods of paganism. The supreme attribute of the ancient Greek gods was *apatheia*, apathy and indifference. Those supposed deities were supremely unconcerned about the welfare of mankind. Even the nature of the true God had been so distorted by the scribes, Pharisees, and rabbis that most Jews thought of Him primarily as a God of anger, vengeance, and indifference. Jesus brought an entirely new message.

Because the Lord is compassionate, believers who bear His name are also to be compassionate. "To sum up," Peter says, "let all be

harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead” (1 Pet. 3:8-9).

MAN’S LOST CONDITION

because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd. (9:36b)

Jesus’ second motive for ministry was the knowledge of man’s lost condition. He saw the people around Him in the reality of their need. He was moved by their diseases and sickness, and He healed every kind of them (v.35). But He was moved even more deeply by the needs that most of the multitude did not know they had—to be freed from their bondage to sin. He was not fooled by their religious fronts and their spiritual facades. He saw their hearts, and He knew that inwardly **they were distressed and downcast**.

Skullō (to be **distressed**) has the root meaning of flaying or skinning, and the derived meanings of being harassed or severely troubled. It often connoted the ideas of being battered, bruised, mangled, ripped apart, worn out, and exhausted. Jesus saw the multitudes as being inwardly devastated by their sinful and hopeless condition.

Rhiptō (to be **downcast**) has the basic meaning of being thrown down prostrate and utterly helpless, as from drunkenness or a mortal wound. The Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) uses the word of Sisera as he “was lying dead with a tent peg in his temple” (Judg. 4:22). Jesus saw the **downcast** multitudes as **sheep without a shepherd** to protect and care for them. They were helpless and defenseless, spiritually battered, thrown down, and without leadership or supply.

Those who claimed to be their shepherds were the scribes and Pharisees, but it was those very “shepherds” who were largely responsible for the people’s confusion and hopelessness. Their religious leaders gave them no spiritual pastures, nor did they feed them, give them drink, or bind up their wounds. Instead, they were spiritually brutalized by uncaring, unloving leaders who should have been meeting their spiritual

needs. Consequently, the people had been left weary, desolate, and forlorn. In 10:6 Jesus calls them “the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” God’s chosen people who had been left to perish.

The scribes and Pharisees offered a religion that added burdens instead of lifting them. They had great concern about their self-made traditions but only superficial and hypocritical concern about the true law of God. And for them, the common people were the object of disdain not compassion, to be exploited not served. The scribes and Pharisees were true descendants of the false shepherds against whom the Lord had railed centuries earlier through Ezekiel: “Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them” (Ezek. 34:2-4; cf. Zech. 11:5).

The scribes and Pharisees “tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men’s shoulders,” Jesus said; “but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger” (Matt. 23:4). Worse than that, they “shut off the kingdom of heaven from men,” not entering themselves and not allowing others to enter (v.13). What an indictment.

Many religious leaders today are still endeavoring to keep people out of the kingdom by distorting and contradicting God’s Word and perverting the way of salvation. They still keep them from the true Shepherd. By telling people they are already saved because “a good God would never condemn anyone to hell,” they lead people to be content with themselves and to see no need for repentance and salvation—thereby shutting tight the gracious door God has provided. Or when people are told they can work their way into God’s favor by avoiding certain sins or by performing certain good deeds or participating in some prescribed ritual, they are likewise deceived and left in their lostness. Those for whom Christ feels compassionate love are spiritually battered, bruised, and thrown down to lie helpless outside the sheepfold God has provided for them in His Son.

Jesus called such false teachers thieves and robbers, strangers from whom people should flee (John 10:1, 5). In his parting words to the

Ephesian elders at Miletus, Paul warned, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:28-29).

How wonderfully refreshing it must have been to hear Jesus say, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light” (Matt. 11:28-30). What a contrast those words were from the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees, who added burden upon burden, tradition upon tradition, requirement upon requirement.

Someone has written,

Let me look on the crowd as my
Savior did,
Till my eyes with tears grow dim;
Let me view
with pity the wandering sheep, And
love them
for the love of Him.

THE COMING CONSUMMATION OF JUDGMENT

Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest is plentiful,” (9:37a)

Jesus here changes the metaphor from shepherding to harvesting, but He continues to give His motives for ministry. Jesus ministered not only because it was His nature to have compassion and because the people had a deep need; He also ministered because they faced God's final judgment.

Several interpretations are commonly offered for the meaning of **the harvest**. It is said to represent all the lost, the seekers after God, or those who are elected for salvation. But from other parts of Scripture, including the Old Testament, we discover a different picture of what Jesus doubtlessly meant by the figure of **harvest**.

God declared to Israel through Isaiah, "For you have forgotten the God of your salvation and have not remembered the rock of your refuge. Therefore you plant delightful plants and set them with vine slips of a strange god. In the day that you plant it you carefully fence it in, and in the morning you bring your seed to blossom; but the harvest will be a heap in a day of sickness and incurable pain" (Isa. 17:10-11). The harvest here was God's judgment.

Through Joel the Lord said, "Hasten and come, all you surrounding nations, and gather yourselves there. Bring down, O Lord, Thy mighty ones. Let the nations be aroused and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations. Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, tread, for the wine press is full; the vats overflow, for their wickedness is great. Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision" (Joel 3:11-14). Again the harvest was God's judgment, and the multitudes faced the decision of their destiny—before they lost the opportunity to decide.

In the parable of the wheat and tares Jesus spoke of the two plants being allowed "to grow together until the harvest," when the tares would be bound into bundles and burned up (Matt. 13:30). In His explanation of that parable Jesus said, "Just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (vv. 40-42). The parable includes the truth that the harvest will bring the righteous into eternal blessing (v. 43), but the emphasis is clearly on judgment.

On the island of Patmos, the apostle John saw a vision of the harvest.

And I looked,” he said, “and behold, a white cloud, and sitting on the cloud was one like a son of man, having a golden crown on His head, and a sharp sickle in His hand. And another angel came out of the temple, crying out with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, ‘Put in your sickle and reap, because the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is ripe.’ And He who sat on the cloud swung His sickle over the earth; and the earth was reaped.

And another angel came out of the temple which is in heaven, and he also had a sharp sickle. And another angel, the one who has power over fire, came out from the altar; and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, saying, “Put in your sharp sickle, and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, because her grapes are ripe.” And the angel swung his sickle to the earth, and gathered the clusters from the vine of the earth, and threw them into the great wine press of the wrath of God. And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood came out from the wine press, up to the horses’ bridles, for a distance of two hundred miles. (Rev. 14:14-20)

Again, the unmistakable emphasis is one of judgment.

Jesus ministered compassionately and tirelessly because He could see the ultimate consummation of divine judgment toward which every person in the multitudes was headed who did not trust in Him. Paul said, “Therefore knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Cor. 5:11), and in another letter he reminded his readers of the vengeance of God (Rom. 12:19). In 2 Thessalonians he paints a vivid picture of God’s

judgment: “The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (1:7-9).

It is easy to lose awareness of the imminence and the inevitability of God’s judgment, but the Christian who loses sight of that judgment loses a major portion of his motive for witnessing.

Someone has written,

There is no way to describe hell. Nothing on earth can compare with it. No living person has any real idea of it. No madman in wildest flights of insanity ever beheld its horror. No man in delirium ever pictured a place so utterly terrible as this. No nightmare racing across a fevered mind ever produces a terror to match that of the mildest hell. No murder scene with splashed blood and oozing wound ever suggested a revulsion that could touch the border lands of hell.

Our Lord, however, knew the tragedy and anguish of a destiny of “unquenchable fire, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:43-44), and it grieved His heart that even one person should be there, because it is not His will “for any to perish” (2 Pet. 3:9). When He saw the crowds, He taught them and preached to them and healed them—all for the ultimate purpose that they might come to Him and escape **the harvest** of judgment they could not otherwise avoid.

His METHOD

but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest. (9:37b-38)

The primary problem that hindered Jesus' ministry as He taught, preached, and healed in Palestine is the primary problem that hinders it today: **the workers are few.**

These **workers** should not be confused with the angelic harvesters mentioned in 13:39 and 49. These are rather the *ergaten*, who are identified by the same term in 10:10 as the twelve. Nor are the *ergaten* sent into the vineyard (20:2) necessarily identified as harvesters. They work in the field headed for harvest; and that is what our Lord is calling the disciples to do.

Even as the Son of God, Jesus could not reach all the people that lived even in His own country or His own lifetime. The first part of His training method, therefore, was to give His disciples the insight that the need for the gospel to be brought to a world headed for judgment far surpasses the outreach of those who are seeking to minister it.

Who can reach the lost, hell-bound world of sinful, hurting people who need to hear and accept the gospel? Who will tell them of their plight and show them the way of escape? Who will share with them Jesus' love and compassion and power? Who will warn them of the false shepherds that lead them deeper and deeper into darkness and hopelessness?

In his own days on earth Christ's **workers** were **few**, and they are still few today. The first need in His ministry is for **workers**, and one of the most important things those workers must understand is that their numbers *are* few and that they can be increased only by God's provision and power.

After right motives are established in compassionate concern to reach the lost for Christ, God's people need to look at their world as Jesus looked out at the multitudes in Galilee and over the city of Jerusalem. We need to observe the people around us as Ezra observed his fellow Israelites on the way from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezra 8:15) and the way Nehemiah inspected the walls of Jerusalem before he began to rebuild them (Neh. 2:13).

The next step in Jesus' method is prayer. His disciples are to **beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.**

Christ's **workers** are to pray for more **workers**.

The Lord of the harvest is a title of God that represents His role as judge. **The Lord of the harvest** is the Judge of the unsaved who will stand before Him in the last day and be condemned to hell, and we are to **beseech** Him to send **workers** to lovingly warn them, so they may be a part of those harvested to eternal glory.

The Christian's first responsibility is not to go out and start working as soon as he sees a need but to come to **the Lord** in prayer. Waiting on the Lord is a crucial part of serving Him. Before the disciples had received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost they were not prepared to witness for Christ, and He therefore instructed them "not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, 'Which,' He said, 'you heard of from Me'" (Acts 1:4). Before they embarked on their ministry in "Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and even to the uttermost part of the earth," they were to stay where they were for a while. And in the upper room where they were staying, "with one mind [they] were continually devoting themselves to prayer" (v.14).

It is interesting and significant that Jesus did not command the disciples to pray for the lost, although that is certainly appropriate (cf. 1 Tim. 2:1-8). Their first prayer was to be for **the Lord of the Harvest to send out workers into His harvest**.

It is possible to pray regularly for the salvation of a loved one, a neighbor, a friend, or a fellow employee and to let our concern stop with our prayer. But when we earnestly pray for the Lord to *send* someone to those unsaved people, we cannot help becoming open to being that someone ourselves. It is possible to pray for someone's salvation while keeping them at arm's length. But when we sincerely **beseech the Lord** to send someone to witness to them, we place ourselves at His disposal to become one of His **workers** in that ministry.

The Messengers of the King (10:1)

And having summoned His twelve disciples, He gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. (10:1)

Those whom Jesus had called to pray for workers He then called to become workers. As they began to see the world as He sees it, looking out on lost humanity through their Lord's eyes and with His heart of compassion, they also began to see that they themselves were called to go out and warn that lost world of the coming harvest of judgment and to invite them into the Lord's kingdom.

Vital as it is, prayer is not all that is required. The believer who prays for God to send workers but is unwilling to go himself, prays insincerely and hypocritically. The Christian who genuinely prays for God to send witnesses is also willing to be a witness.

William Barclay reports that when Martin Luther became convinced that the biblical way of salvation was by God's grace working through man's faith in His Son, Jesus Christ, he began earnestly preaching and contending for this doctrine that became the hallmark of the Protestant Reformation. A friend of his was equally convinced of this truth, and the two men agreed that Luther would spend his time out in the world preaching, writing, and debating, while the friend would spend his time alone in a monastery upholding Luther and the cause of the Reformation in prayer. As Luther visited the friend from time to time and reported the difficulties and obstacles of the work, the friend would intensify his praying. One night the friend had a dream in which he saw a gigantic field that stretched over the whole earth. But only one lone figure was working in the field, and when he looked closer the man saw that the lone figure

was his dear friend Luther. When he woke up he immediately went to find Luther and tell him that God made clear to him through the dream that it was not enough simply to pray. He, too, must give himself directly to the work of spreading the good news of salvation. He did not forsake praying, but he set aside his pious solitude and began to labor beside Luther in the heat and dirt of battle.

Until this stage of His ministry, Jesus had ministered alone. He had the companionship of the twelve disciples and the company of vast multitudes who followed wherever He went, but none of the twelve, and certainly none in the multitudes, participated in His ministry except as an observer or recipient. After the imprisonment of John the Baptist, Jesus was God's sole worker in the great field of the world. Then He began the preliminary stages of commissioning those twelve to join Him as fellow workers.

The major thrust of Jesus' commissioning process begins in verse 5 of Matthew 10 and continues through the chapter as the Lord sets forth His foundational instructions for ministry. But in the first four verses Matthew gives three essentials of the commissioning. In verse 1 he tells of Jesus' initiation of the disciples and of the divine impact their ministry was to have on the world. In verses 2-4, which will be discussed in the next several chapters, we are given the disciples' identities.

THEIR INITIATION

And having summoned His twelve disciples, He gave them authority (10:1a)

The verb behind **having summoned** is *proskaleō*, a compound of *kaleō* (to call) and *pros* (toward, or to). It is an intense term that means to call someone to oneself in order to confront him face to face. It is used of God's calling the Gentiles to Himself through the gospel (Acts 2:39) and of His calling His chosen men and entrusting them with proclaiming the gospel (Acts 13:2; 16:10).

When Jesus **summoned His twelve disciples**, He was making more than a casual request. The writer's choice of verbs seems to imply that this summoning was connected to an official commissioning to the Lord's service. Here Matthew refers to the **twelve** as **disciples**, whereas in the next verse he calls them apostles. *Mathētēs (disciples)* refers to those who learn under the instruction of a master teacher. *Apostoloi* ("apostles," v.2) refers to qualified representatives who are sent out on a mission. During their training period, the twelve were learners and were primarily called **disciples**, but as they ventured forth themselves in obedience to Christ's commission and in His power, they were most often called apostles. They still had more to learn before they could be fully sent out to represent their Lord, and it is on their further learning that Jesus next concentrated His attention and effort.

There were four general phases in Jesus' training of the disciples to be apostles. The first two, already presented in previous chapters of the gospel, were their conversion and their initial calling to follow Him. From the many who came to trust in Him as Messiah and Lord early in His ministry, Jesus handpicked the **twelve** for special and unique service. He called them away from their former occupations and gave them a completely new vocation.

The third phase of their training could be called an internship, which they experienced as they lived with Jesus constantly for three years, to be taught both by His instruction and by His example. It is this phase that is highlighted in Matthew 10. From Mark's account (Mark 6:7) we learn that this involved their going out in pairs on short-term assignments to practice what their Lord had been teaching them. During this phase they were never far from Jesus, who closely monitored their progress; and the greatest lesson of this phase was that they were totally inadequate without Him. After such short periods of active service, the **twelve disciples** returned to Jesus for further teaching.

The fourth and final phase of the disciples' training began after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, when He returned to heaven and sent the Holy Spirit as the supernatural Helper who would be with them forever (Acts 1:8; 2:4; cf. John 14:16).

It is encouraging to realize that Jesus did not call those **twelve disciples** who became apostles on the basis of their innate worthiness or personal capabilities or faithfulness, but solely on the basis of what He

could make of them by His own power working through them. It is a mark of authenticity and honesty that the gospel writers, like all the other Scripture writers, make no effort to mask the faults and shortcomings of God's people, including those of their most outstanding leaders. During the disciples' three years of training under Jesus, we see few signs of maturity and reliability but many signs of pettiness and inadequacy. It is a marvelous insight into the grace of God toward us to see Christ dealing so lovingly and patiently with men who are so weak and unresponsive.

CHOSEN SOVEREIGNLY

Behind Jesus' training of the twelve are several foundational facts. First, these men were chosen sovereignly by God. None of the twelve initiated the idea of following Jesus and becoming His disciples, much less His apostles. It was entirely God's planning and doing. Mark tells us that Jesus "summoned those whom He Himself wanted" (3:13), and near the end of His earthly ministry Jesus reminded them, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you" (John 15:16). The men themselves were not consulted nor were any other men. Jesus' only consultation was with His heavenly Father. Like Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, and all the prophets, the **twelve disciples** were chosen by God's sovereign will and for His sovereign purpose, being foreordained to His service before the foundation of the world. That has always been God's way. He divinely chose Israel, He divinely chose His prophets and His apostles, and He divinely chooses those today who become the leaders of His own Body, the church. Acts 13:1-4 and 20:28 clearly teach that the Holy Spirit sovereignly places men in leadership in the church.

CHOSEN AFTER PRAYER

Second, the **twelve** were chosen after prayer. The men were Christ's choice, and His choice was His Father's choice. Jesus sought the Father's will in everything He did, doing absolutely nothing independently or on His own initiative (John 5:19, 30; 8:28). Jesus chose and called those whom He would disciple only after a long vigil of prayer. "And it was at this time that He went off to the mountain to pray," Luke tells us, "and He

spent the whole night in prayer to God” (Luke 6:12). It was only after day came that He called “His disciples to Him; and chose twelve of them, whom He also named as apostles” (v.13). He chose these twelve because they were His Father’s choice, the Father’s gift to the Son. “I manifested Thy name to the men whom Thou gavest Me out of the world,” Jesus later prayed; “Thine they were, and Thou gavest them to Me” (John 17:6). This same pattern of prayer in choosing servants of the Lord can be seen in Acts 13:1-4. Those were very special men, not because of who they were in themselves, but because they had been sovereignly chosen by God the Father to be **disciples** of God the Son.

CHOSEN TO BE PREPARED

Third, the **twelve** were chosen to be prepared. Even though they were converted and called, they were far from ready to serve the Lord. Training is an essential part of any work, including the Lord’s. The **disciples** left their nets, their crops, their tax collecting booths, and their other businesses; and for three years they walked with Jesus—watching, listening, observing, learning, and often misunderstanding.

One writer says of them,

They have no occupation, they have given up the pursuits in which they were engaged: their fishing, their tax gathering, and their agriculture. They carry on no business; they simply walk around and behind their leader, talking to each other or to Him, and when He speaks to the people who begin to gather, they listen just like everybody else. The only thing they do is go with Him from place to place. They are idle, and it begins to be a question of whether it is not doing harm and giving rise to reproach that twelve grown men are being kept idle for no apparent purpose and neglecting obvious duties in order to do so. (Herbert Lockyer, *All the*

Apostles of the Bible [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972], p. 13)

It must have looked like that to many of those who came to Jesus. It was easy to see what He was doing; but why were the twelve with Him? They did very little to help Him, and on more than one occasion they disagreed with and even tried to interfere with what He was doing.

Yet they were with Jesus for a purpose, and not a moment's time with Him was wasted, regardless of appearances, because their preparation was on a divine schedule. Jesus knew they needed to be taught and trained. They had to be trained before they could be sent. They had to learn as disciples before they could minister as apostles, and theirs was the unimaginable and unparalleled privilege of being trained by the Lord Himself. To every believer Jesus says, "Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me" (Matt. 11:29). No believer can grow in Christ apart from learning from Him through His Word. But the training of the **twelve disciples** was absolutely unique. In all of history, they alone were taught directly by the incarnate God, as they lived with Him inseparably for those three years.

Much can be learned from the classroom, from good books, and from personal experience. But spiritual growth comes best from close contact with a holy example. A consistently pure life that is patient, loving, reverent, and that has peace of heart and mind is an unmatched tutor for godly living. To hear a godly person talk to others and pray to God, to see him act and react, and to feel his heartbeat for the Lord is to be trained in the best of all schools.

The disciples were a humanly defective and inept group, but their Teacher was unsurpassed. His intention was not to teach them to be the best they could be in their own capacities and strength but to teach them to be what they could be through His provision and power.

One of the most obvious shortcomings of the disciples was their lack of spiritual understanding. They were called to evangelize the world for Christ, yet even far into their training they showed no perception of heavenly truth or of God's unfolding purpose and eternal plan for redeeming the world. They were spiritually alive because they had trusted

in Christ, but they had little spiritual perception or sensitivity. They were dense to spiritual things. They struggled to understand Jesus' parables nearly as much as the crowds did. When Jesus asked if they understood what He was teaching, they would often say, "Yes, Lord." But their subsequent words and actions invariably proved they did not understand all that the Lord taught. They were so dull that they did not even understand that they failed to understand. Added to their spiritual dullness were their many prejudices and preconceptions, which they were reluctant to forsake even in light of the Lord's specific teaching to the contrary.

When on one occasion Peter said to Jesus, "Explain the parable to us," Jesus replied, "Are you still lacking in understanding also?" (Matt. 15:15-16). When Jesus gave the disciples an object lesson in humility by personally washing their feet, Peter proudly refused. After Jesus told him that otherwise he would have no part in Him, Peter went to the other extreme, asking to be washed all over (John 13:5-9). By both responses Peter proved he had missed the meaning of what Jesus was doing and teaching.

When Jesus first began to tell the disciples of His coming death in Jerusalem, "Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You'"—to which Jesus replied, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's" (Matt. 16:21-23). When Jesus took His disciples aside to explain His imminent crucifixion—telling them of His predicted arrest, mocking, scourging, death, and resurrection—"they understood none of these things, and this saying was hidden from them, and they did not comprehend the things that were said" (Luke 18:31-34).

After Jesus was crucified, just as He had predicted, the disciples ignored that He had also predicted His resurrection, and they went despondently back to their fishing (John 21). Even after the Lord had appeared to them several times, proving His victory over the grave, they still did not understand the purpose of His suffering or death or resurrection—or what their role in His future ministry was to be.

Yet through all their misunderstandings, contradictions, pettiness, and failures, Jesus patiently continued to teach—repeating many of the essential truths again and again. Even during the time between His resurrection and ascension "He also presented Himself alive, after His

suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).

Closely related to the disciples’ spiritual dullness was their lack of humility. Often they failed to understand what Jesus said simply because they assumed they already knew. They were proud, jealous, and envious men who were frequently more concerned about their own welfare and prestige than about Jesus’ teaching or work or about His own human welfare or divine glory.

After Jesus and His disciples arrived in Capernaum one day, He asked them, “What were you discussing on the way? But they kept silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest” (Mark 9:33-34). Jesus had just told them again of His coming arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection (v.31), yet they could think only of their personal rankings in the kingdom! Jesus rebuked them by saying, “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all” (v.35).

A short while later the contest over greatness became even more intense. Probably at the prompting of her sons, the mother of James and John came to Jesus and asked, “Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left” (Matt. 20:20-21). Again Jesus’ rebuke was sharp, and it was addressed more to the two disciples than to their mother. He said, “You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” With typical self-confidence they replied, “We are able” (v.22). Even at this late date in Jesus’ ministry they did not fully comprehend that the cup He was about to drink was the crucifixion; but even had they known, their answer would doubtlessly have been the same. As Jesus went on to tell them, their answer was correct, but in a far different way and degree than they imagined. James would be martyred for His Lord, and John would be exiled for life, but not because of their own bravery or strength.

At this point the other ten disciples “became indignant with the two brothers” (v. 24), but from no better motive. They were simply angered that James and John presumed to claim the high places they themselves coveted. Jesus therefore said to all of them, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall

be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (vv. 25-28).

Jesus not only corrected the disciples’ wrong thinking and attitudes by teaching them again the principles of His kingdom, but He gave them object lessons of those principles. On one occasion He picked up a little child and placed it before them as the model of true humility (Mark 9:36), and when He wanted them to comprehend what true servanthood is like, He washed their feet Himself (John 13:5-15).

A third weakness that plagued the disciples was lack of faith. They had trusted Jesus for salvation, but they struggled to trust in His truth, His goodness, or His power. Repeatedly Jesus referred to them—His select inner circle—as men of “little faith.” When they became terrified for their lives during the storm at sea, He said, “Why are you so timid? How is it that you have no faith?” (Mark 4:40). Even after His resurrection, “He reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who had seen Him after He had risen” (Mark 16:14). The disciples had witnessed virtually every miracle the Lord had performed during His three years of ministry, including at least two miracles of raising the dead. Yet they did not believe the reports of His own resurrection any more than they had believed His predictions of it.

A fourth problem with the disciples was lack of commitment. Their lack of humility and self-understanding made them quick to promise they would never leave or forsake Him, but their lack of faith bred weak commitment, which rendered them just as quick to fail the test of their promises. When the time of real testing came, Judas betrayed Jesus, Peter denied Him, and the other ten were frightened away. In the beginning, when the cost was small, the disciples “left everything and followed Him” (Luke 5:11); but when they faced the swords and clubs of the soldiers in the garden, “they all left Him and fled” (Mark 14:50).

Only a few hours earlier Peter had confidently boasted, “Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death!” (Luke 22:33), and Matthew reports that “all the disciples said the same thing too” (26:35). But Jesus knew them infinitely better than they knew themselves, and He said to Peter, “The cock will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me” (Luke 22:34). Jesus had already warned Peter of Satan’s desire to sift him like wheat and assured him He had prayed that his faith would not fail (vv. 31-32).

A fifth frailty of the disciples was lack of power. As with the other problems, however, they themselves were unwilling to admit it. In themselves they were impotent and helpless, yet even after repeated failures they continued to believe they were strong and self-sufficient. When a certain man brought his son to the disciples for healing, they self-confidently tried but “could not cure him” (Matt. 17:16). Before Jesus Himself healed the boy, He said, “O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?” (v. 17). When the disciples asked Jesus privately why they were unsuccessful, He answered, “Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible to you” (vv. 19-20). The day came when the disciples had such power of faith, but it was only after they were filled with the Lord’s own Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8; 2:4; cf. John 20:22).

Jesus dealt with His disciples’ lack of understanding by continuing patiently to teach them. He dealt with their lack of humility by demonstrating humility. He dealt with their lack of faith by demonstrating the power of God. He dealt with their lack of commitment by praying for them. After He had given them several warnings of the persecutions they would face for His sake (John 15:18-21; 16:1-4, 22, 32-33), He lifted “up His eyes to heaven” and prayed on their behalf the most beautiful prayer ever uttered (17:1-26). And He dealt with their lack of power by sending them His own Holy Spirit as their divine Helper (John 14:16; 16:7, 13-15).

It is therefore not surprising that the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were amazed at the preaching and healing power of Peter and John, whom they knew to be “uneducated and untrained men.” It was at this point the people “began to recognize them as having been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). They were recognized as Jesus’ disciples because they now spoke and acted like Jesus. They had become living mirrors of their Lord, and that is why believers were eventually called Christians, which means “little Christs.” The disciples became living illustrations of the axiom that “everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). Jesus had trained them well, and now they went out and lived like their Master. What they had learned by being with Christ and had received from Him through His Spirit not only had transformed their lives but would, through them, transform the world.

For three years they lived with this Man among men who never uttered a word that was not true, who never sinned in thought or deed, who never lost His temper, and who was never angry except in righteous indignation over evil. Though He was the Son of God, He never followed His own will or took glory for Himself. He cared nothing for His own welfare but everything for the welfare of others, literally wearing Himself out with fatigue in their service. He healed the sick, cleansed the demon-possessed, and raised the dead; and He loved anybody and everybody. Now He appointed the “twelve, that they might be with Him” (Mark 3:14) in order that they might become like Him. And they did.

CHOSEN TO BE SENT

Not only were the twelve disciples chosen sovereignly, chosen with prayer, and chosen for training, but they were also chosen to be sent. The disciples (“those who learn”) were trained to become apostles (“those who are sent”).

Jesus calls all disciples in order to send them out. There were only twelve apostles (Matthias was later added to replace Judas, and Paul was a unique addition beyond the twelve) who were the official “sent ones” of the early church and who one day will “sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28). But every disciple of Jesus Christ is called to make other disciples (Matt. 28:19-20). We are all trained to be sent.

THEIR IMPACT

He gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. (10:1b)

Exousia (**authority**) is from a verb that means “it is lawful,” and it therefore refers to a right or power that is legitimately delegated. Jesus granted the twelve disciples God’s divine **authority** to do exactly what He Himself had been doing (see 4:23; 9:35). To do what He did would

demonstrate they were sent by Him, just as what He did demonstrated He was sent by the Father. Throughout the book of Acts we see the disciples doing the very things for which Jesus here gives them **authority**.

The apostles did indeed **cast... out many unclean spirits and heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness**. Peter and John healed the lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple (Acts 3:2-8). “At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people, . . . And also the people from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits; and they were all being healed” (5:12, 16; cf. 8:6-7). To the man in Lystra who was “without strength in his feet, lame from his mother’s womb, who had never walked,” Paul said, “Stand upright on your feet.” And he leaped up and began to walk” (14:8-10). While Paul was stranded on the island of Malta, he healed the father of Publius, the leading man of the island, “and after this had happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to him and getting cured” (28:8-9).

The apostles manifested the kind of kingdom power that their Lord had manifested, and by their faithful obedience they turned Jerusalem and then the world upside down (cf. Acts 17:6). Jesus promised that they would do “greater works” (in extent, not power) and His words began to be fulfilled.

The following story fell into my hands from an unknown source:

One night in the East End of London a young doctor was turning out the lights of a mission hall in which he was working. He found a ragged boy hiding in a dark corner, where he begged to be allowed to sleep. The doctor took the homeless boy to his own room, fed him and tried to get his story. He learned that the boy was living in a coal bin with a number of other boys. He persuaded the boy to show him where these boys were. They went through narrow alleys and finally came to a hole in the wall of a factory. “Look in there,” he said. The doctor struck a match and looked around, crawling into the cellar. Finally

he found thirteen boys with only bits of old burlap to protect them from the cold. One lad was clasping to him a four-year-old brother. All were sound asleep. The doctor caught a vision then and there of service for his Lord. He cared for those boys and started the Bernardo Homes for neglected children. At the time of the death of Dr. Bernardo, the newspapers reported that he had taken, and surrounded with a Christian atmosphere, more than 80,000 homeless boys and girls. Hundreds of them became fine Christian citizens. O that we might have eyes to see the need about us! Thousands will drift into a Christless eternity because Christians do not take Christ to them.

The Master's Men
—part 1
Peter: A Lesson in
Leadership (10:2a)

Now the names of the twelve apostles are these: The first, Simon, who is called Peter, (10:2a)

In his book *Quiet Talks on Service*, S. D. Gordon gives an imaginary account of Jesus' return to heaven after His ascension. As the angel Gabriel greets Jesus he asks, "Master, You died for the world, did You not?" to which the Lord replies, "Yes." "You must have suffered much," the angel says; and again Jesus answers, "Yes." "Do they all know that you died for them?" Gabriel continues. "No. Only a few in Palestine know about it so far," Jesus says. "Well, then, what is Your plan for telling the rest of the world that You shed Your blood for them?" Jesus responds, "Well, I asked Peter and James and John and Andrew and a few others if they would make it the business of their lives to tell others. And then the ones that they tell could tell others, and they in turn could tell still others, and finally it would reach the farthest corner of the earth and all would know the thrill and power of the gospel." "But suppose Peter fails? And suppose after a while John just doesn't tell anyone? And what if James and Andrew are ashamed or afraid? Then what?" Gabriel asks. "I have no other plans," Jesus is said to have answered; "I am counting entirely on them" (cited in Herbert Lockyer, *All the Apostles of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972], p. 31).

Though it is a fantasy, that story dramatizes a great truth about the gospel. The only plan the Lord has for reaching the world is for those who know Him to witness about Him to others. The life-changing power of the gospel is in the atoning death of Jesus Christ and can be applied in a life

only through the convicting and recreative work of the Holy Spirit. But the declaration of the gospel is in the hands of those who have already experienced the new life and are willing to tell of it to others.

Society routinely sets standards of qualification for a myriad of enterprises. Businesses establish qualifications for their employees, and the more responsible the job, the higher the qualifications. Advertisements for jobs often list requirements such as self-motivation, ability to work under pressure, minimum typing speed, several years' work experience, and willingness to travel. A person must also qualify in order to buy a house or car, get a credit card, enroll in college, or receive a driver's license.

Scripture makes clear that God's standards for His people, especially for the leaders who are to model those standards for His people, are extremely high (1 Tim. 3:1-12; Titus 1:6-9; 2 Pet. 3:14). The standard for every believer, in fact, is nothing less than perfection: "You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect," Jesus says (Matt. 5:48). Yet Scripture makes equally clear that no person *in himself* can meet the least of God's standards. Even after he became an apostle, Paul confessed of himself: "I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh" (Rom. 7:18). In the same epistle he says of mankind in general, "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one" (3:10-12).

The greatness of God's grace is seen in His choosing the undeserving to be His people and the unqualified to do His work. It should be a marvelous encouragement to every believer to know that, just as Elijah (James 5:17), the apostles had a nature like ours. Because there was no other way, God chose to bestow sanctifying grace on those who believe in His Son and by His own power to transform them into men and women of great usefulness.

We are tempted to become discouraged and disheartened when our spiritual life and witness suffer because of our sins and failures. Satan attempts to convince us that those shortcomings render us useless to God; but His use of the apostles testifies to the opposite. They did not lead the church in turning the world upside down because they were extraordinarily talented or naturally gifted, but because—in spite of their human

limitations and failures—they surrendered themselves to God, whose power is perfected in man's weakness (2 Cor. 12:9).

That has always been God's way, since He has never had anything but imperfect and sinful men through whom to work. Soon after God delivered Noah and his family through the Flood, Noah became drunk and acted indecently. Abraham, the father of the faithful, doubted God, lied about his wife, and committed adultery with her maid. Isaac told a similar lie about his wife when he thought his life was in danger. Jacob took advantage of his brother Esau's weakness and extorted the birthright from him. Moses was a murderer, and in pride he struck the rock instead of speaking to it as God had instructed. His brother, Aaron, the first high priest, led Israel in erecting and worshiping the golden calf at the very time Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the law from God. Joshua disobeyed the Lord by making a treaty with the Gibeonites instead of destroying them. Gideon had little confidence in himself and even less in God's plan and power. Samson was repeatedly beguiled by Delilah because of his great lust for her. David committed adultery and murder, was an almost total failure as a father, and was not allowed to build the Temple because he was a man of blood. Elijah stood fearlessly before 850 false prophets but cowered before one woman, Jezebel. Ezekiel was brash, crusty, and quick to speak his mind. Jonah defied God's call to preach to the Ninevites and resented His grace when they were converted through his preaching.

Apart from the brief ministry of His own Son, the history of God's work on earth is the history of His using the unqualified. The twelve disciples who became apostles were no exception. Even from the human standpoint they had few characteristics or abilities that qualified them for leadership and service. Yet God used those men, just as He did Noah, Abraham, and the others, in marvelous ways to do His work.

Writing to the factious, worldly Corinthians, Paul insisted that neither he nor Apollos were anything in themselves. "What then is Apollos?" he asks. "And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth" (1 Cor. 3:5-7).

The New Testament does not teach Christian leaders to follow the individual methods or styles of the apostles. It does not explain their methods or give details of their specific strategies for evangelism or other ministry. The focus of apostolic power in the New Testament is always on the Lord. As with the lowliest believer, the apostles' power and effectiveness were exclusively the work of the Holy Spirit.

The story is told that after a famous artist finished his painting of the Last Supper he asked a friend to comment on the work. When the friend remarked that the cups were the most magnificent parts of the entire painting, the artist was dumbfounded. He picked up his brush and painted over every cup, explaining, "I failed. I wanted you to see Christ, but you only noticed the cups." It is a wonderful thing to be a vessel fit for the Master's use, but the vessel is not the source of spiritual power and should never be the focus of attention.

Emphasizing the methods and practices of famous and visibly successful Christian leaders inevitably weakens the church, and at no time in history has that misguided emphasis been more dominant than it is in much of the church today. When men are elevated, Christ is lowered; and when men's power and resources are relied on, Christ's work is weakened.

Someone has commented that a great writer can take a worthless piece of paper, write a poem on it and instantly make it extremely valuable. A famous artist can take a piece of canvas worth fifty cents and by painting a picture on it make it priceless. A wealthy man can sign his name to a worthless piece of paper and make it worth a million dollars. In an infinitely greater way Jesus Christ can take a worthless, corrupted, and repulsive life and transform it into a righteous child of God and a useful worker in His kingdom.

A church in Strasbourg, France, was severely damaged by bombs during World War II. Although a beloved statue of Christ had survived, a ceiling beam had fallen across the arms and broken them off. A local sculptor offered to restore the statue without charge, but the townspeople decided to leave it as it was. Without hands it would be a continuing reminder to them that God does His work through His people, His earthly hands.

Jesus Christ chooses human hands—and minds and arms and feet—as the instruments of His eternal work of redemption. Those who are not offended by His demands for discipleship and who, like the apostles, give

their imperfect and flawed lives to Him as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1), become His means for drawing all men to Himself.

Jesus did not intend to proclaim the kingdom alone. His own ministry lasted but three years and did not even extend to all of Palestine. From the earliest part of His ministry He began training the twelve who would continue His work. It was in this training of the twelve that the Lord began the process Paul later admonished Timothy to follow: “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2).

Jesus chose only **twelve** men to be His **apostles**, a seemingly insignificant number for the task ahead. They would be pitted not only against the evil, unbelieving system of the world but against Satan and his demon system.

History is full of amazing exploits by a few men against great odds. Sometimes the few have been victorious, and often they have gone down in tragic defeat. In either case they are remembered and admired for their courage. Against supernatural enemies, however, man can never be successful in his own power, no matter how great his courage. On the other hand, when God empowers His people, no obstacle or enemy can withstand them.

Shamgar, a judge of Israel, killed 600 men with an ox goad. With only 300 men filtered from an original force of 32,000, Gideon, another judge, routed an uncountable number of Midianites and Amalekites, whom the Lord caused to slaughter each other in panic. Still another judge, Samson, slaughtered 1,000 Philistines with only the jawbone of a donkey as a weapon. Jonathan and his armor bearer, who was probably only a boy, killed twenty armed Philistines who were waiting for them at the top of a hill; and that victory led to the defeat of the entire Philistine army by Israelites armed only with farm implements. In one day Elijah singlehandedly slaughtered 850 pagan prophets on Mount Carmel.

The Lord can display His divine power through a handful of men, or even one man, just as surely as through a multitude—so the small number of the apostles was no hindrance to the work of the gospel.

Henry Drummond, the Scottish author and evangelist who wrote the well-known booklet *The Greatest Thing in the World*, was once invited to speak to an exclusive men’s club in London. He began his talk with a provocative analogy that those men easily understood: “Gentlemen, the

entrance fee into the kingdom of heaven is nothing; however, the annual subscription is everything.”

Because Jesus Christ paid the total price for salvation, it costs nothing to *become* His disciple. But to *follow* Him as a faithful disciple costs everything we have. We are not only saved by Christ’s blood but are bought with it and therefore belong totally to Him (1 Cor. 6:19-20; 7:23).

The twelve men Jesus called as disciples and transformed into apostles were willing to pay everything. They turned their backs on their occupations, their lifestyles, their homes, their own plans and aspirations. They committed themselves totally to following Jesus Christ, wherever that would lead and whatever that would cost.

They were a committed few among the unbelieving many. From early in His ministry, and especially after He began performing miracles, Jesus never lacked for an audience. The multitudes followed Him wherever He went, so much so that He often had difficulty being alone by Himself or with the twelve. The crowds were attracted by the ring of authority in His voice, by the uniqueness of His message, by the wonder of His miracles, and by His concern for common people and for the sick, diseased, and sinful.

In the broadest sense they were disciples (*mathētēs*), which has the root meaning of follower or learner. But that term does not necessarily carry the idea of commitment, as is clear from several gospel accounts. The morning after Jesus fed the five thousand (plus women and children), many of the people who were fed followed Him back to Capernaum. When He saw them, Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled” (John 6:26). A short while later He said to the same group, “You have seen Me, and yet do not believe” (v. 36). Among this crowd were “many... of His disciples” (v. 60) who were disturbed when they heard Jesus say, “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (vv. 54). After Jesus further explained what He meant, they were even more offended, and “as a result of this many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore” (v. 66). Those disciples were only observers and hearers who had no desire to trust and follow the Lord.

Those disciples accepted Jesus as a great teacher and wonder worker, but only on the physical level. They were quite willing for Him to

heal their bodies and fill their stomachs, but they did not want Him to cleanse their sins, recreate their hearts, and transform their lives. They gladly came to Him for the “food which perishes,” but they had no appetite for “the food which endures to eternal life” (John 6:27).

Jesus’ teaching was not “difficult” (v. 60) because it was hard to understand but because it was hard to accept. The people knew that Jesus was not talking of eating and drinking His physical body and blood but of accepting everything that He was, said, and did. His statement was difficult for them to accept for the very reason that they *did* understand it.

As in Jesus’ time and throughout history, false disciples today are willing to accept whatever of the gospel fits their personal inclinations and life-styles. They are willing to be identified as Christians, belong to a church, be active in its work, and give money to its support. But they have no intention of giving themselves to Jesus Christ as Lord and Master. When such a demand is made of them, or even suggested, they vanish as quickly and permanently as those disciples at Capernaum.

Jesus’ difficult teachings offended them and caused them “to stumble” (John 6:61). “Stumble” translates *skandalizō*, which means to put up a snare or stumbling block, and is the term from which we get *scandal*. The original meaning pertained to a trap held up by a stick. When an animal grabbed food that was attached to the stick, the stick would fall, causing the trap to capture or kill the animal. The offended disciples at Capernaum understood clearly that to accept Christ’s demand to eat His flesh and drink His blood in order to receive eternal life meant to give up their old life—which they would not relinquish even for heaven. Consequently, they had nothing more to do with Jesus.

After the crowd left, Jesus asked the disciples, “You do not want to go away also, do you?” (v. 67). He “knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him” (v. 64), but He wanted to make sure that the twelve realized in their own minds the cost of true discipleship. Peter replied for the group, saying, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God” (vv. 68-69).

Except for Judas, the twelve decided to eat Christ’s flesh and drink His blood, whatever the cost. They had no idea of the particulars of the cost, but they placed themselves in the Lord’s hands, confident that in Him, and only in Him, was eternal life and everything else of any value.

The twelve men Jesus chose as His apostles had in their hands the full responsibility for initially taking the gospel to the rest of the world. The church was “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone” (Eph. 2:20). Jesus promised them, “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you” (John 14:26). Through the Holy Spirit the apostles received God’s divine revelation and were the ones responsible for writing most of the New Testament. It was therefore to “the apostles’ teaching” to which the true and faithful church has always devoted itself, beginning in Jerusalem immediately after Pentecost (Acts 2:42). Through them the doctrine of the New Covenant was established, explained, and proclaimed.

The apostles not only were the channels of Christian theology and evangelism but were also the first examples of godly, virtuous living for the church to follow. God confirmed their authority as true apostles “by signs and wonders and miracles” (2 Cor. 12:12); and as “His holy apostles” (Eph. 3:5) they received, taught, recorded, and exemplified the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the third phase of the disciples’ training under Jesus was what might be called their internship, which began immediately after their conversion and calling and preceded their final commissioning and sending after His ascension (Acts 1:8). It is this third phase of training that occupies Matthew in chapter 10. By this time the disciples had been under Jesus’ instruction for perhaps eighteen months, but they had not participated directly in the ministry. Until now they had only been observers and learners. Now they began to have direct involvement as the Lord sent them out two by two (see Mark 6:7) to try their wings in the work for which He had given them authority.

The apostles were essential for the future of the Christian faith, because they were the only ones called and empowered to build the foundation of God’s only plan for telling the world of redemption through His Son. It was time for them to be more than mere hearers and observers, so they were given “authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness” (10:1). But their first responsibility was to “preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (v. 7), for which message their miraculous works would be divine authenticating signs. As Nicodemus acknowledged regarding Jesus,

“Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him” (John 3:2).

“How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” asks the writer of Hebrews. “After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will” (Heb. 2:3-4). The Lord Jesus Christ was the first preacher of the gospel, and the apostles (“those who heard”) confirmed what He preached, and God the Father confirmed their testimony by the divinely empowered “signs and wonders . . . various miracles and . . . gifts of the Holy Spirit” that accompanied their preaching. The word of the apostles was miraculously attested as they laid down the foundation for the church.

The apostles were ordinary men. As far as we know, the only one who was materially prosperous was Matthew, who gained his wealth by legally but unethically extorting taxes for Rome. None of the twelve was highly educated or had prominent social, political, or religious status. Details about some of them remain unknown to us today, except for their names, because neither Scripture nor secular history has much to say about them.

Yet there has never been a task in the history of the world equal to that of those common men whom the Lord chose to be His first agents of ministry in setting in motion the advancement of the kingdom of God on earth. They had the monumental assignment of finishing the foundation work of the church that the Lord Himself had begun. Luke mentions this transition of responsibility in the introductory words of Acts: “The first account [i.e., the gospel of Luke] I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. To these He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God” (1:1-3).

A number of truths about the apostles can be learned simply from the scriptural listings of their names. First of all, in the four New Testament lists of the apostles (Matt. 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:14-16; and Acts 1:13; cf. v. 26), Peter is always named first. In Matthew 10:2 **the first** does not refer to the order of selection, because Jesus called Andrew,

Peter's brother, before He called Peter (John 1:40-42). In this context, *prōtos* (**first**) indicates foremost in rank. The apostles were equal in their divine commission, authority, and power; and one day they will sit on equal thrones as they judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28). But in terms of *junction*, Peter was **the first**, the foremost member of the twelve. *Prōtos* is used with the same meaning in 1 Timothy 1:15, where Paul speaks of himself as the "foremost of all" sinners. In Revelation 1:17, Christ speaks of Himself as "the first [*prōtos*] and the last." No group can function properly without a leader, and **Peter** was the leading member of the twelve from the beginning.

Second, all four lists of the apostles are divided into the same three subgroups. The first group includes Peter, Andrew, James, and John; the second includes Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, and Matthew; and the third includes James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot. The names are in different orders within the groups, but they always include the same four names, and the first name in each group is always the same, suggesting that each group had its own identity and leader. The first group includes those Jesus called first (though not in the individual order), the second includes those He called next, and the third group those He called last.

We know a great deal about the men in the first group, much less about those in the second, and almost nothing about those in the third—except for Judas, who betrayed Jesus, committed suicide, and was replaced by Matthias just before Pentecost (Acts 1:26). There is not only a decreasing amount of information about the members of each group but also a decreasing intimacy with Jesus. The first four constituted Jesus' inner circle of disciples; and of those four, Peter, James, and John were especially close to Him. Little is said about His direct instruction or work with the second group, and almost nothing about close contact with the third. He loved all the apostles equally, empowered them equally, and promised them equal glory; but because of the physical limitations common to all men, He was not able to give them equal attention. It is impossible for any leader to be equally close to everyone with whom he works. By necessity he will spend more time with and place more responsibility on certain people who are particularly capable and trustworthy.

The first group included two sets of brothers, Peter and Andrew and James and John, all of whom were fishermen. Matthew was a tax collector, but we know nothing of the occupations of any of the other seven. The two sets of brothers were acquainted even before Jesus called them, because they fished near each other on the Sea of Galilee (see Matt. 4:18-21).

The temperaments of the apostles about whom we know the most were very much different. Peter, for example, was impulsive, a natural leader, and a man of action. Almost invariably he was the first to react to something that was said or done by saying or doing something himself. John, on the other hand, appears to have become quiet and pensive under Christ's tutelage. In the first twelve chapters of Acts we read of Peter and John working closely together during the early days of the church. It must have been a helpful learning experience for both of them, with Peter anxious to charge ahead and John wanting to think things over first. Peter did all the preaching. Men of equal status and office and even of similar giftedness may have different functions relative to the uniqueness of their gifts.

Thomas was clearly the most skeptical of the twelve (John 20:25), and Simon the Zealot's very name indicates he was a radical Jewish revolutionary, dedicated to driving out the Roman oppressor. Before he met Christ he doubtlessly would have willingly plunged a knife into the heart of Matthew, a traitorous collaborator with Rome.

SIMON PETER

The first, Simon, who is called Peter, (10:2a)

All of the twelve, including Judas, were integral parts of the Lord's plan. But **Peter** was by far the central figure, both during the three years of Jesus' earthly ministry and during the early years of the church after Pentecost. Jesus spent more time with Peter than with any of the others, partly because Peter was constantly at the Lord's side. He was never far from Jesus and was continually asking Him questions, giving advice, and

even giving commands. Apart from that of Jesus, no name is mentioned more often in the New Testament than Peter's. No other person speaks as often or is spoken to as often. No disciple was reproved as often or as severely as Peter, and only he was presumptuous enough to reprove the Lord. No other disciple so boldly confessed Christ or so boldly denied Him. No other disciple was so praised and blessed by Jesus, and yet no other did He call Satan.

How could Jesus take such an ambivalent, inconsistent, and self-centered man and make him into **the first**—the *prōtos*—of the apostles? From the gospel record we can discern at least three instructive elements that were instrumental in the Lord's preparation of Peter: the right raw material, the right experience, and the right lessons.

THE RIGHT RAW MATERIAL

Peter had the right raw material from which Jesus could fashion the sort of leader He intended Peter to be. Peter was a big beginning; he had potential. But while he was in control of his own life, his beginnings never got further than that and his potential was not always easy to see.

But one of Peter's qualifications for leadership is seen in his continually asking questions of Jesus. He always wanted to know the what, when, where, and why of everything the Lord said and did. Many of his questions were superficial and immature, but they reflected a genuine concern about Jesus and His work. A person who does not ask questions has little chance for success as a leader, because he has no desire or willingness to inquire about what he does not understand. When the other disciples failed to understand something, they appear to have been more likely to keep quiet or simply discuss their doubts and questions among themselves. Peter, on the other hand, was never reluctant to ask Jesus about whatever was on his mind.

When Peter did not understand what Jesus meant when He said that it is "not what enters into the mouth [that] defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth," he asked, "Explain the parable to us" (Matt. 15:11, 15). When he was concerned about the reward he and his fellow disciples would get for leaving all and following Jesus, he did not hesitate asking about it (Matt. 19:27). Peter wondered about the fig tree that Jesus caused to wither (Mark 11:21) and, with James, John, and Andrew, he

asked Jesus to explain when and how the Temple would be destroyed (Mark 13:4). After Peter was told that he would be a martyr for the Lord, he asked about John's fate: "Lord, and what about this man?" (John 21:21). Peter's questions seldom received the answer he expected, because they usually were self-centered or completely missed the primary truth Jesus was explaining. But the Lord used even his poor questions to patiently train him in leadership. Peter's questions, immature as many of them were, gave the Lord an opportunity to help him grow.

Second, Peter showed initiative, another necessary ingredient of leadership. Just as he was usually the first to ask Jesus questions, he was also usually the first to respond to questions Jesus asked. When the Lord asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter immediately replied, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:15-16). When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Peter therefore having a sword, drew it, and struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear" (John 18:10). Even though his actions were often misguided, Peter was ready to respond in what he thought was Christ's behalf.

Third, Peter positioned himself in the middle of the activity. He was a natural participant, never content to be on the sidelines. He stayed as close to Jesus as possible and wanted to be a part of everything that happened. Even when he denied the Lord, he was at least as near to Jesus as he could be, whereas all the other disciples were nowhere to be found. When they were told of Jesus' resurrection, Peter reached the tomb after John only because John was a better runner (John 20:4). Peter was always there.

The bold fisherman was a native of Bethsaida and later moved to Capernaum, where he and his father, John (or Jonas), and brother, Andrew, carried on their trade. Because he had a mother-in-law, we know that Peter was married when Jesus called him (Matt. 8:14), and from Paul's comments in 1 Corinthians 9:5, it is likely that Peter's wife traveled with him throughout his apostolic ministry.

Even Peter's names give insight into his character. He was given the common name Simon by his parents, but Jesus changed his name to Peter (Cephas in Aramaic) which means stone (Matt. 16:18). By nature Peter was vacillating and unstable, and when the Lord named him Peter, the other disciples doubtlessly had great reservations about the

appropriateness of his new name. But the new name was perhaps a gentle and encouraging reminder to Simon of the kind of man Jesus called him to become.

Peter is usually referred to as Simon when the purpose is simply to identify him or something related to him—such as his house or mother-in-law (Mark 1:29-30), his boat (Luke 5:3), or his fishing partners (Luke 5:10). He is also referred to as Simon whenever he is reprimanded for sin or displays special weakness, as when he questioned Jesus' advice to go "out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch" (Luke 5:4). When Jesus came back from prayer in the garden and found the disciples sleeping, He said, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour?" (Mark 14:37). After the resurrection Peter disobediently returned to his fishing, and when the Lord confronted him three times about his faithfulness, each time He addressed him as Simon (John 21:15-17). He used his old name to point out that he was acting like his old self.

In John's gospel Peter is called by both names together (Simon Peter) some seventeen times. Perhaps because John knew Peter so well he used the two names to depict both the old and the new characteristics of his friend, which were often intermixed and difficult to distinguish.

THE RIGHT EXPERIENCES

A second element in preparing for leadership is having right experiences. The Lord brought into Peter's life all the experiences necessary to develop his leadership ability.

First of all, Jesus gave Peter wondrous revelations. When Peter first confessed that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus explained to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:16-17). When many of Jesus' followers forsook Him because of His teaching about the cost of discipleship, using the figure of eating His flesh and drinking His blood, the Lord asked the twelve, "You do not want to go away also, do you?" Peter's response on that occasion seems also to have been inspired of God as he said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life." (John 6:66-68).

Jesus was transforming Peter by letting him know that God wanted to use his mouth to proclaim the great delivering truth of the gospel. One

day he would stand up boldly and say, “Men of Judea, and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give heed to my words” (Acts 2:14). And one day he would take a pen and write God’s revelation in the form of two New Testament epistles.

Second, Peter was given great honor and reward. After Jesus explained to Peter that the truth of his confession was revealed to him by the Father, He said, “I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:18). The Lord used Peter to preach the great sermon at Pentecost to the Jews assembled there from all over the world, and He used Peter to bring the gospel to Cornelius, the first Gentile convert. Peter unlocked the doors of the gospel to both the Jews and the Gentiles.

All of the apostles opened the door to the kingdom as they preached the gospel of salvation, and every time any man of God preaches Christ he, too, unlocks those kingdom doors to let men in.

Third, Peter experienced great rebuke. A short while after Jesus honored Peter by the declaration just mentioned above, Peter himself proved that our Lord’s reference could not have been to him, since he was then anything but a solid foundation on which Christ could build His church. Perhaps feeling proud and overconfident as the leading disciple, he demonstrated that his mouth could be used by Satan as well as by God. When the Lord “began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day,... Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You’” But his severe rebuke of Jesus brought an even more severe rebuke *from* Jesus: “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s” (Matt. 16:21-23).

A great danger of leadership is not knowing its limits. Many dictators and demagogues were once capable public servants, but great honor and power caused them to believe the right of leadership lay in themselves rather than in their privileged office. When Peter began elevating his own position and understanding, he found himself serving

Satan rather than God. Great potential for being used by God also brings great potential for being used by Satan.

Fourth, Peter experienced what might be called great rejection, not *by* Jesus but *of* Him. Peter's extreme self-confidence again caused him to fail Jesus exactly at the point where he thought he was strongest. Just as confidence in his own wisdom resulted in his rebuke by Jesus, his confidence in his own dependability resulted in his rejection of Jesus. When Jesus predicted that all the disciples would fall away when He was arrested, Peter again contradicted Him, asserting, "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away." When Jesus went on to say that Peter's falling away would occur that very night and would, in fact, happen three times, Peter protested even more strongly: "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You." Following his lead, "all the disciples said the same thing too." Jesus, of course, again proved right and Peter again proved wrong. While he warmed himself in the courtyard of the high priest, Peter not only denied the Lord three times, but progressively denied Him more vehemently (Matt. 26:31-35, 69-75).

Fifth, Peter experienced a great recommissioning. When Jesus confronted him with the lack of love, Peter assured the Lord three times that he did indeed love Him, and Jesus three times reinstated him and charged him to care for His flock. Jesus had not given up on Peter. He reassured His faltering disciple that his calling still stood and commanded him again just as He had in the beginning, "Follow Me!" (John 21:15-19).

THE RIGHT ATTITUDES

A third element in Jesus' training of Peter was teaching him the principles of godly leadership. First of all, because leaders can easily become domineering, they have a special need to learn submission. When the Capernaum tax collectors demanded a two-drachma Temple tax from Jesus, He commanded Peter to go and catch a fish, in whose mouth would be a stater, exactly enough to pay the tax for both Jesus and Peter (Matt. 17:24-27). From that experience Peter learned a lesson not only in submitting to Jesus but to human authorities. In his first letter he wrote, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such

is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. . . . Honor all men; love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king” (1 Pet. 2:13-15, 17).

Second, Peter needed to learn restraint, of which he needed a double portion. As already mentioned, when the Roman soldiers came with the officers of the chief priests and the Pharisees to arrest Jesus in the garden, Peter drew his sword and began to fight—even though the Roman cohort alone may have numbered 500 or more men. Jesus told Peter to put away his sword and to let God’s divine plan take its course (John 18:10-11).

Third, Peter needed to learn humility; and again he needed a double portion. Only a few hours after he proudly boasted, “Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away,” Peter denied the Lord three times—although he was in little, if any, danger (Matt. 26:33, 69-75). But he eventually learned his lesson, and many years later wrote, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5).

Fourth, Peter needed to learn to sacrifice, and Jesus promised him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself, and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.” Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, “Follow Me!” (John 21:18-19). When Peter became concerned that John might not have to pay such a costly sacrifice, Jesus told him sternly, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!” (vv. 21-22). For the second time on this occasion Jesus commanded Peter to follow Him, this time using the emphatic *su* (“you”).

That was the last time Jesus had to command Peter to follow Him. From then on, Peter obeyed whatever the cost. He even learned to rejoice in his suffering for Christ, and wrote, “To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. . . . If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God.... Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right” (1 Pet. 4:13-14, 16, 19).

Fifth, Peter needed to learn love. It was lack of genuine love that caused Peter to deny His Lord, and it was about that love that Jesus pressed him three times. The Holy Spirit led Peter and John to minister together in the early years of the church, and Peter no doubt learned many lessons in true love from the great apostle of love.

Jesus' washing the disciples' feet not only was an example of humility but of the source of humility—love. Service to others, no matter how costly or demeaning, is neither humble nor godly if done from any motive but love (cf. 1 Cor. 13:3). Peter records the lesson he learned: “Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8).

Sixth, Peter needed to learn courage. Because Jesus' prediction of Peter's suffering pointed to great sacrifice, it also pointed to need of great courage. When Peter was brought before the high priest and the Sanhedrin, or Council, for preaching the gospel, he was no longer the fearful coward he had been in the high priest's courtyard the night of Jesus' arrest. Now confident in his Lord rather than in himself, he stood boldly and declared, “Let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man [the one Peter had healed in Solomon's portico] stands here before you in good health. He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the very corner stone” (Acts 4:10-11; cf. 3:1-8). When the Council again charged Peter and John not to continue preaching, the apostles replied, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard” (v. 19-20). At the subsequent prayer meeting in Jerusalem they prayed for continued boldness; and “when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak the word of God with boldness” (v. 31).

Peter often learned his lessons slowly, but he learned them well. He took the initiative to seek someone to replace Judas among the apostles (Acts 1:15-17), became the first spokesman of the church at Pentecost (2:14), was the first to defend the gospel before the Sanhedrin (4:8), was the first to enact church discipline (in dealing with the deceit of Ananias and Sapphira, 5:3-9), confronted Simon the magician when he attempted to pervert God's power to his own advantage (8:18-23), healed Aeneas and

raised Dorcas from the dead (9:34,40), was the first to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 10), and wrote two marvelous epistles in which he humbly included all the lessons Jesus had patiently taught him.

Peter was a man God touched with His grace in a special way. As a “wandering heart” that God finally captured and claimed for Himself, Peter would have sung joyfully the words of Robert Robinson’s beloved hymn “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing”:

O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I’m constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Take my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.

Tradition reports that Peter died a cruel death. And before he himself was crucified, he is said to have been forced to witness the crucifixion of his wife. In his *Ecclesiastical History*, the early church Father Eusebius writes that Peter stood at the foot of his wife’s cross and kept repeating to her, “Remember the Lord. Remember the Lord.” After she died, it is said he pleaded to be crucified upside down, because he was unworthy to die as his Lord had died.

Peter’s life can be summed up in the last words of his second epistle: “Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. To Him be glory, both now and forever. Amen” (2 Pet. 3:18).

The Master's
Men-part 2
Andrew, James the
son of Zebedee,
John (10:2b)

and Andrew his brother; and James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother;
(10:2b)

Along with Peter, the leading disciple (the foremost, or “first,” v. 10:2a), these three men composed Jesus’ inner circle of four. Like Peter, they do not appear on the surface to be ideal candidates for becoming apostles and the foundation of the church. Yet from the accounts of these men both in the gospels and the rest of the New Testament, we learn that God is able to use in His service any kind of person who submits to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

The apostles, and especially these four who are the best known of them, are often looked on as “stained glass saints.” They have been frequently portrayed with halos above their heads and benign expressions on their faces. Not only children but cathedrals, chapels, cities, and towns are named after them. Their names are often preceded by Saint, adding to the notion that they were on a completely different plane of spiritual existence from other human beings, including other Christians.

But although they had an uncommon calling, the apostles were common men, much like the rest of us. They were saints only in the sense that every believer is a saint, made holy unto God through the imparted righteousness of Jesus Christ and awaiting the full perfection of sainthood in heaven (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; Phil. 3:12-14; Heb. 11:40; Jude 14). Until

then, they, like all saints, had to live with the weakness of their humanness.

ANDREW

Andrew was Peter's **brother**, and his name means "manly." Like his brother, he was a native of Bethsaida (John 1:44) and was a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. Even before he met Jesus, Andrew was a godly, dedicated Jew. He and John were disciples of John the Baptist, and when that prophet declared of Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" they left the Baptist and began to follow Jesus (John 1:36-37). Andrew then "found first his own brother Simon, and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which translated means Christ)" (v. 41). Peter and Andrew lived together (Mark 1:29) and doubtlessly shared everything with each other. It was therefore compelling for Andrew to share with Peter the most important discovery of his life.

Subsequent to his confession of Jesus as the Messiah, however, Andrew had returned to his fishing. A while later, as Jesus was "walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And He said to them, 'Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men'" (Matt. 4:18-19). It was at this time that Jesus actually called the two men into discipleship training, and from that point on these two brothers, along with the other two brothers, James and John, became Jesus' most intimate friends. But though he was greatly respected by his fellow disciples and is always spoken of favorably in the few accounts in which he is mentioned, Andrew was apparently never quite as close to the Lord as the other three and is usually referred to as Peter's brother.

In the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) Andrew is not mentioned except in the lists of the twelve disciples. And in only three accounts in John's gospel do we find any information about him more than his name.

First, John tells us of Andrew's previous discipleship to John the Baptist, his confession of Jesus as the Messiah, and his reporting to Peter his discovery and introducing him to the Lord (John 1:37-42). From his

first encounter with Jesus, Andrew demonstrated an eagerness to introduce others to His Lord, and the desire to witness characterized his entire ministry.

Second, John tells us of Andrew's involvement in Jesus' feeding the five thousand on the far side of the Sea of Galilee. When Philip expressed bewilderment at Jesus' question, "Where are we to buy bread, that these may eat?... Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, 'There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are these for so many people?'" (John 6:5-9). He, too, was puzzled about Jesus' question, but he did as much as he could in response to it and located some food. The barley loaves were rather small, much like biscuits or large crackers, and were often eaten with fish preserved by pickling so that they could be carried to work as a lunch or on trips away from home. Andrew's bringing the boy to Jesus suggests that he believed his Master could somehow make more of this small amount of food.

Third, John depicts Andrew bringing others to the Lord. When some God-fearing Gentiles came to Philip asking to see Jesus, "Philip came and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip came, and they told Jesus" (John 12:20-22). Although Philip himself was one of the twelve, he apparently felt less than comfortable approaching Jesus alone and asked Andrew to accompany him.

From these three accounts we can discern several insights into the character of Andrew. First of all we see his openness and lack of prejudice. He knew that the disciples' first priority, but not their only task, was to take the gospel to their fellow Jews, "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:6). But he also must have known that the person to whom Jesus Himself first revealed His messiahship was a half-breed Samaritan woman, who trusted in Him and, like Andrew, immediately began telling others of Him (John 4:25-29, 40-42).

Andrew was also characterized by simple but strong faith. We do not know what was in his mind when he brought the boy with the loaves and fish to Jesus, but he obviously believed Jesus could make use of the boy and his food. He had seen Jesus make wine, and he probably saw no reason why He could not multiply food as well.

Andrew also appears to have been humble. Throughout his ministry he was known primarily as Peter's brother, and he was never as intimate with Jesus or used by Him as publicly or dramatically as was his brother.

And though he was part of the inner circle, Andrew seemed always to be in the shadow of Peter, James, and John. Yet there is no indication that he ever resented his position or function. He was content simply to belong to and serve Jesus, and no doubt to the end of his life was in awe of the fact that he was called to be an apostle at all. He cared more for his Lord and His work than he did for his own welfare or advantage, and he willingly sacrificed his own interests and comfort for the sake of others coming to the Lord. He showed nothing of the self-will and self-interest seen at times in Peter, James, and John.

Andrew is the model for all Christians who labor quietly in humble places and positions. He did not try to please men but God, and had no interest in building a reputation for himself. He would gladly have taken for himself Christina Rossetti's words:

Give me the lowest place;
Not that I dare ask for that lowest place,
But Thou hast died that I might live
And share Thy glory by Thy side.
Give me the lowest place;
Or if for me the lowest place is too high,
Then make one more low
Where I may sit and see my God and love
Him so.

(Cited in Herbert Lockyer, *All the Apostles of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972], p. 54.)

Andrew was that rare person who is willing to take second place, who is perfectly content to be in support of the more noticeable and acclaimed ministry of others, if that is where God wants him to be. He

does not mind being hidden, so long as the Lord's work is done. Here is the person that all leaders depend on and who are the backbone of every ministry. The cause of Christ is greatly dependent on the self-forgetting souls who are satisfied to occupy a small sphere in an obscure place, free from self-seeking ambition. Andrew was told that one day he would sit on one of the apostolic thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28). But for him that unique honor was not cause for boasting but for humble awe and wonder.

The Scotsman Daniel McLean wrote of Andrew, the patron saint of Scotland:

Gathering together the traces of character found in Scripture [about Andrew], we find neither the writer of an Epistle, nor the founder of a Church, nor a leading figure in the Apostolic Age, but simply... an intimate disciple of Jesus Christ, ever anxious that others should know the spring of spiritual joy and share the blessing he so highly prized. A man of very moderate endowment, who scarcely redeemed his early promise, simple minded and sympathetic, without either dramatic power or heroic spirit, yet with that clinging confidence in Christ that brought him into that inner circle of the Twelve; a man of deep religious feeling with little power of expression, magnetic more than electric, better suited for the quiet walks of life than the stirring thoroughfares. Andrew is the apostle of the private life—the disciple of the hearth. (Cited in Lockyer, *All the Apostles*, pp. 55-56)

God uses people like Andrew, and only He can calculate their effectiveness. Sometimes it takes an Andrew to reach a Peter. An obscure Methodist preacher of the eighteenth century named Thomas Mitchell was an Andrew. His obituary read, "Thomas Mitchell, an old soldier of Jesus Christ, a man of slender abilities as a preacher, and who enjoyed only a

very defective education.” Yet one of his friends wrote of him: “His earnest and loving work caused him to lead many people to Christ.” Though a man of “slender abilities” and “defective education,” he was nevertheless God’s means of bringing to Christ the great preacher Thomas Olivers.

Thomas Mitchell went to a little village in Lincolnshire, where he arose each morning at five o’clock to preach in the open air, as John Wesley often did. His preaching was so fiery that he was arrested and attacked by a mob as he was taken to the public house for a hearing before the village curate. The crowd convinced the curate to let them throw Mitchell into a filthy, slimy pond. Each time he managed to crawl out, the mob threw him back in. He was then painted from head to foot with white paint and taken again to the public house. After a long debate about what to do with him, they decided to drown him. He was thrown into a small lake outside the town, and each time he came to the surface, a man with a long pole would push him under again. Eventually he was taken out, more dead than alive. He was tirelessly cared for by a godly old lady of the village, but when the mob found out that he was recovering, they threatened to rend him limb from limb unless he promised never to preach again. He refused to make such a promise but somehow managed to escape the threatened punishment. He later wrote of the incident, “All the time God kept me in perfect peace and I was able to pray for my enemies.” For the rest of his life he continued to minister in obscure faithfulness. But by God’s standards and in God’s power, he was far from being “a man of slender abilities.” So was Andrew.

JAMES THE SON OF ZEBEDEE

The third man named in Matthew’s list of the first four disciples is **James the son of Zebedee**. In the gospel accounts, **James** never appears apart from his brother John, and during the three years of training under Jesus they were inseparable. Because James is always mentioned first, he was probably the older and more dynamic of the two. The brothers were fishing partners with their father, **Zebedee**, who was apparently fairly

well-to-do, because he employed hired servants in his business (Mark 1:20).

Because so little is said of him, James appears in the gospels more as a silhouette than a detailed portrait. Jesus referred to James and John as “Boanerges, which means, ‘Sons of Thunder’” (Mark 3:17), and from that descriptive name alone we can assume James was passionate, zealous, fervent, and aggressive.

As Passion Week approached, Jesus sent several disciples ahead to make arrangements for lodging. Because they were traveling from Galilee, they would need to spend a night in Samaria on the way to Jerusalem. Jews and Samaritans had great religious and racial animosity for one another, and when the Samaritans refused to give accommodations to Jesus “because He was journeying with His face toward Jerusalem,” James and John said to Him, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (Luke 9:52-54). The two brothers may have believed that the repentant Samaritan woman at Sychar and the others there who had trusted in Jesus as the Messiah were barely worthy of salvation (see John 4:25-42). But a Samaritan who refused even to provide the Lord a night’s lodging was, in their view, worthy only of instant execution. At that point James and John were hateful and intolerant, and their volatile and vengeful temperaments clouded over what they had heard Jesus teach and seen Him do. He therefore “turned and rebuked them, [and said, ‘You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them’]” (Luke 9:55-56).

James had much zeal but little sensitivity. In his resentment of the Samaritans’ rejection of Jesus he reflected a commendable commitment. It is good for God’s people to become incensed when He is dishonored and vilified (cf. Ps. 69:9; John 2:13-17). Jesus Himself was angered when His Father’s house was profaned (Matt. 21:12-13) and when hardness of heart made His opponents criticize even His healing the diseased and afflicted on the Sabbath (Luke 13:15-16). But Jesus did not return evil for evil (1 Pet. 2:23), and He forbids His followers to do so (Matt. 5:38-42).

When the mother of James and John, doubtlessly at their urging, asked Jesus to grant them seats on either side of His throne in the kingdom, the Lord asked them, “Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” Without hesitation they replied confidently, “We are able”

(Matt. 20:21-22). Whether they instigated their mother's request or not, they obviously thought it was perfectly appropriate. They had no reservations about their deserving the honor or their ability to meet any demands it might make of them.

From a human standpoint James and John displayed more natural reliability than Peter. They were not as vacillating and were not given to compromise or equivocation. But they were brazenly ambitious. The two who vengefully wanted to call down fire on the Samaritans are now seen also as self-serving place seekers, stalking the Lord for His patronage—unashamed of using their mother to gain their personal ends and oblivious of the fact that they were demeaning Christ and His kingdom.

When Herod wanted to attack and destroy the infant church, he singled out James for arrest and execution. The fact that he chose James first suggests that this apostle may have been more publicly noticeable and influential than even Peter or John. It was only after he saw that the murder of James pleased the Jews that Herod “proceeded to arrest Peter also” (Acts 12:1-3). At least in the king's eyes, James seemed to be the most dangerous. He was probably thunderous and unrelenting in his ministry, and because of it became the first apostolic martyr.

Zeal is a great virtue, and the Lord needs those who are fearlessly aggressive. But zeal is also prone to be brash, loveless, insensitive, and lacking in wisdom. Insensitivity can destroy a ministry, and James had to learn to bridle his ambition and to love.

Some pastors who are orthodox in doctrine and morally upstanding are utterly insensitive to their congregations and their own families. The nineteenth-century writer Henrik Ibsen told of a Norwegian pastor who diligently followed the motto “All or nothing.” He was stern and uncompromising in everything he said and did. He zealously wanted to advance the kingdom of Christ, but he had no regard for the feelings of fellow believers. He wanted to uphold God's standards of truth and holiness, but he was blind to His standards of love and kindness.

He was especially hard on his own family. When his little girl became seriously ill, he refused to take her out of the cold Norwegian climate to a warmer place, even though the doctor warned that not to do so would cost her life. The pastor responded with his usual “All or nothing,” and the girl soon died. Because the mother had found no love in her husband, her life had been completely centered in her little daughter.

When the daughter died, the mother was so distraught and shattered that she would sit for hours fondling the clothes of her baby girl, trying to feed her starved heart with the empty garments. After a few days her husband took the clothes away and gave them to a poor woman on the street. The wife had hidden one little bonnet as a last reminder, but her husband soon found that and gave it away—after giving the grieving mother a lecture on “All or nothing.” In a few months the mother also died, a victim more of her husband’s misguided zeal than of her daughter’s untimely death.

The great evangelist Billy Sunday saw thousands of souls converted to Jesus Christ, but every one of his children died in unbelief, because he had had no time for them. Zeal without love is cruel and destructive. A person with flaming passion and enthusiasm for the Lord’s work but who tends to be intolerant and impatient is doubtlessly more usable than a lukewarm, uncommitted, and compromising person, who the Lord said is fit only to be spat out of His mouth (Rev 3:16). But intolerance and insensitivity are a tragic barrier to effective ministry and are never justified. Without love, the most dynamic and dedicated zeal—even in the Lord’s own work—is nothing (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

Jesus bridled James’s zeal and channeled His servant’s energy into fruitful ministry. James and John did indeed drink their Master’s cup, as He had predicted (Matt. 20:23). For John the cup was a long life of rejection and a death in exile. For James it was a short bright flame that brought martyrdom.

An ancient Roman coin depicted an ox facing both an altar and a plow, with the inscription “Ready for either.” That should be the attitude of every believer. James gave his life for the Lord as a brief and dying sacrifice, whereas John gave his as a long and living sacrifice of service.

JOHN

The last disciple mentioned in the first group is **John**, the **brother** of James. Unlike Andrew and James, John is one of the most prominent disciples in the New Testament. He not only figures prominently in the gospel accounts but wrote one of the gospels himself, as well as three epistles and the book of Revelation.

Because of his eventual gentleness and self-effacing attitude, we are sometimes inclined to think of John as being naturally retiring and mild mannered, perhaps even somewhat effeminate. But in his early years he was fully as much a “Son of Thunder” as James. He joined his brother in wanting to call down fire on the unbelieving Samaritans and in seeking a position next to the Lord in the kingdom. Like James, he was naturally intolerant, ambitious, zealous, and explosive, though perhaps not as much so.

It is interesting that the only time John is mentioned alone in the gospels is in an unfavorable light. On one occasion he came to Jesus and reported, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to hinder him because he was not following us” (Mark 9:38). John appears prejudiced and sectarian, and he did not look favorably on those who were not affiliated with his own group, even if they were faithfully doing the Lord’s work.

Christians are justified in breaking fellowship with fellow believers who teach false doctrine and persist in immoral living; in fact are commanded to do so (Rom. 16:17-18; 1 Cor. 5:9-11; Gal. 1:8; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14). But exclusivism or sectarianism based on form, culture, status, race, color, wealth, appearance, or any other such superficiality is anathema to the Lord, in whom “there is neither Jew nor Greek, . . . slave nor free man, . . . male nor female; for [we] are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

Throughout his life, John remained uncompromising in doctrine and in standards of morality, but the Holy Spirit developed in him an unparalleled capacity for love, so much so that he is often called the apostle of love. It is apparent from his epistles that he did not slip into the foolish and tolerant sentimentality that often masquerades as love. During the rest of his life, which lasted until near the turn of the second century, he lost none of his intolerance for falsehood and immorality. Love without certain standards or strong convictions is as much a spiritual disaster as zeal without sensitivity. The Lord knew that, as far as the human author was concerned, the apostle who became the most powerful advocate of love would have to be a man who was also uncompromising of truth. Otherwise his love would take him down the road of destructive sentimentalism that is traveled by so many in the name of Christ.

In his five New Testament books John uses forms of the word *love* eighty times and *witness* or its synonyms some seventy times. He was always a witness to the truth and ever a teacher of love. Truth guarded his love, and love surrounded his truth.

John was also a discoverer, a seeker for truth. He was the first to recognize the Lord on the shore of Galilee and was the first disciple to see the risen Christ. It was to him that the Lord entrusted the revelation of future events in the Apocalypse. John did not lean on Jesus' breast (John 13:23) because of maudlin sentimentality but because he had an insatiable hunger for Christ's truth and fellowship. He wanted to gather every word that came from his Master's lips and to bask continually in the warmth of His love.

That John's love was controlled by God's truth is nowhere seen more clearly than in his three epistles, in which his exhortations for love are always balanced by commands for truth and righteousness. He denounced the antichrist and those who sided with him. He rebuked the unloving and the disobedient. It was John that Jesus inspired to record His most sobering distinction between the saved and the unsaved, declaring that the one is the child of God and the other the child of Satan (John 8:41-44). Again and again John appealed to various witnesses to the truth he taught. He spoke of the witness of John the Baptist (John 1:7-8; 3:26), the witness of the miracles (John 5:36), the witness of the apostles (15:27), the witness of the Father (5:37), of the Son (18:37), and of the Holy Spirit and the water and blood (1 John 5:8).

But throughout his teaching John's heart of love and compassion is revealed, and the reflection of his great capacity not only to teach but to exemplify love is manifest. People who love greatly can also be loved greatly, because they are eager to receive it as well as give it. John continually took in the love of Christ and continually gave it out. He so identified with Christ's love that he referred to himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). John could claim no greater honor for himself than being the apostle whom Jesus loved.

Tradition tells us that John did not leave the city of Jerusalem until Mary the mother of Jesus died, because the Lord had entrusted her into his care (John 19:26). The Lord said to Peter, "Tend My sheep" (John 21:17); but to John He said, in effect, "Take care of My mother." John had a

special love that Jesus knew would lead this disciple to treat Mary as his own mother.

John's teaching on love might be summarized in ten truths that run through his writings. He taught that God is a God of love (1 John 4:8,16), that God loves His Son (John 3:35; 5:20) and is loved by His Son (14:31), that God loved the disciples (16:27; 17:23), that God loves all men (3:16), that Christ loved the disciples (13:34), that He loves all believers (1 John 3:1), that He expects all men to love Him (John 14:15, 21), that believers in Him should love one another (13:34; 1 John 4:11, 21), and that love fulfills all the commandments (14:23; 1 John 5:3).

From the lives of these three men, as from the lives of the other disciples, it becomes obvious that the Lord uses a variety of people. Andrew was humble, gentle, and inconspicuous. He saw the individual more than the crowd. He was not a dynamic evangelist, but he continually brought people to Jesus Christ. James, like Peter, was dynamic, bold, and a natural leader. He initiated, took charge, and moved ahead; but he could also be self-willed, self-assured, prejudiced, and ambitious. John was also a son of thunder, but of a milder sort. He was a truth seeker who was sensitive to those to whom he taught the truth.

Jesus transformed all three into effective fishers of men and foundation layers of His church, and all three suffered for their faithfulness. Tradition says that Andrew led the wife of a provincial governor to Christ and that when she refused to recant her faith the governor had Andrew crucified on an X-shaped cross—which subsequently became his symbol in church lore. He is said to have hung on the cross in agony for two days, preaching the gospel to those who passed by for as long as he was able.

According to tradition, when James had been sentenced to death and was about to be beheaded, the Roman soldier who guarded him was so impressed with his courage and constancy of spirit that he knelt at the apostle's feet, begging forgiveness for the rough treatment he had given him and for his part in the execution. James is said to have lifted the man up, embraced and kissed him, and said, "Peace, my son. Peace to you and the pardon of your faults." The soldier is said to have been so moved by James's compassion that he publicly confessed Christ and was beheaded alongside the apostle.

Scripture reports that John was banished to the small and barren Isle of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, off the west coast of Asia Minor. He died about A.D. 98, during the reign of Emperor Trajan. Some sources suggest that those who knew him well said their reminder of John was the echo of a constant phrase that was on his lips: “My little children, love one another” (cf. 1 John 3:11, 14; 4:7, 11, 20-21).

These were three men with ordinary temperaments, ordinary strengths and weaknesses, and ordinary struggles. Yet in the power of Christ they were transformed into men that turned the world upside down. It was not what they were in themselves but what they were sovereignly and willingly made to become that rendered them such powerful instruments in the Master’s hands. The fishermen of Galilee became fishers of men on a vast scale, and in God’s power they gathered thousands of souls into the church and played a vital part in the salvation of millions more. Through the testimony of their lives and writings, those fishermen are still casting their nets into the sea of mankind and bringing multitudes into the kingdom.

The Master's Men

part 3

Philip, Bartholomew

(Nathanael) (10:3a)

Philip and Bartholomew; (10:3a)

The second group of four disciples begins with **Philip**, as it does in the other listings (Mark 3:18; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13), probably indicating he was its leader. This Philip is not to be confused with the deacon who became a prominent evangelist in the early days of the church (see Acts 6:5; 8:4-13, 26-40).

All of the twelve were Jews, but many used both Greek and Jewish names. It is not known what this disciple's Jewish name was, because **Philip** (a Greek name meaning "lover of horses") is the only name used of him in the New Testament. It was possibly due to his name that the Greeks who wanted to see Jesus came to Philip first (John 12:20-21).

Philip's hometown was the northern Galilee town of Bethsaida, where Peter and Andrew also lived. Because they were all God-fearing Jews and probably were all fishermen (see John 21:2-3), it seems certain that Peter, Andrew, **Philip and Bartholomew** not only were acquaintances but were close friends even before Jesus called them.

As with Andrew, the first three gospels make no mention of **Philip** except in listings of the apostles, and all that is revealed about him is found in the fourth gospel.

It can be surmised from John's account that Philip was already a devout man. The day after Jesus called Peter and Andrew, "He purposed to go forth into Galilee, and He found Philip, and Jesus said to him, 'Follow Me'"(John 1:43). Although John, Andrew, and Peter had taken up with

Jesus as soon as they realized He was the Messiah (vv. 35-42), Philip was the first person to whom the Lord expressly said, "Follow Me."

God had already given Philip a seeking heart. Salvation is always on the sovereign Lord's initiative, and no one comes to Jesus Christ unless God the Father draws him (John 6:44, 65). But God planted the desire in Philip's heart to find the Messiah even before Jesus called him. Philip therefore said to Nathanael (or Bartholomew), "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (1:45). From the perspective of divine sovereignty, the Lord found Philip, but from the perspective of human understanding and volition, Philip had found the Lord. Both the divine and human wills will be in accord when salvation takes place. Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), and it is those who truly seek Him who find Him (Luke 7:7-8; cf. Jer. 29:13). God seeks and finds the hearts of those who genuinely seek Him.

From his comments to Nathanael, it seems that Philip must have been diligently studying the Scriptures to learn God's will and plan. God's promised Messiah was central on his mind, and when he was introduced to the Messiah, he immediately acknowledged and accepted Him. Using His written Word, God had prepared Philip's heart. From the scriptural record we know of no human agent who was instrumental in Philip's calling or commitment. Jesus simply walked up to Him and said, "Follow Me." Philip's heart and eyes and ears were spiritually attuned, and when he heard Jesus' call he knew it was from God. We can only imagine the excitement and joy that filled his soul at that moment.

The genuineness of Philip's faith is seen not only in the fact that he immediately recognized and accepted the Messiah but in the reality that he also promptly began to serve Christ by telling others of Him. As soon as Jesus called him, Philip found Nathanael and told him he had found the Messiah.

One of the certain marks of genuine conversion is the desire to tell others of the Savior. The new believer who is baptized as a public testimony of his new relationship to Jesus Christ often has a spontaneous desire to use that occasion to witness for the Lord. The believer who has not left his first love for the Lord inevitably has a loving desire to witness to those who do not know Him.

Because Philip already cared about his friend Nathanael, it was natural to communicate to him the most profound and joyous discovery of his life. In every listing of the twelve, Philip and Nathanael are together, and it is likely they had been close friends for many years before they met Jesus.

Second, we learn from John's gospel that Philip had a practical, analytical mind. When Jesus faced the great crowd of people who had followed Him to the far side of the Sea of Galilee, He knew they were tired and hungry and that few of them had made provision for eating. He therefore "said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread, that these may eat?'" (John 6:5). Philip had seen Jesus perform many miracles, including the turning of water into wine (John 2:1-11), but at this time his only thoughts were of the practical problems involved in Jesus' suggestion. In addition to the 5,000 men (6:10), it is not unrealistic to assume that there were an equal number of women and several times that many children.

Judging from Philip's response, it may have been that he was normally in charge of getting food for Jesus and his fellow disciples, just as Judas was in charge of the group's money. He therefore would have known how much food they usually ate and how much it cost. But Jesus had a special purpose in asking Philip about the food. "And this He was saying to test him; for He Himself knew what He was intending to do" (v. 6). If Jesus had asked about buying food only for the thirteen men in their own group, the answer would have been simple and practical, and Philip could quickly have given the answer. But he should have realized that, in His asking about feeding the entire multitude, Jesus' question went far beyond the practical and implied the impossible.

But Philip took the question at its practical face value and immediately began to calculate an answer based on his own experience. Making a rough estimate, he concluded that "two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little" (v. 7). A denarii represented the daily wage of an average Palestinian worker, and even if two hundred of them were collected from the crowd or taken from the disciples' treasury, that amount could not buy enough bread even to give the multitude a snack.

Philip's response was sincere, but it revealed a lack of consideration for Jesus' supernatural provision. He was face to face with the Son of God, but he could see no further than the practical, physical

dilemma. There was no prospect of a solution from the human standpoint, and that is all he considered. He was so engrossed in the material situation that he completely lost sight of God's power.

It has been noted that the supreme essential of a great leader is a sense of the possible. Like most people, however—including perhaps most believers—Philip only had a sense of the impossible. He did not yet understand that “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26; cf. Mark 9:23).

It would seem that, after having seen Jesus perform so many miracles, Philip's immediate response would have been, “Lord, You made the water into wine, stilled the storm, and have healed every kind of disease. Why bother trying to buy so much food when all You have to do is say the word and create the food necessary to feed all these people?”

Philip failed Jesus' test of faith because he was too taken up with his own understanding and abilities. He was methodical and full of practical common sense; but those virtues, helpful as they often are, can be an obstacle to the immeasurably greater virtue of trusting God for what is impractical. Facts and figures are a poor substitute for faith.

Third, we learn from John's gospel that Philip was not forceful and was inclined to be indecisive. Although he was not a member of the inner circle, Philip had access to Jesus on his own. But when “certain Greeks among those who were going up to worship at the feast . . . came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and began to ask him, saying, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus,’” Philip decided to take them first to Andrew (12:20-22).

Philip knew that Jesus healed the Gentile centurion's servant and accepted the half-Gentile Samaritans who came to Him for salvation, yet he seems to have been uncertain about whether it was proper to introduce these Gentiles to the Lord. He may have been thinking of the temporary instruction Jesus gave when He first sent the disciples out on their own: “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 10:5-6). Natural Jewish prejudice made that an easy command to obey, and Philip may have thought the restriction was still in effect. But he did not ignore the Greeks' request and at least made the effort to consult Andrew.

Fourth, we discover from John's gospel that Philip lacked spiritual perception. This deficiency was evident in his failing Jesus' test in regard

to feeding the multitude, and it was even more pronounced when, almost three years later, he said to Jesus at the Last Supper, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us” (John 14:8). It must have grieved Jesus deeply to hear such a question, and He replied, “Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how do you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me; otherwise believe on account of the works themselves” (vv. 9-11).

After three years of learning at Jesus’ feet, Philip’s spiritual perception still seemed almost nil. Neither Jesus’ words nor His works had brought Philip to the understanding that Jesus and His Father were one. After gazing for three years into the only face of God men will ever see, he still did not comprehend who he was seeing. He had missed the main truth of Jesus’ teaching, that He was God incarnate.

Yet the Lord used that man of limited vision and trust. Philip was slow to understand and slow to trust. He was more at home with physical facts than with spiritual truth. Yet, along with the other apostles, Jesus assured him of a throne from which he would judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28). Philip was pessimistic, insecure, analytical, and slow to learn; but tradition tells us that he ultimately gave his life as a martyr for the Lord he so often disappointed and who so patiently taught and retaught him. It is reported that he was stripped naked, hung upside down by his feet, and pierced with sharp stakes in his ankles and thighs, causing him slowly to bleed to death. He is said to have asked not to be shrouded with linen after he was dead, because he felt unworthy to be buried as was his Lord.

BARTHOLOMEW (NATHANAEL)

Bartholomew means “son [Aramaic, *bar*] of Tolmai.” He was much different from Philip, his close friend and companion with whom he is always paired in the New Testament. The first three gospels refer to him only as Bartholomew, but John always as Nathanael, which may have been

his first name. The short account of John 1:45-51 is the only place this apostle is mentioned in the New Testament outside the four listings of the twelve.

Bartholomew came from Cana of Galilee and was brought to the Lord by his friend Philip. As soon as Philip discovered Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, he “found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph’” (John 1:45).

Philip’s words imply that, like himself, Nathanael was a student of Scripture, a seeker after divine truth and well acquainted with the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. A further implication seems to be that these two men were partners in Scripture study, having examined the Old Testament together for many years. In any case, it is clear from Philip’s statement that he knew Nathanael would immediately know whom he was talking about. They both hungered for God’s truth and earnestly sought the coming of the anticipated Messiah.

But Nathanael was affected by prejudice. Instead of judging Jesus by what He said and did, Nathanael stumbled over the fact that He was from Nazareth, a town with a notably unsavory reputation. It was an unrefined, rowdy place that hosted many foreign travelers. Nathanael’s question, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” (v. 46), was probably a common expression of derision among the Jews of Galilee.

Prejudice is an unwarranted generalization based on feelings of superiority, and it can be a powerful obstacle to the truth. Herbert Lockyer points out that in his allegory *The Holy War*, John Bunyan depicts Christ (called Emmanuel) invading and holding the life of a person (represented as the town Mansoul). During the course of the siege on Mansoul, Emmanuel’s forces attack Eargate. But Diabolus (Satan) sets up a formidable guard called “Old Mr. Prejudice, an angry and ill-conditioned fellow who has under his power sixty deaf men” (*All the Apostles of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972], p. 60).

The nature of prejudice is to turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to any truth that does not fit its preconceived and cherished ideas. Consequently, it is a common and powerful weapon of Satan. By appealing to various prejudices he often succeeds in getting a person to reject the gospel even before learning what it is really about. The prejudices of their man-made traditions blinded many Jews to the true teaching of their Scriptures and

thereby led them to reject Jesus as the Messiah—despite His clear demonstrations of divine power and fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

Fortunately, Nathanael's prejudice was tempered by his genuine desire to know God's truth. He agreed to Philip's suggestion ("Come and see") and went to meet Jesus for himself (v. 46*b*-47*a*).

From the mouth of Jesus we learn still other characteristics of Nathanael. As Nathanael approached, Jesus said, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" (v. 47*b*). *Alēthōs* ("indeed") was a word of strong affirmation by which Jesus declared Nathanael to be the kind of man God intended His chosen people to be. He was a Jew in the truest spiritual sense, "a Jew who is one inwardly,... [whose] praise is not from men, but from God" (Rom. 2:29). He was not merely a physical descendant of Abraham but, more important, a Jew in the true covenant with God, a spiritual descendant, a child of promise (see Rom. 9:6-8).

Not only was Nathanael a genuine, spiritual Jew, but he was, by the Lord's own testimony, a man "in whom is no guile!" (John 1:47*c*). He was a genuine Jew and a genuine person. He had no deceit or duplicity, no hypocrisy or phoniness. That characteristic alone set him far apart from most of his countrymen, especially the self-righteous and hypocritical scribes and Pharisees, whose very names Jesus used as synonyms for religious and moral hypocrisy (Matt. 23:13-15, 23, 25, 27).

Nathanael had reflected the common prejudice of the time, but his heart was right and won out over his head. His prejudice was not strong and it quickly withered in the light of truth. What an astoundingly wonderful commendation to be described by the Lord Himself as "an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!"

Nathanael's response to Jesus' commendation reflected its appropriateness. He did not swell up with pride at the compliment but wondered how Jesus could speak with such certainty about the inner life of a person He had never met. "How do You know me?" he asked (John 1:48). "How do You know what I am really like on the inside?" he was asking. "How do You know that I truly seek to follow God and that my life is not hypocritical?" Because of his genuine humility, Nathanael may have been inclined to doubt Jesus' judgment and think His comments were mere flattery.

But Jesus' next words removed any doubts Nathanael may have had. When Jesus said, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you," Nathanael knew he stood in the presence of omniscience. He declared, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel" (vv. 48b-49).

Because fig trees of that region could become quite large, they were often planted near a house to provide shade, comfort, and a place of retreat from household activities. Nathanael must have been meditating and praying in the shade of such a tree before Philip came to him.

In any case, Jesus not only saw where Nathanael was sitting but knew what he was thinking. "I saw you in your secret place of retreat," Jesus said, in effect, "and I even saw what was in your heart." Nathanael's prayers were answered and his searching for the Messiah was over. Because his heart was divinely prepared to seek the Messiah, he immediately acknowledged Him when they met, just as the godly Simeon and Anna recognized even the infant Jesus as the Son of God (Luke 2:25-38).

Jesus continued His attestation of Nathanael's faith. "Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe?" (John 1:50), is better translated as a statement of fact (as in the NIV). Both Jesus and Nathanael knew it was the manifestation of omniscience that convinced Nathanael of Jesus' messiahship. Because of Nathanael's faith, Jesus went on to say, "You shall see greater things than these." And He said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you shall see the heavens opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (vv. 50b-51). This demonstration of Jesus' omniscience would come to seem small to Nathanael in comparison to the wonders of divine power he would soon begin to witness.

It may be that Nathanael came to understand Jesus' glory as well as any of the other apostles. We know nothing else of the man than what is found in that one brief account. But it seems reasonable to assume that he was among the most dependable and teachable of the twelve. There is no record of his questioning Jesus or arguing with Him or even misunderstanding Him.

The New Testament says nothing of his ministry or his death, and even tradition has little to offer about him. But it is apparent from the

Lord's own words that, like David, Nathanael was a man after God's own heart.

The Master's Men-
part 4
Thomas, Matthew (10:3b)

Thomas and Matthew the tax-gatherer; (10:3b)

As in the other lists of disciples, these two men are in the second group of four, although the order of their names varies (see Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13).

THOMAS

Probably since the first century, **Thomas** has been known primarily, if not almost exclusively, for his doubt; and “doubting Thomas” has long been an epithet for skeptics. But a careful look at the gospel accounts reveals this disciple was a man of great faith and dedication.

As with several other apostles, all that is known of him besides his name is found in John’s gospel. While Jesus was ministering on the other side of the Jordan River near Jericho, the report came that Lazarus had died. On hearing the news, Jesus said to His disciples, “I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him” (John 11:15). Even after witnessing so many miracles, including the raising of the dead, the twelve were still lacking in faith, and Jesus determined to perform this last great miracle for their benefit. He had already decided to go back to Judea, despite reminders by the disciples that it would cost His life (vv. 7-8). Because Bethany was a near suburb of Jerusalem, for Jesus to go there was almost as dangerous as His going into Jerusalem. Fully realizing the danger for all of them, “Thomas therefore,

who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with Him’” (v. 16).

Thomas, and doubtlessly the other disciples as well, believed that, because of the hostility of the Jewish establishment, going to Jerusalem would be virtual suicide. But he took the initiative to encourage the twelve to go with Jesus and suffer the consequences with Him. He was obviously pessimistic about the outcome of the trip, but the pessimism makes his act all the more courageous. As a pessimist, he expected the worst possible consequences; yet he was willing to go. An optimist would have needed less courage, because he would have expected less danger. Thomas was willing to pay the ultimate price for the sake of His Lord.

Such unreserved willingness to die for Christ was hardly the mark of a doubter. Thomas was willing to die for Christ because he totally believed in Him. Thomas was perhaps equalled only by John in his utter and unwavering devotion to Jesus. He had such an intense love for the Lord that he could not endure existence without Him. If Jesus was determined to go to Jerusalem and certain death, so was Thomas, because the alternative of living without Him was unthinkable.

Herbert Lockyer has commented: “Like those brave knights in attendance upon the blind King John of Bohemia who rode into the battle of Crecy with their bridles intertwined with that of their master, resolved to share his fate, whatever it might be ... so Thomas, come life, come death, was resolved not to forsake his Lord, seeing he was bound to Him by a deep and enthusiastic love” (*All the Apostles of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972], p. 178).

Thomas had no illusions. He saw the jaws of death and did not flinch. He would rather face death than face disloyalty to Christ.

In the Upper Room following the Last Supper, Jesus urged the disciples not to be troubled in heart and assured them that He was going to prepare a heavenly place for them and would come again and receive them to Himself, in order that they might forever be with Him. He then said, “And you know the way where I am going” (John 14:1-4). Puzzled at this, Thomas asked, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?” (v. 5).

Only a few days earlier Thomas had declared his determination to die with Christ if necessary. His devotion to Christ was unqualified, but like the other disciples he had almost no understanding of Jesus’ death,

resurrection, and ascension, for which his Master had been preparing him for three years. Thomas had little comprehension of what Jesus had just said, apparently assuming Jesus was only talking about taking a long journey to a distant country. He was bewildered, saddened, and anxious. Again the disciple's pessimism and also his love are revealed. His pessimism made him fear that he might somehow be permanently separated from his Lord, and his love for his Lord made that fear unbearable. Understanding Thomas's heart as well as his words, Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (v. 6). "If you know Me," Jesus was saying, "you know the way. And if you are in Me, you are in the way. Your only concern is to be with Me, and I will take you wherever I go."

The third text in which John tells us about Thomas is by far the best known. When Jesus was crucified and buried, all of Thomas's worst fears had seemed to come true. Jesus had been killed, but the disciples were spared. Their Master was gone, and they were left alone, leaderless and helpless. For Thomas it was worse than death, which he had been perfectly willing to accept. He felt forsaken, rejected, and probably even betrayed. From his perspective, his worst pessimism had been vindicated. Jesus' promises had been empty—sincere and well meaning, no doubt, but nevertheless empty. Because he loved Jesus so much, the feeling of rejection was all the more deep and painful. The deepest hurt is potentiated by the greatest love.

When the other disciples told Thomas they had seen the Lord, he probably felt like salt had been poured into his wounds. He was in no mood for fantasies about His departed Lord. It was unbearably painful trying to adjust to Jesus' death, and he had no desire to be shattered by more false hopes. When Thomas heard that Jesus was raised from the dead and alive, he declared, "Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe" (John 20:25).

A person who is depressed, especially if he is naturally pessimistic, is hard to convince that anything will ever be right again. Because he is convinced his plight is permanent, the idea of improvement not only seems unrealistic but can be very irritating. To the person confirmed in hopelessness, even the idea of hope can be an offense.

But Thomas's attitude was basically no different from that of the other disciples. They, too, were incredulous when first told of Jesus'

resurrection. When Peter and John ran to the tomb and found it empty as Mary had said, “as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead” (John 20:9). Even with evidence of the resurrection, they did not search for a risen Lord but went back home (v. 10). When Christ appeared to the ten disciples (Judas was dead, and Thomas was elsewhere), who huddled behind closed doors “for fear of the Jews,” they were not certain that it was the flesh and blood Jesus until after He “showed them both His hands and His side” (vv. 19-20). Nor had the two disciples to whom Jesus appeared on the Emmaus road believed the reports of His resurrection (Luke 24:21-24). None of the disciples believed Jesus was alive until they saw Him in person.

Because they all doubted His promise to rise on the third day, Jesus allowed Thomas to remain in his doubt for another eight days. When He then appeared again to the disciples, He singled out this dear soul who loved him enough to die for Him and who was now utterly shattered in spirit. “Reach here your finger, and see My hands,” He said to Thomas, “and reach here your hand, and put it into My side; and be not unbelieving, but believing” (John 20:26-27). In one of the greatest confessions ever made, Thomas exclaimed, “My Lord and my God!” Now all doubt was gone and he knew with full certainty that Jesus was God, that Jesus was Lord, and that Jesus was alive! The Lord then gently rebuked Thomas, saying, “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed” (vv. 28-29). But His rebuke was fully as much of the other disciples as of Thomas, because his doubt, though openly declared, had been no greater than theirs.

If Jesus is not God and is not alive, the gospel is a foolish and futile deception, the furthest thing from good news. “If Christ has not been raised,” Paul told the Corinthian skeptics, “your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. . . . If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:17,19).

Tradition holds that Thomas preached as far away as India, and the Mar Thoma Church, which still exists in southwest India and bears his name, traces its origin to him. He is said to have had died from a spear being thrust through him, a fitting death for the one who insisted on placing his hand in the spear wound of his Lord.)

MATTHEW

Because he wrote the first gospel, **Matthew** is one of the best known apostles. But the New Testament reveals very few details of his life or ministry.

Before his conversion and call to discipleship, **Matthew** collected taxes for Rome (Matt. 9:9). It was not an occupation to be proud of, and one would think he would have wanted to dissociate himself from the stigma as much as possible. Yet when he wrote the gospel some thirty years later, he still referred to himself as **the tax-gatherer**.

As discussed previously in more detail (see chap. 6), tax-gatherers were considered traitors, the most hated members of Jewish society. They were often more despised than the occupying rulers and soldiers, because they betrayed and financially oppressed their own people. They were legal extortioners who extracted as much money as they could from both citizen and foreigner with the full authority and protection of Rome.

They were so despicable and vile that the Jewish Talmud said, “It is righteous to lie and deceive a tax collector.” Tax collectors were not permitted to testify in Jewish courts, because they were notorious liars and accepted bribes as a normal part of life. They were cut off from the rest of Jewish life and were forbidden to worship in the Temple or even in a synagogue. In Jesus’ parable, the tax collector who came to the Temple to pray stood “some distance away” (Luke 18:13) not only because he felt unworthy but because he was not allowed to enter.

Matthew was hardly proud of what he had been, but he seems to have cherished the description as a reminder of his own great unworthiness and of Christ’s great grace. He saw himself as the vilest sinner, saved only by the incomparable mercy of his Lord.

Even from the little information given about him, it is evident Matthew was a man of faith. When he got up from his tax table and began to follow Jesus, he burned his bridges behind him. Tax collecting was a lucrative occupation, and many opportunists were doubtlessly eager to take Matthew’s place. And once he forsook his privileged position, the Roman officials would not have granted it to him again. The disciples who were fishermen could always return to fishing, as many of them did after

the crucifixion; but there could be no returning to tax collecting for Matthew.

In the eyes of the scribes and Pharisees, Matthew's leaving his tax office to follow Jesus did little to elevate his standing. Casting his lot with Jesus did not increase Matthew's popularity, but it greatly increased his danger. There is little doubt that Matthew faced something of the true cost of discipleship before any of the other apostles.

Matthew was not only faithful but humble. In his own gospel (and even in the other three) he is faceless and absolutely voiceless during his time of training under Jesus. He asks no questions and makes no comments. He appears directly in no narrative. Only from Mark (2:15) and Luke (5:29) do we learn that the banquet Jesus ate with "tax-gatherers and sinners" was in Matthew's house. In his own account, the fact that he was responsible for it is only implied (Matt. 9:10). He was eager and overjoyed for his friends and former associates to meet Jesus, but he calls no attention to his own role in the banquet.

It may be that his humility was born out of his overwhelming sense of sinfulness. He saw God's grace as so superabundant that he felt unworthy to say a word. He was the silent disciple, until the Holy Spirit led him to pick up his pen and write the opening book of the New Testament—twenty-eight powerful chapters on the majesty, might, and glory of the King of kings.

The fact that Matthew is also referred to as Levi indicates his Jewish heritage. We have no idea what his biblical training may have been, but Matthew quotes the Old Testament more often than the other three gospel writers combined—and quotes from all three parts of it (the law, the prophets, and the writings, or Hagiographa). Since it is highly unlikely he studied Scripture while he was a tax collector, he gained his biblical knowledge either in his youth or after he became an apostle.

Matthew had a loving heart for the lost. As soon as he was saved his first concern was to tell others of that great news and invite them to share in it. He was ashamed of his own previous life of sin; but he was not ashamed to be seen eating with his former associates who were despised by society and living under God's judgment, because they needed the Savior just as he had.

He sensed personal sinfulness as perhaps none of his fellow disciples did, because he had been greedily and unashamedly involved in

extortion, deception, graft, and probably blasphemy and every form of immorality. But now, like the woman taken in adultery, because he was forgiven much, he loved much (see Luke 7:42-43, 47). The genuineness of his love for the Lord is proved in his concern for the salvation of his friends.

God took that outcast sinner and transformed him into a man of great faith, humility, and compassion. He turned him from a man who extorted to one who gave, from one who destroyed lives to one who brought the way of eternal life.

The Master's Men-
part 5
James the son of
Alphaeus,
Thaddaeus (Judas
the son of James),
Simon the Zealot
(10:3c-4a)

James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot, (10:3c-4a)

These men are the first three in the third group of four apostles and are the least known of the twelve. Most of what we know of them is inferred from their names or descriptive identities or is gleaned from church tradition. Except for one short question posed to Jesus by Thaddaeus, the Bible tells us nothing about their individual characters, personalities, abilities, or accomplishments, either during their three years of training under Jesus or during their ministry in the early church.

JAMES THE SON OF ALPHEAUS

The first-named of these unknown apostles is **James**, who is distinguished from the other apostle James (the son of Zebedee, v. 2) and from James the half brother of Jesus by being identified as **the son of Alphaeus**. In Mark 15:40 he is referred to as “the Less.” *Mikros* (“less”) can also mean smaller or younger. Used in the sense of smaller, the name may have been another means of distinguishing him from James the son of

Zebedee, who was clearly larger in influence and position and possibly also in physical stature. In the sense of younger, it may have indicated his youthfulness in comparison to the other James.

As just mentioned, this James was considerably less than James the son of Zebedee in the realm of influence. He may have had outstanding traits such as boldness or courage, but, if so, he would likely have been called “the Bold” or something similar, rather than “the Less.” He could have been older than the other James; but if that were true, he would probably have been called “the Elder,” since that description would have been less confusing and more respectful of his age. It is also possible, of course, that he was smaller in stature. But the most probable meaning of “the Less” would seem to be that of youthfulness, coupled with that of his subordinate position in leadership.

Because Matthew’s father was also named Alphaeus (spelled Alpheus in Mark 2:14), James and Matthew may have been brothers. Or this James may have been a cousin of Jesus. Clopas was a form of Alphaeus, and if Jesus’ “mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas” (John 19:25), was James’s mother, he would have been Jesus’ first cousin. That possibility is also supported by Mark 15:40, which tells us that the mother of James the Less was named Mary. It is possible that he was both Matthew’s brother and Jesus’ cousin. In either case or both, this James’s low profile testifies to his humility, since there is no indication that he tried to take personal advantage of any such relationship.

James was not distinguished as a gifted leader, either before or after his calling and training. We can assume he faithfully fulfilled the Lord’s work during his ministry, and we know that he will one day sit on a heavenly throne and join the other twelve in judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28). But his apostleship had no relationship to outstanding ability or achievement. He was an unextraordinary man, used in unextraordinary ways to help fulfill the extraordinary task of taking the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world.

After 2,000 years, James the son of Alphaeus remains obscure. We do not know a single word he spoke or a single thing he did. The early church Fathers claimed that he preached in Persia (modern Iran) and was crucified there as a martyr for the gospel. If that is true, one can only wonder what would have happened to that country and to world history had those people responded favorably to the gospel.

THADDAEUS (JUDAS THE SON OF JAMES)

The second apostle listed in the third group is **Thaddaeus**. Based on less reliable Greek manuscripts, the Authorized text reads, “Lebbaeus, whose surname was Thaddaeus.” From Luke 6:16 and Acts 1:13 we learn that he was also called Judas the son of James. It is likely that Judas was his original name and that Thaddaeus and Lebbaeus were descriptive names, somewhat like nicknames, added by his family or friends.

Thaddaeus comes from the Hebrew word *shad*, which refers to a female breast. The name means “breast child,” and was probably a common colloquialism for the youngest child of a family, the permanent “baby” of the family who was the last to be nursed by his mother.

Although the name Lebbaeus is not found in what are considered the superior Greek manuscripts, and is therefore not in most modern translations, it may well have been one of this apostle’s names. It is based on the Hebrew *leb* (“heart”) and means “heart child,” which suggests he was known for his generosity, love, and courage.

On the night before His arrest and trial, Jesus said, “He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him” (John 14:21). At that time Thaddaeus spoke his only words recorded in Scripture: “Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, ‘Lord, what then has happened that You are going to disclose Yourself to us, and not to the world?’” (v. 22).

Judas (Thaddaeus) obviously was thinking only of outward, visible disclosure, and he wondered how Jesus could manifest Himself to those who loved Him without also manifesting Himself to everyone else. Like most Jews of his day, he was looking for Christ to establish an earthly kingdom. How, he wondered, could the Messiah sit on the throne of David and rule the entire earth without manifesting Himself to His subjects? Thaddaeus may also have wondered why Jesus would disclose Himself to a small group of insignificant men and not to the great religious leaders in Jerusalem and the powerful political leaders in Rome.

Jesus did not rebuke Thaddaeus for his misunderstanding, which he sincerely and humbly expressed. In light of common Jewish expectations, the question was appropriate and insightful, and it gave Jesus the

opportunity to further explain what He meant. He proceeded to reiterate what He had just said and added the negative side of the truth: “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father’s who sent Me” (John 14:23-24). Christ was not at that time establishing His earthly kingdom, and the disclosure He was then making was of His divinity and authority as spiritual Lord and Savior. That disclosure can only be recognized by those who trust and love Him, and the genuineness of such trust and love is evidenced by obedience to His Word. Manifestation is limited to reception.

A radio or television broadcast can have a great range, reaching virtually the entire globe by use of satellites. But its programs are only “disclosed” to those who have proper receivers. The rest of the world has no awareness of the broadcast, although its electronic waves completely surround them.

Henry David Thoreau once observed that “it takes two people to speak the truth, the one who says it and the one who hears it.” Those who will not listen to the gospel cannot hear it, no matter how clearly and forcefully it may be proclaimed. Jesus Christ was God incarnate, yet “He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:10-11). During His three years of ministry, countless thousands of people—mostly God’s chosen people, the Jews—saw and heard Jesus. Yet only a few had more than passing interest in who He really was or in what He said. The god of this world so blinded their minds that when they looked they could not see (2 Cor. 4:4).

Someone has commented that if you tore a beautiful hymn out of a hymnal and threw it down on the sidewalk, you could expect many different reactions from those who saw it. A dog would sniff at it and then go his way. A street cleaner would pick it up and throw it in the trash. A greedy person might pick it up expecting to find a valuable document of some sort. An English teacher might read it and admire its literary quality. But a spiritually-minded believer who picked it up and read it would have his soul blessed. The content would have been the same for all those who came in contact with it, but its meaning and value could only be understood by a person receptive to its godly truth.

Only those whose hearts are purified by love and who walk in obedience to God's Word can perceive Christ's truth, beauty, and glory. Thaddaeus was such a person.

Tradition holds that Thaddaeus was specially blessed with the gift of healing and that through him the Lord healed many hundreds of people in Syria. He is said to have healed the king of that country and won him to the Lord. The supposed conversion threw the land into such turmoil that the king's unbelieving nephew had Thaddaeus bludgeoned to death with a club, which became the symbol for that apostle.

SIMON THE ZEALOT

The third name in the third group is **Simon the Zealot**. The King James Version's "Simon the Canaanite" is based on an unfortunate transliteration of *kananaios*, which was derived from the Hebrew *gannâ*, meaning "jealous" or "zealous." It is the equivalent of the Greek *zēlōtēs* ("zealot"), a description Luke uses of this Simon (Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13).

Zealot may have signified his membership in the radical party of Zealots whose members were determined to throw off the yoke of Rome by force. The Zealots developed during the Maccabean period, when the Jews, under Judas Maccabaeus, revolted against their Greek conquerors. During the time of Christ, another Judas (a common Jewish name of that period) was the outstanding Zealot leader.

The Zealots were one of four dominant religious parties in Judah (along with the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes) but were for the most part motivated more by politics than religion. They were primarily guerrilla fighters who made surprise attacks on Roman posts and patrols and then escaped to the hills or mountains. Sometimes they resorted to terrorism, and the Jewish historian Josephus called them *sicarii* (Latin, "daggermen") because of their frequent assassinations. The heroic defenders of the great Herodian fortress at Masada were Jewish Zealots led by Eleazar. When that brave group fell to Flavius Silva in A.D. 72 after a seven-month siege, the Zealots disappeared from history.

If **Simon** was that sort of **Zealot**, he was a man of intense dedication and perhaps violent passion. His always being listed next to

Judas Iscariot may suggest that those men were somewhat two of a kind, whose primary concern about the Messiah was earthly and material rather than spiritual. But whatever motivations they may originally have had in common soon vanished, as Judas became more confirmed in his rejection of Jesus and Simon more confirmed in his devotion to Him.

Apparently throughout their ministries, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot remained unknown even to most of the church. But they joined the ranks of the unnamed Old Testament saints who “experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. And all these . . . gained approval through their faith” (Heb. 11:36-39).

The Master's Men-
part 6
Judas (10:4b)

and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed Him. (10:4b)

Among the twelve apostles, one stands out against the backdrop of the others as a lonely, tragic misfit, the epitome of human disaster. He is the vilest, most wicked man in Scripture. In the lists of apostles he is always named last and, with the exception of Acts 1:13, is always identified as Jesus' betrayer. For 2,000 years the name **Judas Iscariot** has been a byword for treachery.

Forty verses in the New Testament mention the betrayal of Jesus, and each of them is a reminder of Judas's incredible sin. After the description of his death and his replacement among the twelve in Acts 1, his name is never again mentioned in Scripture. In Dante's *Inferno* Judas occupies the lowest level of hell, which he shares with Lucifer, Satan himself.

His NAME

Judas was a common name in New Testament times and was a second name for one of the other apostles, Thaddaeus. It is a personalized form of Judah, the southern kingdom during the Jewish monarchy and the Roman province of Judea during the time of Christ. Some scholars believe the name means "Yahweh (or Jehovah) leads," and others believe it refers to one who is the object of praise. With either meaning, it was a tragic

misnomer in the case of Judas Iscariot. No human being has ever been less directed by the Lord or less worthy of praise.

Iscariot means “man of Kerioth,” a small town in Judea, about twenty-three miles south of Jerusalem and some seven miles from Hebron. Judas is the only apostle whose name includes a geographical identification, possibly because he was the only Judean among the twelve. All the others, including Jesus, were from Galilee in the north. Judean Jews generally felt superior to the Jews of Galilee; and although Judas himself was from a rural village, he probably did not fit well into the apostolic band.

His CALL

Judas is always listed among the twelve apostles, but his specific call is not recorded in the gospels. He first appears in Matthew’s listing, with no indication as to where or how Jesus called him. Obviously he was attracted to Jesus, and he stayed with Him until the end of His ministry, far past the time when many of the other false disciples had left Him (see John 6:66).

There is no evidence that Judas ever had a spiritual interest in Jesus. It is likely that, from the beginning, he expected Jesus to become a powerful religious and political leader and wanted to use the association with Him for selfish reasons. He recognized Jesus’ obvious miracle-working power as well as His great influence over the multitudes. But he was not interested in the coming of the kingdom for Christ’s sake, or even for the sake of his fellow Jews, but only for the sake of whatever personal gain he might derive from being in the Messiah’s inner circle of leadership. Although he was motivated totally by selfishness, he nevertheless followed the Lord in a halfhearted way—until he was finally convinced that Jesus’ plans for the kingdom were diametrically opposed to his own.

Christ chose Judas intentionally and specifically, “for Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him” (John 6:64). Although the disciples did not at the time understand what He meant, Jesus alluded to His betrayal a year or

more before it occurred. “Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?” Jesus told them soon after the false disciples at Capernaum turned away from Him. John explains that “He meant Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray Him” (vv. 70-71).

David predicted Christ’s betrayal a thousand years before the fact. “Even my close friend, in whom I trusted, who ate my bread,” he wrote, “has lifted up his heel against me” (Ps. 41:9; cf. 55:12-15, 20-21). Although that passage primarily referred to David, its greater significance applied to Jesus Christ, as He Himself declared (John 13:18).

Zechariah even predicted the exact price of betrayal. “And I said to them, ‘If it is good in your sight, give me my wages; but if not, never mind!’ So they weighed out thirty shekels of silver as my wages. Then the Lord said to me, ‘Throw it to the potter, that magnificent price at which I was valued by them.’ So I took the thirty shekels of silver and threw them to the potter in the house of the Lord” (Zech. 11:12-13). At the Lord’s command, the prophet had shepherded the Lord’s people (vv. 4-11), and the wages they paid Zechariah represented the “magnificent price” at which their descendants would value the Messiah Himself.

In His high priestly prayer, Jesus said to His Father, speaking of the twelve, “While I was with them, I was keeping them in Thy name which Thou hast given Me; and I guarded them, and not one of them perished but the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled” (John 17:12). Luther translated “son of perdition” as “lost child,” that is, a child whose nature and intention is to be continually wayward and lost. Jesus lost none of the twelve except the one who was confirmed in his sin and refused to be saved. He chose Judas in order to fulfill Scripture, knowing that Judas would reject that choice.

At the Last Supper Jesus said, “Behold, the hand of the one betraying Me is with Me on the table. For indeed, the Son of Man is going as it has been determined; but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!” (Luke 22:21-22). Although our finite human minds cannot understand it, God had predetermined the betrayal, though, at the same time, Judas was held fully responsible for it, because it was by his own choice.

In Judas’s rejection of Christ there is the same apparent paradox of divine sovereignty and human will that exists in the process of salvation. Although a person must receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior with an

act of his will (John 1:12; 3:16; Rom. 1:16), every believer who does so was chosen to be saved even before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4; cf. Acts 13:48). In the same way, Judas had the opportunity to accept or reject Christ in regard to salvation, although Christ planned from the beginning for the disbelief and rejection that would characterize this disciple. Those seemingly conflicting truths—just as others found in Scripture—are resolved only in the mind of God. The Bible is clear that Jesus extended to Judas the opportunity for salvation to the extent that his unbelief was his own choice and fault (cf. Matt. 23:37; John 5:40). Judas *chose* to reject and betray Christ. That is why Christ did not label him as a victim of sovereign decree but “a devil” (John 6:70) and made clear that he did what he did not because God made him do it but rather Satan (John 13:27).

God also predetermined Judas’s successor among the twelve from the beginning. Just before Pentecost, the Holy Spirit led Peter to explain to the apostles who remained, “It is therefore necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us—beginning with the baptism of John, until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these should become a witness with us of His resurrection” (Acts 1:21-22). Out of the disciples who met that qualification, the eleven then chose “two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias. And they prayed, and said, ‘Thou, Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show which one of these two Thou hast chosen to occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.’ And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles” (vv. 23-26). Both God’s sovereign, predetermined choice and the human choice of the apostles were involved in the selection of Matthias.

A few days later, on the day of Pentecost, Peter said to the crowd in Jerusalem, “Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death” (2:22-23). God sovereignly predetermined Jesus’ crucifixion, but the unbelieving Jews were responsible for sending Him to the cross. It was

God's predetermined will to send His Son to die, and it was rebellious man's determined will to put Him to death.

HIS CHARACTER

Judas's outward personality must have been commendable or at least acceptable. Before the actual betrayal, none of the other disciples accused Judas of any wrongdoing or criticized him for any deficiency. When after three years of training them Jesus predicted that one of the twelve would betray Him, the other eleven had no idea who it might be. At first, "being deeply grieved, they each one began to say to Him, 'Surely not I, Lord?'" (Matt. 26:22). Then "they began to discuss among themselves which one of them it might be who was going to do this thing." But they soon lost sight of the betrayal and began to discuss not who was the worst among them but rather "which one of them was regarded to be greatest" (Luke 22:23-24). In any case, Judas was no more suspect than any of the others. In answer to John's question "Lord, who is it?" Jesus replied, "That is the one for whom I shall dip the morsel and give it to him" (John 13:25-26). Jesus then gave the morsel to Judas, saying, "What you do, do quickly." Still the others had no idea the traitor was Judas. "No one of those reclining at the table knew for what purpose He had said this to him," that is, to Judas (vv. 27-28).

Because he was never suspected by the other disciples, Judas must have been a remarkable hypocrite. He had even been selected treasurer of the group and was perfectly trusted (John 13:29). It is probable that, like most of the other disciples, he had led a respectable, religious life before Jesus called him. Perhaps he had not been an extortioner and traitor to his own people like Matthew or a hot-blooded revolutionary and possible assassin like Simon the Zealot, although his coming from Kerioth of Judea might have obscured his background to the other disciples, who were Galileans.

Judas apparently guarded what he said. His only recorded words were spoken near the end of Jesus' ministry, when he objected to Mary's anointing Jesus' feet with expensive ointment. "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii, and given to poor people?" he asked (John

12:5). “Now he said this,” John explains, “not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it” (v. 6). Under the Holy Spirit’s inspiration, John was given that insight which he recorded when writing the gospel decades later; but at the time of the incident he had no awareness of Judas’s ulterior motive.

Judas was no more naturally sinful than any other person ever born. He was made of the same stuff as the other apostles, with no less common goodness and no more innate sinfulness. But the same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay, and Judas’s choice not to trust in Jesus became more and more hardened and fixed as he continued to resist the Lord’s love and Word.

Judas was probably one of the youngest disciples and likely an outwardly devout and patriotic Jew. Though not as radical as Simon the Zealot, he was anxious for the Roman yoke to be thrown off and expected Jesus to usher in the messianic kingdom that would accomplish that. Rome would be overthrown, and God’s people would be reestablished in peace and prosperity.

But Judas was first of all a materialist, as his stealing bears witness. He wanted the earthly benefits of a restored Jewish kingdom but had no interest in personal righteousness or regeneration. He was perfectly satisfied with himself and came to Jesus solely for material advantage, not for spiritual blessing. Jesus gave him every opportunity to renounce his self-life and seek God’s forgiveness and salvation, but Judas refused. The Lord gave the parables of the unjust steward and the wedding garments, but Judas did not apply the truths to himself. The Lord taught much about the dangers of greed and love of money and even warned the twelve that one of them was a devil, but Judas would not listen. He did not argue with Christ, as Peter and some of the others did and, in fact, probably openly acted as if he agreed with Him. But the response of his heart was continual rejection. Jesus chose Judas because the betrayal was in God’s plan and was prophesied in the Old Testament; yet Jesus gave Judas every opportunity not to fulfill that prophecy.

Judas was in the third group of four disciples—with James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot—indicating he was among the disciples who were least intimate with Jesus. It is likely he was on the fringe even of his own subgroup, participating no more than necessary, and

that from the sidelines. It is doubtful he was close to any of the others. He was thought to be honest, but he developed no close friendships or intimate relationships. He was a loner.

In the Orient, a host would always offer an honored guest the first sop, which consisted of a morsel of bread dipped in a syrup-like mixture of fruit and nuts. At the Last Supper Jesus offered the first sop to Judas. Yet at the very moment the Lord extended special honor to Judas, “Satan then entered into him” (John 13:27). To the very end Jesus loved Judas, but he would have none of what He offered him.

His PROGRESSIVE REJECTION

Judas did not begin his discipleship intending to betray Jesus. He was in full sympathy with what he thought was Jesus’ purpose and plan and was ready to support Him. After each miracle Judas may have expected Jesus to announce His kingship and begin a campaign against Rome, whose vast army, great as it was, would have been no match for Jesus’ supernatural power. Judas kept hanging on and hanging on, expecting Jesus to fulfill his dreams of defeating the despised oppressor. Like a gambler who thinks every loss puts him that much closer to winning, Judas perhaps thought that every failure of Jesus to use His power against Rome brought that ultimate and inevitable goal a bit closer.

For three years Judas hoped, and at the triumphal entry into Jerusalem he must have thought the time had finally come. Obviously, Judas reasoned, Jesus had been building up to a grand climax, waiting for the crowds to fully recognize His messiahship and His right to the throne of David. He would ascend His throne by popular demand, and the Lion of Judah would at last expel and destroy the eagle of Rome.

But when Jesus rejected the crowd’s crown and instead began to teach even more earnestly about His imminent arrest and death, it was Judas’s hopes and expectations that were expelled and destroyed. He was devastated that Jesus could build up to such a perfect opportunity and intentionally let it slip through His hands. He must have thought Jesus mad to willingly allow Himself to be mistreated and even killed, when with one word He could destroy any opponent. Now he knew beyond doubt

that, whatever Jesus intended to do, it had no relationship to his own motives and plans.

Judas started at the same place as the other disciples. But they trusted in Jesus and were saved, and as they surrendered more and more to His control, they grew away from their old ways. They, too, were sinful, worldly, selfish, unloving, and materialistic. But they submitted to Jesus, and He changed them. Judas, however, never advanced beyond crass materialism. He refused to trust Jesus and more and more resisted His lordship. Eventually he was confirmed in his own way to the point that he permanently closed the door to God's grace. Like Faust, he irretrievably sold his soul to the devil.

When Jesus turned His back on the crown offered by the multitude, Judas turned his back on Jesus. He could no longer restrain his vile, wretched motives for self-glory and gain. He had given a glimpse of his true self when he showed more concern for the money "wasted" on perfume to anoint Jesus than concern for the Lord's imminent arrest and death, which the disciples by now knew awaited Him in Jerusalem (John 11:16).

Judas's fascination with Jesus had turned first to disappointment and finally to hatred. He had never loved Jesus but only sought to use Him. He had never loved his fellow disciples but rather stole for himself from what small resources they had. Now he turned completely against them.

On the last night Jesus was together with the disciples, He washed their feet with His own hands, to teach them humility and service. As He began He said, "You are clean, but not all of you," referring to Judas (John 13:10-11). After the object lesson He gave another warning that Judas could have heeded: "I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, 'He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me'" (John 13:18). Jesus grieved over Judas, being unwilling that even this vile man should perish (cf. 2 Pet. 3:9). As the time for the betrayal came closer, Jesus "became troubled in spirit, and testified, and said, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, that one of you will betray Me'" (v. 21). He did not grieve over the loss of His own life, which He willingly laid down. He grieved over the spiritual death of Judas and, it seems, made one last appeal before it became forever too late. He knew Judas's unbelief, greed, ingratitude, treachery, duplicity, hypocrisy, and hatred. Still He loved him. The death He was about to die was as much for

Judas's sin as for the sins of any person ever born, and it was for Judas that the Lord grieved as only He can grieve. He lamented over Judas in the same way He had lamented over Jerusalem: "How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matt. 23:37).

Throughout church history, in the name of love and compassion, some people have tried to attribute a good motive to Judas's betrayal or at least to minimize its evil. But such an attempt flies in the face of Scripture, including Jesus' own specific words. The Lord called Judas a devil and the son of perdition. To make Judas appear better than that is to make God a liar. Every unsaved person is under Satan's control and serves Satan's will. But when Judas accepted the morsel from Jesus' hands without repentance or regret, Satan took possession of him in a way that is frightening to contemplate (John 13:27).

His BETRAYAL

Judas did not betray Jesus in a sudden fit of anger. We are not told when the idea first came to him, but apparently the incident of Mary's anointing Jesus with the perfume prompted him to pursue it. It was right after this that "one of the twelve, named Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests, and said, 'What are you willing to give me to deliver Him up to you?'" After accepting the thirty pieces of silver, "from then on he began looking for a good opportunity to betray Him" (Matt. 26:14-16). Luke adds that he sought "a good opportunity to betray Him to them apart from the multitude" (22:6). Judas was a coward, and at that time he assumed the crowds who acclaimed Jesus during the triumphal entry would remain loyal to Him. He wanted no one to know of his treachery, certainly not a hostile multitude. Like the chief priests and scribes who paid him, he was "afraid of the people" (Luke 22:2).

It is difficult to determine the equivalent modern buying power of the thirty pieces of silver Judas received, especially since the specific silver coin is not identified. But at the most generous reckoning, it was a trifling sum for betraying any person to his death, much less the Son of God. The relatively small amount suggests that, in his greed and hatred,

Judas was willing to settle for any price. It also suggests the disdain the chief priests and scribes had for Judas. Their hatred for Jesus was public and well known; but Judas was one of Jesus' disciples and friends, and the Jewish leaders doubtlessly had contempt for his treachery even though they used it to their own ends. The small price further suggests the low value all of them placed on Jesus' life.

So that His enemies could recognize Jesus in the darkness of Gethsemane, Judas "had given them a signal, saying, 'Whomever I shall kiss, He is the one'" (Mark 14:44). His contempt for Jesus was such that he used that cherished mark of love and friendship as his sign of betrayal.

Judas not only profaned the Passover by receiving blood money but he also profaned Gethsemane, the private place of worship and solace that He knew Jesus loved. "Judas then, having received the Roman cohort, and officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, came there with lanterns and torches and weapons" (John 18:3). Unaware that Jesus knew of his wicked plan, Judas thought to deceive Him by the kiss, feigning love and loyalty. But Jesus already knew the soldiers were coming and "went forth, and said to them, 'Whom do you seek?'" (v. 4). When they said, "Jesus the Nazarene," He replied, "I am He" (v. 5). As if to reinforce his hateful determination to betray Jesus, Judas proceeded to kiss Him, although it was no longer necessary to identify Him. His supreme act of hypocrisy was to pretend love for Jesus while giving Him over to His enemies. The Greek text of Matthew 26:49 uses an intensive form that suggests Judas kissed Jesus fervently and repeatedly. Yet even in face of this diabolical sham, Jesus called Judas "friend" as He told him, "Do what you have come for" (v. 50). Jesus' love extended even beyond Judas's point of no return.

The degree of Judas's betrayal was unique but not its nature. Through Ezekiel, God rebuked His people for profaning Him "for handfuls of barley and fragments of bread" (Ezek. 13:19), and through Amos He charged them with selling "the righteous for money and the needy for a pair of sandals" (Amos 2:6). Still today men and women will sell out the Lord for whatever they think is worth more.

It may not be for silver,
It may not be for gold;
But yet by tens of thousands,

The Prince of life is sold.
Sold for a godless friendship;
Sold for a selfish aim;
Sold for a fleeting trifle;
Sold for an empty name.
Sold in the mart of science;
Sold in the seat of power.
Sold at the shrine of fortune;
Sold in pleasure's hour.
Sold for your awful bargain,
None but God's eye can see.
Ponder my soul the question,
How shall He be sold by thee?
Sold, O God. What a moment
Stilled his conscience's voice?
Sold, unto weeping angels
Record the fatal choice.
Sold, but the price accepted
To a living coal shall turn;
With the pangs of a late repentance
Deep in a soul to burn.

(Author unknown. Cited in Herbert Lockyer, *All the Apostles of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972], p.' 110.)

Judas sold Jesus for greed. He was malicious, vengeful, ambitious, and hateful of everything good and righteous. But above all, he was avaricious.

No man could be more like the devil than a perverted apostle. And for the same reason, every false teacher who holds the name of Christ stands in special guilt and is worthy of special disdain.

His DEATH

“When lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin,” James says, “and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death” (James 1:15). Judas’s sin caused him to sell out Christ, his fellow apostles, and his own soul. When Jesus had been found guilty by the mock trial in the Sanhedrin and was turned over to Pilate, Judas “felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood’” (Matt. 27:3-4). But remorse is not repentance. Judas regretted what he had done and recognized something of its horrible sinfulness. But he did not have a change of mind, and he did not ask God to change his heart. He knew he could not undo the damage he had done, but he tried to mollify his conscience by returning the money he had been paid for his wickedness. Because he lived only on the material level, he somehow thought he could resolve his problem by the physical act of giving back the blood money. Then his unforgiven heart turned from vengeance against Christ to vengeance against himself, and he “went away and hanged himself” (v. 5). That did not end the misery of his conscience, however, for his guilt and anguish will last through all eternity.

Apparently Judas failed in his hanging attempt, and Luke reports the consummation of his death. It may have been that the branch to which the rope was tied broke and he fell over a precipice or down a hill, “and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out” (Acts 1:18).

Although they had no compunction about making false charges against Jesus and of unlawfully condemning Him to death, the chief priests’ consciences would not let them put the thirty pieces of silver back into the Temple treasury after Judas threw the money at their feet, “since it is the price of blood” (Matt. 27:6). In perfect fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy (Zech. 11:12-13), “they counseled together and with the money bought the Potter’s Field as a burial place for strangers. For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day” (Matt. 27:7-8).

God overruled the wickedness of Jesus’ betrayer and executioners and used it to fulfill His own Word. Even those who bitterly opposed the Lord’s will found themselves unwittingly fulfilling His Word.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE LIFE OF JUDAS

Even wickedness and tragedy can teach valuable lessons, and there is great profit from studying the life of Judas. First of all he is the world's greatest example of lost opportunity. Judas was among the original twelve men Jesus called to be His apostles, His gospel ambassadors to the world. He lived and talked and ministered with Jesus for three years, hearing God's Word from the mouth of His own Son and seeing God's power manifested as never before on earth. No human being has ever heard a more complete and perfect declaration of the gospel or seen more perfect obedience to it. Judas heard the perfect gospel and saw the perfect life. To none of the apostles did Jesus give more specific warning about sin—and more repeated opportunity to repent of it and to believe—than He did to Judas. Yet Judas turned his back on grace incarnate.

Today many people have heard the gospel clearly and seen genuine though imperfect examples of its transforming power. Yet they, too, reject it and, like Judas, choose instead to stay in the way that leads to destruction.

Second, Judas's life provides the world's greatest example of wasted privilege. He lusted for temporary material possessions and riches when he could have inherited the universe forever. It is a tragically foolish bargain to exchange the riches of God's kingdom for the pittance the world can offer.

Third, Judas's life serves as the clearest illustration of love of money being the root of all kinds of evil (see 1 Tim. 6:10). In the unbelievable extreme of greed, he loved money so much that he sold the Son of God for a trifling amount of it.

Fourth, Judas's life is the supreme object in history of the forbearing, patient love of God. Only God could have known the utter evil of Judas's heart from the beginning and yet never have withdrawn His offer of grace. At the Last Supper Christ presented Judas the dipped morsel as a gesture of love and honor; and even as He was being betrayed by the kiss, He called Judas "friend."

The life of Judas provided an essential qualification in preparing Christ for His high priestly role. Judas's betrayal brought great anguish to Jesus' heart, and through that and other such torment the Son of God was perfected through His suffering (Heb. 2:10). Christ can understand and

sympathize with our sufferings partly because Judas helped make Christ's own suffering complete.

Judas was the consummate hypocrite of all time, the supreme illustration of an ungodly life that hides behind Christ while he serves Satan.

Someone has well said,

Still as of old,
Man by himself is priced.
For thirty pieces of silver
Judas sold himself, not Christ.

(Author unknown)

Principles for **Effective Ministry**

(10:5-15)

These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them, saying, “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; freely you received, freely give. Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts, or a bag for your journey, or even two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for the worker is worthy of his support. And into whatever city or village you enter, inquire who is worthy in it; and abide there until you go away. And as you enter the house, give it your greeting. And if the house is worthy, let your greeting of peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your greeting of peace return to you. And whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake off the dust of your feet. Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city.” (10:5-15)

After the listing of the apostles, chapter 10 may be divided into three parts. The first section (vv. 5-15) deals with the basic task of ministry, the next section (vv. 16-23) with reaction to ministry, and the last section (vv. 24-42) with the cost of ministry.

The apostles were the original missionaries, trained and sent forth to preach the gospel to a world under God’s judgment, into a harvest that was plentiful but for which the workers were few (Matt. 9:37; cf. 2 Cor. 5:11). The instruction Jesus gave the apostles at this time was for short-term mission work in their own country; but the basic concepts apply to

every believer the Lord sends out into ministry. Some of the specifics were restricted to a given time and situation, whereas the principles are broad and universal.

One of the tragedies of contemporary Christianity, and of the church throughout most of its history, is that many of those who purport to represent Jesus Christ either do not represent Him at all or represent Him poorly. Those whom Christ sends out cannot minister faithfully and effectively for Him if they do not understand and follow the principles for ministry that He Himself taught.

Jesus' purpose for this first apostolic mission was twofold. First, it was for the sake of the lost, to give them opportunity to hear and accept the gospel; and, second, it was for the benefit of the twelve themselves, to give them training in the enterprise of winning souls. Jesus was instructing His disciples how to reproduce disciples.

In Matthew 10:5-15 Jesus articulates eight principles, each of which is a general requirement for effective ministry: a divine commission, a central objective, a clear message, confirming credentials, confident trust, settled commitment, concentration on those who are receptive, and rejection of those who are contemptuous.

A DIVINE COMMISSION

These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them, saying, (10:5a)

The **twelve** had not volunteered to become disciples and apostles, nor did they volunteer to minister in Christ's behalf. They were sovereignly called, commissioned, and sent out by Him. They were under divine orders. What the Lord said of Jeremiah could be said of each of the twelve: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you" (Jer. 1:5).

From Mark's parallel passage we learn that Jesus sent the disciples out in pairs (6:7). In that way they would have companionship while beginning a type of work that was new and completely foreign to them. Loneliness is fertile ground for temptation and weakness, and by going out

with companions they would be less prone to discouragement, depression, and self-pity. They could encourage one another, hold each other accountable, and take turns ministering, thereby helping to reduce pressure and fatigue. In addition to that, the Old Testament principle of a testimony being confirmed by two or three witnesses (Deut. 19:15) would give added authority to the apostles' preaching.

This particular time of ministry probably lasted only a few weeks, but it was specially significant, because it was the first time kingdom truth was proclaimed by anyone other than Christ Himself. In fulfillment of the purpose for which Christ had said to each of them, "Follow Me!" He now **sent out** each of them on their first assignment in His behalf.

God's calling and sending of His people today is not as direct as that, but it can nevertheless be known. Three criteria can help a believer decide whether or not he is called into the Lord's service. The first criterion is strong desire. God's Word reveals that when we delight in Him, He will give us the desires of our heart (Ps. 37:4). The Christian who loves the Lord and wants above all else to please Him is sensitive to His will in ways that an unfaithful believer cannot be. When one's life is centered on joyous obedience and one's motive is God-honoring, it is perfectly appropriate to seek a place of ministry in the Lord's service. Paul says that if a godly man aspires to the office of bishop, or overseer, "it is a fine work he desires to do" (1 Tim. 3:1). The closer we walk with the Lord, the more certain we can be that our desires are His desires.

A second criterion is the confirmation of the church. When a person feels a strong desire to preach but does not have the encouragement and support of godly believers who know him well, he should reevaluate the source of his feelings. The Lord uses other believers to confirm His call to individuals. The qualifications for church leaders, given in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are the standards by which the church is to measure the suitability of a person who desires to minister. Such confirmation is illustrated in what Paul told Timothy: "Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed upon you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery [elders]" (1 Tim. 4:14).

A third criterion for determining God's call is that of opportunity. When a person has a strong desire to minister and has the encouragement of the godly believers in the church, God will open a clear door of service, just as he did for Paul at Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:9).

The twelve were called and sent out by the direct spoken command of Jesus. His will for them was specific and unmistakable. *Parangellō*, the verb behind **instructing**, had a number of usages in New Testament times. As a military term it represented the order of an officer to those under his command, an order that required unhesitating and unqualified obedience. As a legal term it was used of an official court summons, the equivalent of a modern subpoena, which to disregard made a person liable to severe punishment. Used ethically, the term represented a moral obligation that was binding on a person of integrity. As a medical term it represented a doctor's prescription or instruction given to a patient. The word was also used to refer to certain accepted standards or techniques, such as those for writing or oratory.

In every dimension of its use, *parangellō* included the idea of binding a person to make the proper response to an instruction. The soldier was bound to obey the orders of his superiors; a person involved in a legal matter was bound by the court's orders; a person of integrity was bound by moral principles; a patient was bound to follow his doctor's instruction if he wanted to get well; and a successful writer or speaker was bound by the standards of his craft. In various forms, the word is used some thirty times in the New Testament.

Jesus used it to direct a leper (Luke 5:14), to command an evil spirit (8:29), to order Jairus and his wife (8:56), and to charge His disciples (9:21). The officers of the Sanhedrin used the term when they commanded Peter and John "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:18), as did some of the believing Pharisees in Jerusalem who insisted that it was necessary "to direct [Christians] to observe the Law of Moses" (Acts 15:5). Paul used the term frequently of his own commands as an apostle (1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:4, 6, 10, 12; 1 Tim. 6:13) as well as of instruction by other Christian leaders (1 Tim. 1:3; 6:17).

When one realizes his calling is of the Lord, he has no choice but to respond just as a soldier responds to his superior officer or a person in the courtroom responds to the judge. God sets the standards and gives the orders; our responsibility is to obey. God does not require creativity or innovation in His ministers, but He does require obedience and faithfulness (1 Cor. 4:2). The minister is not a chef but a waiter. He is not called to prepare the meal—because God has already done that—but to serve it just as he has received it. Like Paul, every minister is under God's

divine compulsion and should remind himself, “Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:16).

In a general sense *every* believer is commissioned by the Lord and is bound to obey His call to go and present Him to the world. Not every believer is called to be a preacher, teacher, pastor, or missionary; but every believer is called to be Christ’s witness to the world. Jesus Christ has no followers who are not under His order in the Great Commission to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:19).

The first and most essential element for ministry is the unqualified understanding that one is sovereignly called, gifted, and empowered by the Lord to do His work in His way. Children of God do not determine their own destiny or mark out their own patterns or plans. They are under divine orders, and their supreme, overarching concern must be to submit to Christ in all things.

A CENTRAL OBJECTIVE

“Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”
(10:5b-6)

The second principle for ministry that emerges indirectly from this passage is that of having a central objective. A ministry that is not focused on certain priority objectives is a ministry doomed to mediocrity. God gives different objectives to different people, and He often changes objectives from time to time and situation to situation, as He did with the apostles. But He never asks a person to do everything in sight. He is a loving and reasonable God, and when we find ourselves frustrated and overworked, we may be trying to do more than He has called us to do or are seeking to do it in our own power. In spite of the great personal effort required in faithful spiritual service (cf. Phil. 2:30; Col. 1:24), when the yoke and load are truly His, Jesus assures us they will be easy and light (Matt. 11:29).

The Great Commission was Christ's broad, general order to proclaim the gospel to the whole world, but in carrying out that commission the apostles would be given specific gifts and specific ministries. Yet at this particular time in Christ's plan for proclaiming the gospel and for preparing the apostles, His objective was especially narrow and limited.

In the way of and **any city of** represent two Greek possessive genitives. The apostles were not to go into any **way**, or area, belonging to **Gentiles** or into **any city** that belonged to **Samaritans**. In other words, they were not at this time to proclaim the kingdom message of salvation to non-Jewish people.

That this was a temporary command is seen not only from the clear call of the Great Commission but from the fact that Jesus had already ministered both to **Gentiles** and to **Samaritans**. He had healed the Gentile centurion's servant (Matt. 8:5-13) and had first revealed Himself publicly as the Messiah to the Samaritan woman of Sychar, who believed in Him herself and led other Samaritans to saving faith (John 4:7-42).

The redemption of the whole world had always been in God's plan. He did not call Abraham in order that only he and his descendants, the Hebrew people, would be blessed but that through those descendants "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). God's chosen people, like His only begotten Son, were called to be a light to the Gentile nations to draw them to His righteousness and to "bring salvation to the end of the earth" (Acts 13:47; cf. Isa. 42:6; 49:6; 60:3; 62:1-2). From the beginning, Israel was not called simply to receive, but also to be the channel of, God's blessing. The covenant people were to be a witnessing people to the rest of the world, that is, to **Gentiles**.

The **Samaritans** were especially despised by Jews, because they were half-breeds, neither true Jews nor true Gentiles. But Jesus always showed kindness to Samaritans, even to the woman from Sychar who was living in adultery. And in His parable of neighborly love, a Samaritan was favorably portrayed as the epitome of godly compassion. In Christ's last words to the apostles before His ascension, He specifically names Samaria as a field of ministry (Acts 1:8).

There are perhaps three reasons that Jesus chose to restrict the apostles' ministry at this time to **the lost sheep of the house of Israel**. First was the Jews' special place in God's plan. They were God's chosen

people, the people of the covenants, the promises, and the law John the Baptist preached primarily to fellow Jews, “saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (Matt. 3:1-2), and Jesus began His own ministry with the same declaration to the same people (4:17). As He explained to the Samaritan woman, “Salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22); that is, it came to the Jews first and, through them, comes to the rest of the world, just as God had promised Abraham. Israel, represented by “Jerusalem, and . . . Judea,” was the launching point for taking the gospel to “Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Even Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, always began a new ministry in the local synagogue whenever he was able (see Acts 9:20; 13:5; 18:4; 19:8). Jews were the first to hear the gospel and the first to preach the gospel.

Had the apostles gone first to the Samaritans and Gentiles, the Jews would have been very reluctant to listen to them, because they would have perceived the apostles as bearers of a pagan religion. Although they had greatly distorted and disobeyed God’s revelation, the Jews were right in their belief that His revelation to them was unique and that they had a unique role in His plan of redemption.

Second, Jesus sent the apostles to preach first to Jews because they were barely up to the task of witnessing effectively to their own people—much less of witnessing to Gentiles and Samaritans, whose cultures and ways they little understood and greatly despised. Even after Pentecost, Peter was not convinced the gospel was for Gentiles. The Lord had to persuade him through a special vision and by firsthand witness of the Spirit’s work in Cornelius and his household (Acts 10). Peter’s prejudice was so strong that many years later he, along with Barnabas and other Jewish Christians, broke fellowship with their Gentile brothers in Christ, “fearing the party of the circumcision” (Gal. 2:12-13), who taught that Gentiles had to become Jewish proselytes before they could become Christians.

Except for Cornelius and his household, the Ethiopian eunuch, and a few others, the gospel had little impact on the Gentile world until the Lord raised up Paul. Although a former Pharisee and a “Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil. 3:5), this apostle had grown up in Tarsus, a Gentile city, and was learned in Gentile literature, religion, and culture.

Third, Jesus probably restricted the apostles’ first ministry to the Jews for the practical reason that the twelve needed a special point of

attack, a limited and familiar field in which they could concentrate their fledgling efforts. An unfocused ministry is a shallow ministry. The effective worker for Jesus Christ puts his primary energy and effort into the task the Lord has assigned him. He is concerned for all of the Lord's work, but he does not try to do it all himself.

Jesus' own earthly ministry was limited. He did not travel outside Palestine, and His ministry to Gentiles and Samaritans was incidental when compared to His ministry to the Jews. He did not have preaching missions in Gentile territory, and He ministered to Samaritans only as He passed through their land while traveling between the Jewish regions of Judea and Galilee. All of His public teaching and preaching and the vast majority of His miraculous works were done among the Jews. To the Canaanite woman from the district of Tyre and Sidon, Jesus said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24). As already pointed out, His personal ministry to others besides Jews and His commands to take the gospel into all the world show that "only to ... Israel" referred to the primary objective of His work *at that time*. The gospel was not generally taken to non-Jews until it was first fully presented to God's chosen people (cf. Rom. 1:16).

Jesus was now giving a limited command to His apostles that was valid only for that time and place in His divine plan of world redemption. But the command illustrates a principle that is valid for every ministry in every time and place—namely, that God gives His people clear, specific objectives for service and ministry.

Self-styled messiahs are always egotists who expect to win the world immediately. Their ministry often seeks to be so vast that it becomes all breadth and no depth, like a lake a mile across and an inch deep.

A CLEAR MESSAGE

**And as you go, preach, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand."
(10:7)**

The third precept for effective ministry illustrated here is that of having a clear message. Many people fail to understand and receive the gospel because they have not heard it clearly presented.

Some years ago a fellow pastor who was sitting next to me on a plane took a small piece of paper and began writing on it until it was completely covered. When he handed it to me and asked me what it said, I could hardly distinguish a single letter. “Well, what was the first word I wrote?” he asked; and I had to confess again that I had no idea. Then he showed me what he had done. He gave me another small, blank piece of paper and told me to write “Christ” on it. On top of that first word and all over the rest of the paper I was then told to write “Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopal, Pentecostal, dispensational, fundamental, evangelical, liberal, Protestant,” and perhaps a dozen more such terms. His point was clear: the simple gospel of Jesus Christ is sometimes so encumbered with secondary matters and human interpretations that the world has no idea what its central message is.

Not only the world but many believers are confused about Christianity because preachers and teachers digress from the gospel of the kingdom into every sort of secondary cause and emphasis. Satan’s surest way of making the gospel impotent is simply to keep it from being understood. When the gospel is clouded with political, cultural, social, economic, environmental, ecclesiastical, and other such causes, its message is muddled and its power is diluted.

The message Jesus gave the apostles to **preach** was simply stated: **The kingdom of heaven is at hand.** Obviously they were to elaborate and explain what that meant, but the basic truth was unmistakable.

In Scripture, the kingdom of heaven can be viewed in three aspects. First, it is manifest in conversion, when a person enters the sovereign rule of God by trusting in Christ for salvation (cf. Matt. 18:3). Second, it is manifest in consecration, as believers live out the divine principles of God’s revelation by obedience to His Word. “The kingdom of God is . . . righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). Third, the kingdom will be seen in its glorious millennial form when Christ returns to earth to establish and rule it in person and then sets up His eternal kingdom (Matt. 25:31; Acts 3:19-21; Rev 11:15; 20:4).

The central message of the kingdom is the message about the King. By definition, a kingdom is the domain ruled by a king, its sovereign. But

the essence of a kingdom is not the geographical area but the actual *ruling* of the king, the administration of his will over the citizens of the kingdom. **The kingdom of heaven** is above all the domain of God's lordship, where He rules by His divine will. All of Jesus' teaching—from His public instruction of the multitudes in the Sermon on the Mount through His private instruction to the twelve disciples at the Last Supper and for forty days after His resurrection—was teaching the truths and principles of life in God's **kingdom**.

The gospel of the kingdom has many practical ramifications, social as well as personal. But until its central message of God's sovereign provision for man's salvation is clearly understood, accepted, and obeyed, trying to apply it to any other area of life is both disobedient to Christ's command and futile. The gospel transforms society only as it transforms individuals.

CONFIRMING CREDENTIALS

Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; freely you received, freely give. (10:8)

The fourth principle of ministry presented here is that of confirming credentials. Doctors, lawyers, and other professionals prominently display the diplomas and other documents that certify their qualifications and authority to practice. In a far more important way, those who represent Christ must have credentials that confirm their divine mission and message. Jesus gave confirming signs for His own ministry, and now He calls the apostles to demonstrate their authority by performing similar signs and wonders.

Because the twelve had no formal training and were obviously not part of the established Jewish religious leadership, which was dominated by the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and priests; because they were not even itinerant rabbis like Jesus; and because there was no New Testament to confirm their message, and most Jews had a distorted understanding

even of their own Scriptures, the Old Testament, they had to have a special means of confirming their preaching and teaching.

“The signs of a true apostle,” Paul declared, are “signs and wonders and miracles” (2 Cor. 12:12). It was with those evidential signs that Jesus empowered the apostles as He sent them out on their first mission to preach to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

The blind man healed in Jerusalem immediately recognized Jesus’ power to heal as proof He was from God. He told the unbelieving Pharisees, “Well, here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where He is from, and yet He opened my eyes. We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing, and does His will, He hears him. Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, He could do nothing” (John 9:30-33).

The signs, wonders, and miracles Jesus commanded the apostles to perform were not for the purpose of simply demonstrating raw supernatural power. Jesus did not tell the apostles, for example, to disappear and reappear, to move the Temple from one place to another, or any such thing. The miracles they performed created wonder and demonstrated the character of God and the nature of His kingdom.

The first of the miraculous credential was the ability to **heal the sick** and **cleansed the leper**. Jesus did not want the people simply to know God’s power, but to know that He offered His power to *help them*. The miracles were signs pointing to God’s compassion and mercy. They demonstrated the sympathetic heart of God, who cares for the suffering, the hurting, the afflicted, and the needy. The future kingdom coming to earth will bring the removal of disease and the restoration of broken bodies, just as God’s Word had predicted (Isa. 29:18; 35:5-6; 42:7). Thus these miracles not only revealed the nature of God but predicted the millennium.

When John was imprisoned and sent his disciples to ask Jesus if He were truly the Messiah, Jesus answered, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matt. 11:4-5). Jesus knew John would recognize those miracles as the confirming marks of God’s Messiah and God’s kingdom.

Though such apostolic miracles ceased with termination of the apostles' work, those who genuinely represent Jesus Christ still give themselves to the sick, the suffering, the downtrodden, and the needy of every sort. The Christian leader who spends all of his time and effort working with those who are healthy and well-to-do either is not sent by God or is not fully faithful to his calling. Every person needs the gospel and every believer continues to need God's help and provision, but God has compassion for those who are in great need.

The Old Testament made that truth clear. "The needy will not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the afflicted perish forever," David wrote (Ps. 9:18). " 'Because of the devastation of the afflicted, because of the groaning of the needy, now I will arise,' says the Lord; 'I will set him in the safety for which he longs'" (Ps. 12:5). Again David wrote, "All my bones will say, 'Lord, who is like Thee, who delivers the afflicted from him who is too strong for him, and the afflicted and the needy from him who robs him?'" (Ps. 35:10), and "I know that the Lord will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and justice for the poor" (Ps. 140:12). "The afflicted and needy are seeking water," God declared through Isaiah, "but there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst; I, the Lord, will answer them Myself, as the God of Israel I will not forsake them" (Isa. 41:17). God is the refuge of the afflicted (Ps. 14:6).

By contrast, the world and its representatives have little compassion. The godless person "oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore a pledge" (Ezek. 18:12). He persecutes the poor (Ps. 10:2), puts heavy burdens on them and defrauds them (Amos 5:11; 8:5-6, grinds them down (Isa. 3:15), and devours them (Hab. 3:14). The world has little use for the afflicted. What concern there is comes as the residual fruit of Christian influence on society.

False prophets have no mercy or compassion but rather use and abuse people to their own selfish advantage. Jesus warned about "the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and like respectful greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues, and places of honor at banquets" but "who devour widows' houses" (Mark 12:38-40).

Christians who are thoroughly orthodox in doctrine and sound in moral character often show little compassion for the poor, the sick, and the afflicted. In such cases they are ineffective and inconsistent representatives of Jesus Christ, despite their sound doctrine and high

morals, because they lack an important credential that should mark the servant of Christ.

The second apostolic credential was the power to **raise the dead** and **cast out demons**. Here the apostles are enabled to manifest God's power even in bringing the dead back to life and in invading and conquering the unseen demonic kingdom of darkness.

Such gifts of miraculous powers were restricted to the apostolic age, and no believer today manifests such supernatural apostolic credentials. But though it is shown in less dramatic and physically awesome ways, the mark of divine power still validates the work of those God sends out to do His will. The ministry of the true servant of Christ is characterized by God's power in redeeming lives, giving divine spiritual understanding, and bringing spiritual growth. Through the faithful witness even of the least-gifted believer the gospel has unleashed power to raise the spiritually dead to life and to shatter the work of demons and of Satan himself.

The third confirming credential was obedience to Christ's admonition, **freely you received, freely give**. The apostles were given their miraculous power from God, and they were to use it without thought of personal gain or advantage. It was God's power, not theirs, and it was to be used for His glory, not their prosperity. The faithful servant of Jesus Christ is marked by unselfishness.

Exorcists were common among the Jews of Jesus' day, and many of them made a lucrative living purporting to cast out demons. People who were demon possessed or had loved ones who were possessed were willing to pay almost any price for deliverance, and there were plenty of charlatans willing to take advantage of their desperation. People would also pay whatever they could for physical healing, and many became like the woman with the hemorrhage, who "had endured much at the hands of many physicians, and had spent all that she had and was not helped at all" (Mark 5:26).

The apostles could have become immensely wealthy had they charged for healing, raising the dead, and casting out demons. Simon the magician had visions of such wealth as he saw the dramatic miracles being performed in Samaria by Philip. When Peter and John came up there and began laying their hands on the believers that they might receive the Holy Spirit, Simon "offered them money, saying, 'Give this authority to me as

well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’ But Peter said to him, ‘May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!’” (Acts 8:18-20).

In New Testament times rabbis were bound by Talmudic law to teach for nothing, for the same basic reason Jesus gave the apostles. Moses had been given the law freely by God, and rabbis were not to charge for teaching it. The only exception was for teaching a small child of parents who were shirking their own responsibility for teaching him. The Mishna held that a rabbi was no more to take money for teaching than a judge was to take money for his decision in a court or a witness for his testimony. Rabbi Zedek wrote, “Make not the law a crown wherewith to aggrandize thyself, or a spade wherewith to dig.” The famous Hillel said, “He who makes worldly use of the crown of the law shall waste away, hence thou mayest infer that whosoever desires a profit for himself from the words of the law is helping his own destruction.”

False teachers, on the other hand, put a price on their ministry, because their motive is not to serve either God or men but themselves. Isaiah spoke of such false shepherds of God’s people “who have no understanding; they have all turned to their own way, each one to his unjust gain, to the last one” (Isa. 56:11). Peter says of them that “in their greed they will exploit you with false words”; but, he goes on to say, “their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep” (2 Pet. 2:3).

One qualification for elders is that they “shepherd the flock of God . . . not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain” (1 Pet. 5:2; cf. Titus 1:7). They are to be “free from the love of money” (1 Tim. 3:3). The pastor who puts a price on his ministry prices himself out of God’s blessing.

The present application of this teaching should be that God’s ministers are to be supported by God’s people, because “the worker is worthy of his support,” as Jesus goes on to say (Matt. 10:10; cf. Luke 10:7). But they are not to put their services out for hire to the highest bidder or demand a given amount they feel they deserve to be paid. It is their responsibility to faithfully minister and the people’s responsibility to faithfully support them. This balance becomes clear in the next element of our Lord’s teaching.

CONFIDENT FAITH

Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts, or a bag for your journey, or even two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for the worker is worthy of his support. (10:9-10)

The fifth principle of ministry practically illustrated in this passage is that of confidently trusting God for whatever is needed. The apostles not only were not to demand payment for their services but were not to amass a great amount of money in advance of their mission. They were not to **acquire gold, or silver, or copper for [their] money belts**. Those three metals represented the various coinages in use at the time, in descending order of value. They were not to take valuable **gold** or **silver** coins or even less valuable **copper** ones. They were to go out with their **money belts** empty.

The **bag** probably refers to a food sack that was commonly carried on a **journey**, since inns were widely scattered and expensive. The apostles were not even to take a sack lunch.

Nor were they to take extra **tunics, or sandals, or a staff**. The tunic was an important outer garment that served both as overcoat and blanket. **Sandals** were necessary to protect the feet from sharp rocks, thorns, and the hot ground. **A staff** was helpful protection against robbers or wild animals.

The apostles were to go forth with a minimum of clothing and supplies, trusting the Lord to provide whatever else they needed. God Himself established the principle that **the worker is worthy of his support**, and He will see that it is fulfilled.

The rabbis had followed that principle for many years. One ancient rabbi had written, “He who receives a rabbi into his house or as his guest and lets him have his enjoyment from his possessions, the Scripture ascribes to him as if he had offered the continual offerings.” They rightly believed that God would bless those who provided food, clothing, shelter, and other aid to the teachers of His Word.

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor,” Paul wrote to Timothy, “especially those who work hard at

preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,’ and, ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages’” (1 Tim. 5:17-18). God’s people are to do more than simply provide for their ministers’ bare needs; they are also to honor them with generosity, especially when they are faithfully proclaiming the Word. It is God’s divine plan that those who “proclaim the gospel. . . get their living from the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:14).

Ministers who never demand anything, who never put a price on their work, and who trust the Lord to provide for their needs have the special blessing of knowing that what they do receive is a gift from the Lord, expressive of His loving, generous care.

SETTLED COMMITMENT

And into whatever city or village you enter, inquire who is worthy in it; and abide there until you go away. (10:11)

The sixth principle of ministry Jesus here teaches by implication, and it is in two parts. First, a person is to find a proper place to stay while ministering in a given location, and second, he is to be satisfied to remain there until the work is finished.

Worthy does not mean wealthy or influential but refers to the spiritual and moral character of the host. In **whatever city or village** the apostles would **enter**, they were to seek out someone to stay with who was known to be godly, whose integrity and life-style were beyond question in the community. Otherwise the ungodly association would harm both their own spirituality and the effectiveness of their testimony.

Once they found a satisfactory place to stay, they were to **abide there until** they went **away**. The minister is not to keep his eye out for better accommodations or even to accept a voluntary offer for better lodging and thus offend his original host. His sole focus should be on his ministry, and his contentment with what he has and where he is staying will itself be a testimony to those to whom he ministers.

Such contentment and humble satisfaction will also benefit the minister's own spiritual life, because, Paul assures us, "godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment" (1 Tim. 6:6). In his own ministry Paul had "learned to be content in whatever circumstances" he was in. He knew "how to get along with humble means, . . . to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance." He had "learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need," because he had learned that he could do all things through Christ, who strengthened him (Phil. 4:11-13).

CONCENTRATION ON THOSE WHO ARE RECEPTIVE

And as you enter the house, give it your greeting. And if the house is worthy, let your greeting of peace come upon it; (10:12-13a)

The seventh principle of ministry reflected in our Lord's teaching here is that of concentrating effort on those who are receptive to the gospel.

The house referred to here is not the place where the apostles would lodge but represents the various houses where they would go to minister. A **worthy** house was one where their witness and work were appreciated and accepted as being from God.

The **greeting** was the age-old Jewish greeting *shālôm*, which is usually translated simply as **peace** but which carries the much deeper meaning of total well-being and wholeness of body, mind, and spirit.

The household that gladly received the apostles was to have its greeting of peace confirmed **upon it**. The implication is that truly receptive listeners were to be ministered to in the fullest way. Their open hearts to the Lord's work earned them God's richest blessing. "He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet," Jesus explained a short while later, "shall receive a prophet's reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward" (Matt. 10:41).

God does not call his servants to minister only where the gospel is immediately and eagerly received. Many fields of service are extremely resistant to the gospel. But the focus of ministry in any area or circumstance should be on those people who are most receptive. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are promised satisfaction (Matt. 5:6), and the faithful minister should give of himself fully and freely in feeding them God's Word. God's mandate is that the gospel should be preached first to those who want it most. They not only are the most deserving but are the ones most likely to believe and to win still others to Himself.

REJECTION OF THOSE WHO ARE CONTEMPTUOUS

but if it is not worthy, let your greeting of peace return to you. And whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake off the dust of your feet. Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city.’“ (10:13b-15)

The last principle for ministry shows the reverse side of the previous one, namely, that of not spending undue time on those who persist in rejecting the gospel.

If a house was **not worthy**, Jesus told the twelve, **let your greeting of peace return to you**, which was an Oriental expression signifying withdrawal of favor or blessing. It is not that such a household would have a blessing and then lose it, but that the *offer* of **peace** was never received and is therefore withdrawn. The greatest blessing of God is worthless for a person who will not accept it. God's gospel is offered to all the world, and it has power to save all the world, but it is powerless to save or help even a single person who will not have Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (cf. John 5:40).

The same principle applies to false teachers who come to us. "If anyone comes to you," John warns, "and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the

one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds” (2 John 10-11).

When a **house** or a **city** was contemptuous of the apostles and of the **words** they taught, as they left that house or city they were to **shake off the dust of their feet**. When they came back into Israel from a Gentile country, many Jews would literally shake as much dust off their feet as possible in order not to bring pagan soil into their homeland. For the apostles to shake the dust off their feet while leaving a Jewish house or town would be to treat the inhabitants like Gentiles—whom most Jews considered to be out of God’s reach. When the leaders of the synagogue in Pisidia of Antioch drove Paul and Barnabas out of their district, the two men “shook off the dust of their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium” (Acts 13:51). Of the unbelieving Jews there Paul had declared, “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles” (v. 46; cf. Matt. 7:6).

It is not that we are to turn away from those who reject the gospel at first hearing or even after several hearings. Had that practice been followed, many believers would not be in the kingdom today. Through Paul, the Lord Himself entreated unbelieving Corinthians to “be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20). Were God not marvelously patient and longsuffering with fallen mankind, He would have destroyed the world long ago. He is infinitely patient with sinners, Peter tells us, “not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

Jesus was not speaking of those who are slow to understand or believe but of those who, after hearing a clear testimony of the gospel and seeing dramatic and irrefutable signs of confirmation, continue to resist and oppose it. When a person’s mind is firmly set against God, we should turn our efforts to others.

When people “have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame” (Heb. 6:5-6). Of such people, Jesus warns, **Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city**. God utterly destroyed those two ancient cities with brimstone and fire because of their wickedness (Gen. 19:24), and today no certain trace of them has

yet been found by archaeologists. But men and women who are contemptuous of the gracious, saving gospel of Jesus Christ face an even worse fate **in the day of judgment** (cf. Matt. 24:50-51; 25:14-46; 2 Thess. 1:5-10).

Sheep Among Wolves (10:16-23)

Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore be shrewd as serpents, and innocent as doves. But beware of men; for they will deliver you up to the courts, and scourge you in their synagogues; and you shall even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not become anxious about how or what you will speak; for it shall be given you in that hour what you are to speak. For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you. And brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents, and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all on account of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved. But whenever they persecute you in this city, flee to the next; for truly I say to you, you shall not finish going through the cities of Israel, until the Son of Man comes. (10:16-23)

As part of their training toward finally being sent on their own after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the twelve needed to have an idea of the obstacles they would face. As noted in the previous chapter, some of the specifics Jesus taught in Matthew 10:5-42 applied only to the apostles; yet in principle they apply to His witnesses in every generation. In a similar way, some of the instruction applied only to the brief mission on which Jesus now sent the twelve out two by two (Mark 6:7), although the underlying ministry precepts applied to their work even after the Lord Jesus had ascended to heaven and will continue to apply to all His faithful servants throughout the church age and even into the Great Tribulation (Matt. 24:21). Ministry built on divine precepts will not end "until the Son

of Man comes” (10:23), the eschatological term Matthew uses to represent the return of Christ to establish His millennial kingdom.

There is a telescoping significance in the passage. Beginning with the limited, dispensational preaching of the kingdom to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (vv. 6-7) during this particular mission and until Pentecost, there is a sweep through the entire future of Christ’s church—from His first coming to His second. With His omniscient prophetic eye, Jesus pictures the twelve in their full mission, and then He pictures all those who would continue to represent Him throughout redemptive history, including those who will suffer for His sake during the holocaust in the Great Tribulation.

That sort of telescopic prophecy is seen in numerous Old Testament passages, in which a prediction had both immediate and future significance and fulfillment. For example, within three verses, Micah spoke of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem at His first coming and of His ruling Israel and the entire earth at His second coming (Mic. 5:2-4). Yet in that passage the two comings seem to be blended into one.

Apart from understanding Jesus’ use of this telescopic method, Matthew 10:5-42 cannot be sensibly interpreted. The apostles did not raise the dead (see v. 8) during this brief mission in Galilee nor at any other time during Jesus’ own earthly ministry. Nor did they themselves experience direct persecution or suffering (see vv. 16-23) until after Pentecost.

In Matthew 10:16-23 Jesus first gives an analogy of believers and their opponents (v. 16*a*) and dual figures illustrating the attitudes they should have as they face those opponents (16*b*). He then mentions the two primary areas from which direct attack from persecutors will come (vv. 17-18) and promises God’s equally direct provision for it (vv. 19-20). Finally, He mentions the two primary areas of indirect attack (vv. 21-22*a*) and tells His followers how to respond when persecution comes (v. 23).

THE ANALOGY

Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; (10:16*a*)

In saying, **Behold**, Jesus indicated His desire for the twelve to pay special attention to what He was about to say. He had spoken of the unbelieving multitudes as being like “sheep without a shepherd” (9:36), and He had delegated miraculous powers to the twelve (10:8). Based on such input it could have seemed to the apostles that they were destined to be powerful wolves who would go out with invincibility to conquer the defenseless, unbelieving sheep of the world. But the Lord here made it clear that the world’s “sheep” are not really defenseless and that the apostles’ powers—divinely endowed and marvelous as they were—would not prevent them from suffering from the hands of men. They, and the rest of His followers until He returns again, would be the real **sheep**. In that paradoxical truth Jesus graphically pointed up the tensions between our vulnerability and our invincibility—between our weakness in ourselves and our strength in Him, between the power of hateful persecution and the power of loving submission, and between the worldly power of the flesh and the supernatural power of the Spirit.

Sheep are perhaps the most dependent, helpless, and stupid of all domesticated animals. They are as often panicked by harmless things as by those that are dangerous. And when real danger does come, they have no natural defense except running, and they are not very good at that.

In *A Shepherd Looks at the Twenty-third Psalm*, Philip Keller gives many insights from his long experience as a shepherd in Canada. He points out that because sheep are so indiscriminate in their choice of vegetation to eat, it is necessary to carefully protect them from eating poisonous weeds. Because they are highly vulnerable to weather extremes and to infections and disease, they must be regularly and individually checked for dangerous symptoms, for cuts and abrasions, and for insects and parasites that can harm them. Flies buzzing around their eyes and ears have been known to so irritate and frighten sheep that they beat their heads against trees or rocks until they are dead. Sometimes flies will lay eggs in a sheep’s eyes and ultimately cause blindness. In trying to escape real or imagined danger, sheep will sometimes panic into a blind stampede, and pregnant ewes will lose their lambs from the running and sometimes even their own lives from utter exhaustion.

But the sheep’s greatest enemy is predators, the worst of which in Palestine and in many other parts of the world has always been **wolves**.

People in Palestine understood the nature of sheep and the danger of wolves. They knew how difficult the task of the shepherd was simply to keep his sheep alive, much less healthy and contented.

Most shepherds did not themselves own the flocks but tended them on behalf of the owners. When a sheep was killed, the shepherd was required to bring back a piece of its torn flesh or some other part of its body to prove it had indeed been killed by a wild animal rather than stolen by a thief or perhaps sold by a dishonest shepherd.

Jesus clearly identifies the **sheep** as **you**, that is, His disciples—the twelve and, by extension, all of His disciples yet to come.

The normal danger for sheep is that wolves come in among *them*. But here Jesus told the twelve, **I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves**. He called them to go into the wolves' own territory, to walk into the very maw of their enemies. Jesus is the perfect Good Shepherd, who loves His sheep with a divine love, who intimately knows them and is known by them, and who lays down His life for them (John 10:11-15). But in the figure of the **sheep** and **wolves**, Jesus gave a graphic illustration of the rejection and persecution by a God-hating world they would face because of Him. So before the twelve went out into their first brief and relatively undemanding service for the Lord, He set before them the cost of discipleship. Just as He did not escape opposition and persecution, neither would they (cf. John 15:18-27; 16:33).

The world will continue to make raids on the church just as wolves make raids on flocks of sheep. "I know that after my departure," Paul said, "savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock" (Acts 20:29). In his Romans letter he spoke of believers being looked on by the world as "sheep to be slaughtered" (8:36). Jesus had already warned His followers of "the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matt. 7:15).

It is consistent with their predatory nature for wolves to come into a flock in the field and even into the sheepfold to attack, mutilate, and devour the sheep. But it is *not* natural or consistent with their nature for sheep to voluntarily walk into the wolves' own den. And it is unnatural for a shepherd to send his sheep into such certain peril. Yet that is where Jesus, the Good Shepherd, sends His disciples—into the hostile world of ungodly souls, because that is where they can serve Him best and be most effective in winning others to Him. The apostles, and to various extents

every believer after them, would be sent out defenseless in themselves among evil, rapacious, vicious, God-hating mankind.

We do not hear much preaching today of sinners needing to count the cost of salvation and repenting of sin in confessing the lordship of Christ, or of coming to Him humbly, devoid of pride and self-trust, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, and entering the narrow gate and walking the narrow road of righteousness. Rarely are Christians called to take up their crosses and follow Christ in moving out into the world as sheep led to slaughter. The popular appeal is to ease, comfort, riches, advancement, and ambition—and the church often uses that kind of enticement to motivate unbelievers to trust in Christ and to motivate believers to follow Him. But Jesus makes no such offer. To the disciple He promises hardship, suffering, and death.

To present the gospel dishonestly and misleadingly is to be unfaithful to the Lord and to those to whom we present it. Because of false promises, many unredeemed people remain on the broad road that leads to destruction while being under the delusion they are on the road to life. Many believers are confirmed in spiritual mediocrity and unfruitfulness, thinking their health, wealth, and material success is the certain mark of divine approval. Still other believers are disillusioned and embittered because their lives of obedience, faithfulness, and sacrifice for Christ have not been materially rewarded.

After the siege of Rome in 1849, Garibaldi said to his soldiers, “Men, all our efforts against superior forces have been unavailing. I have nothing to offer you but hunger and thirst, hardship and death. But I call on all who love their country to join with me.” After the Allies were forced to evacuate Dunkirk in 1940, Churchill said to his fellow Englishmen, “All I can offer you is blood, sweat, and tears.”

If those human leaders refused to send out their fellow countrymen to war under false pretenses, how much less would the divine Son of God! Jesus does not send out His followers without warning about the demands and dangers of discipleship. Nor did His apostles mislead the early church about what belonging to Christ would cost. As he wrote to encourage and strengthen Timothy, his son in the faith, Paul also assured him that “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). Godly lives are not marked by continual suffering and hardship inflicted on them by the unbelieving world. Neither the life of Jesus nor the lives of

the apostles were characterized by uninterrupted hardship and persecution. But faithfulness to God guarantees that at some times and to some degree Satan and his world system will exact a price for it.

THE ATTITUDE

therefore be shrewd as serpents, and innocent as doves. (10:16b)

In Egyptian hieroglyphics, as well as in much ancient lore, **serpents** symbolize wisdom. They were considered to be **shrewd**, smart, cunning, cautious. In that characteristic, at least, Christians are to emulate **serpents**.

Paul advises believers, “Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity” (Col. 4:5). Servants of the Lord are to be **shrewd** and cunning in dealing with the unbelieving world around them.

The basic idea is that of saying the right thing at the right time and place, of having a sense of propriety and appropriateness, and of trying to discover the best means to achieve the highest goal. It is neither wise nor loving to be needlessly accusatory or inflammatory. When the Pharisees attempted to trap Jesus into either defending or condemning the Roman government by asking Him about paying taxes to Caesar, He did not take the occasion to vilify Caesar or the Roman government—vile, debauched, unjust, and ungodly as they were. Nor did He condone their wickedness. He replied simply, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21). It is neither brave nor wise, and neither spiritual nor loving, to needlessly incite anger or court trouble.

As the most harmless and gentle of birds, **doves** represent being pure, or **innocent**, another characteristic of the faithful disciple of Christ. Being true to God’s Word and uncompromising in proclaiming the gospel does not require, and should never include, being abrasive, coarse, inconsiderate, belligerent, blatant, or blunt.

Wisdom and innocence, cunning and gentleness, are handmaids of discretion. No apostle was more uncompromising of the gospel than Paul;

yet he declared,

I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. (1 Cor. 9:19-22)

Innocence involves more than simply avoiding negative attitudes and approaches. It also involves the positive attribute of purity. Godly wisdom has no part in anything that is impure, deceitful, or defiling. It is always the ally of truth and righteousness. Nothing untruthful or unethical can enhance the gospel or make its witness more effective. Paul assured the Thessalonian believers that his preaching and teaching of the gospel did “not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit” (1 Thess. 2:3). Integrity and honesty are practical manifestations of truthfulness, without which an otherwise orthodox presentation of the gospel is distorted and weakened.

We are to be like our Lord Himself, our great “high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled” (Heb. 7:26). We are to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27). Jesus is again our model, because He “committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Pet. 2:23). In following our Lord’s example, “when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate” (1 Cor. 4:12-13).

When Paul was brought before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, the high priest Ananias ordered him to be struck in the mouth. In a moment of unguarded anger the apostle replied, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! And do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?” (Acts 23:3). When he was rebuked by some bystanders for reviling the high priest, Paul immediately apologized, saying, “I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest; for it is written, ‘You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people’” (v. 5). What Paul had said to the high priest was perfectly true, and certainly understandable from a human point of view. But it was not appropriate, not only because it was said to the high priest but because it was said in self-defensive anger. It was not the wise and righteous thing to say.

THE PERSECUTION

But beware of men; for they will deliver you up to the courts, and scourge you in their synagogues; and you shall even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. (10:17-18)

Jesus proceeds to identify the “wolves” and then gives warnings about four areas in which they persecute believers—in religion, government, family, and society in general. Interspersed within the warnings are further instructions about the attitudes His disciples should have and the provision their heavenly Father supplies.

The wolves of whom believers are to **beware** are **men**. The ultimate enemies against whom we struggle are Satan and his demonic hosts, the non flesh-and-blood “rulers, . . . powers, . . . world forces of this darkness, [and] spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). But the agents of those supernatural enemies are human beings. It is through **men** that Satan opposes and persecutes the church of Jesus Christ. **Men** are the wolves who malign, oppress, imprison, torture, and kill God’s people.

Beware of these opponents, Jesus says—be on guard, be watchful, be perceptive. To be innocent is not to be naive. When well-meaning believers insist on putting the best face on every evil, they are not demonstrating love but foolishness and self-deception. Not to beat an unbeliever over the head with the vileness of his sin is one thing; to minimize his sin and his lostness apart from Christ is quite another. To love our enemies and not return evil for evil is one thing; to deny they are enemies is quite another.

Jesus had already promised blessing for those who are “persecuted for the sake of righteousness” and who have insults and “all kinds of evil” spoken against them falsely for His sake (Matt. 5:10-11). Here He promises the persecution that ultimately brings the blessing.

The disciples themselves had not yet experienced persecution or even opposition. Resistance to Jesus was not yet strong. Some of the scribes had criticized Him for claiming to forgive sins (9:2-3), and some of the Pharisees complained to His disciples that their Teacher ate “with the tax-gatherers and sinners” (v. 11) and later accused Him of casting “out the demons by the ruler of the demons” (v. 34). But these criticisms did not hinder the ministry or pose any danger at that time.

Jesus’ purpose in warning about persecution was not to frighten the apostles and make them suspicious of every human being who was not a believer. Their very mission was to convert the unsaved and win them to Christ’s kingdom. But they needed to be warned not to expect the world to receive the gospel and its messengers with open arms. Satan’s world system, of whom every unbeliever is a part, is diametrically opposed to Christ, His people, and His kingdom. Satan will enlist the support of every unbeliever possible in his fight against God. Jesus’ purpose in this text was to caution the apostles, and all of His people, not to be surprised when they are criticized, ostracized, and even imprisoned and put to death for His sake.

PERSECUTION BY RELIGION

for they will deliver you up to the courts, and scourge you in their synagogues; (10:17b)

The first source of persecution is religion, to which both **courts** and **synagogues** refer. Even under pagan rulers, the Jews were often allowed to settle most disputes among themselves, including many civil issues. For this purpose they had developed a detailed system of **courts** in which various cases were adjudicated. Every Jewish village and town, as well as every Jewish settlement of any size in Gentile countries, had a synagogue, which simply means a gathering place or a congregation.

Jews would try, convict, and punish (**scourge**) fellow Jews in their own religious **courts**, which were a part of their **synagogues**. A Jew accused of breaking the Mosaic law or a rabbinic tradition would be brought before a tribunal of judges, who decided the verdict, determined the sentence, and meted out punishment, which was often by scourging.

In New Testament times the **scourge** usually consisted of thirty-nine lashes with a whip, one less than the maximum of forty stripes allowed by Mosaic law (Deut. 25:3). One judge would call out the sentence, one would announce the punishment, one or more would do the scourging, and others of them would count the lashes. The Jewish writer Maimonides reported that appropriate Scripture passages were read and sometimes psalms were sung while punishment was being administered.

As the apostles preached and ministered in Christ's name, they could be sure of being brought before and punished by such Jewish courts. Before his conversion, Saul of Tarsus was engaged in just such persecution. Many years later, as an apostle and a persecuted believer himself, he recounted his confession before God that "in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in Thee" (Acts 22:19). By the time Paul wrote 2 Corinthians he had been scourged by the Jews on five different occasions (2 Cor. 11:24), probably each time in a synagogue.

William Barclay comments that "the man with a message from God has to undergo the hatred and enmity of a fossilized orthodoxy." Jesus Himself was accused, tried, and convicted by religionists. Until the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70—and with it the destruction of the Temple, the priesthood, and the sacrifices—virtually all persecution of Christians was by Jews. Though there remains personal hostility among Jews, after that time Jewish persecution of Christians virtually ceased, and it has never recurred to any significant degree since then.

From Revelation 11, however, we learn that the residual hostility against Christ will cause such persecution to resume during the last days. In the first half of the Tribulation, the beast from the abyss will be aligned with Israel; and in Jerusalem, “where their Lord was crucified,” he will kill the two witnesses God sends to preach on earth for twelve hundred and sixty days (vv. 3-8). It is likely that many unbelieving Jews will be party to the martyrdom of those two men and to the worldwide rejoicing over their deaths (v. 10).

In the meanwhile, many other religious groups, some even bearing the name of Christ, will have oppressed, imprisoned, tortured, exiled, and killed countless millions of true believers. During the lifetime of many of the apostles, other religion-related persecution had already begun. Paul was bitterly opposed in Ephesus because the spread of the gospel there had severely cut into the sale of pagan idols, which were the major source of income for the local silversmiths (see Acts 19:24-29). A letter written by Pliny, a first-century Roman governor of Bithynia, indicates he took severe steps to check the rapid growth of Christianity because it threatened the commercial interests of selling idols and sacrificial animals from which pagan temples derived most of their income.

The intimidation, vandalizing, and murder of modern missionaries in primitive societies has, almost without exception, been carried out or instigated by witch doctors, shamans, or other such religious leaders. And the greatest restrictions on Christian ministry and worship outside the atheistic communist world is in Muslim countries.

Religious persecution of believers has frequently been from within Christendom itself. Paul warned the Ephesian elders that “after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:29).

The final great persecution of God’s people will be by the worldwide religious system called “Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth,” who will become “drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus” (Rev. 17:5-6). All false religious systems had their beginnings at Babel, when rebellious mankind determined to storm heaven and establish its own Satan-inspired substitute for the way of God. Man’s religions have always opposed and sought to destroy God’s truth; and one day they will

culminate in an incredibly powerful ecumenical world religion that will relentlessly and mercilessly oppose the gospel of Christ and persecute His people.

PERSECUTION BY GOVERNMENT

and you shall even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. (10:18)

Persecution will also come from government. **Governors** were Roman procurators, such as were Pilate, Felix, and Festus, but they represent any governmental office or body below the national level. **Kings** (such as the two Agrippas, Herod Antipas, and other monarchs mentioned in the New Testament) represent heads of state.

Here Jesus explains why the wolves are so vicious with the Lord's sheep. It is not because of the sheep themselves but because of their Shepherd. It is **for My sake**, Jesus said, that His disciples would suffer abuse and persecution. The world hates Christians because the world hates Christ. Every person who identifies himself with Christ through salvation becomes a potential target of Satan and his evil forces, including evil men. That it is Christ and not Christians themselves that the world opposes is seen in the fact the more Christ is manifest in us, the more we will be attacked. Conversely, when we do not manifest Christ, we do not incite the world's wrath. The Christian who mimics the world, or simply keeps his faith to himself, is in little danger from the world, because he manifests little of His Lord's nature. The world attacks us only when it sees Christ in us.

Jesus affirmed such reality when He said,

If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world

hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, “A slave is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me. (John 15:18-21)

The stripes, lacerations, bruises, and scars on Paul’s body were the “brand-marks of Jesus” (Gal. 6:17). They were made on his body, but they were intended for his Lord. Paul’s persecutors did not despise him because of who he was but because Christ worked so powerfully through him. When they eventually took his life, it was because his life was Christ’s life. Because the church is Christ’s Body, it is faithful believers in the church who, like Paul, fill up “Christ’s afflictions” (Col. 1:24). It is for that reason that Paul longed for the privilege of sharing in “the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Phil. 3:10). “If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed,” Peter says, “because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Pet. 4:14). It is the “Spirit of glory and of God” in the believer’s life that the world hates and seeks to destroy.

When God’s kingdom is thriving, Satan causes his people to react against it in proportion to its success. Paul himself had been used of Satan to persecute the church. Under his former name of Saul, he was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.” He even asked for letters from the high priest “to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:1-2). When the Lord intercepted Saul on his way to Damascus to carry out his wicked plan, His first words to him were, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” and when Saul asked who was speaking to him, the Lord replied, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” (vv. 4-5).

Saul had not seen Jesus during His earthly ministry, and Jesus was now in heaven; yet Saul was persecuting Jesus. Although the physical objects of the persecution were Christians (those “belonging to the Way”), the spiritual object was Christ Himself. Jesus’ accusation made a deep

impression on Paul, and when he testified before the mob in Jerusalem who demanded his arrest and eventually his execution, he quoted the words spoken to him by the Lord on the Damascus road (Acts 22:7). He quoted the same words when he testified before King Agrippa, declaring that he had not been simply a persecutor of Christians but a persecutor of Christ (26:14).

Every antagonistic and injurious unbeliever, no matter how unconsciously, persecutes Christ through His people. Jesus declared unequivocally that “he who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters” (Matt. 12:30).

The phrase **as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles** is not easy to interpret. It could mean that persecuted believers are a living rebuke against their persecutors, **a testimony against them** and all the unbelieving **Gentiles** (pagans). Others take it to mean **a testimony to Christ** that persecuted believers make as His witnesses. The two interpretations are not incompatible, and both seem to be legitimate.

In either case, governments at various levels and to various degrees have been involved in persecution of believers throughout the history of the church. Only a few years after Pentecost, Herod Agrippa I “laid hands on some who belonged to the church, in order to mistreat them. And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. And when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also” (Acts 12:1-3). Herod’s motivation, even in pleasing the Jews, was not religious but political and personal.

As Christianity began to spread throughout the empire, Rome became especially fearful of its slaves. Because of their great numbers (perhaps as many as 60 million) slaves had long posed the threat of rebellion. They were not permitted to marry free citizens, even free men in the lowest level of society, because slaves were considered less than persons. But when slaves and free Romans alike became Christians, they discovered there was no longer any barrier between them, that they were equal in Christ. Christianity therefore came to be looked on as a threat to the entire Roman social system and economy, and consequently false charges were repeatedly made against Christians. They were accused of cannibalism because they claimed to eat Christ’s body and drink His blood during the Lord’s Supper. They were accused of immorality in their love

feasts and of promoting revolution by preaching about Christ's return to establish His earthly kingdom. Many were martyred.

Throughout church history, various governments have been involved in persecuting the church, sometimes for purely political reasons and sometimes as an enforcer of state-recognized religion. During modern times, communist governments alone have slaughtered millions of Christians and persecuted and imprisoned countless millions more. Because atheism is a central tenet of Communism, it has always sought to suppress and eliminate religion, especially Christianity.

In the end times persecution of the saints will reach its climax, both by religion and by government, and will apparently be wielded as one great powerful arm of the antichrist. The beast that will come "up out of the sea" will shout "blasphemies against God" and will "make war with the saints and to overcome them; and authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation was given to him" (Rev. 13:1, 6-7).

Although government is established by God to preserve social order, it has also become an instrument of Satan to promote his own work and to oppose the Lord's. Government is ordained by God but manipulated by Satan; and Daniel, Isaiah, and Ezekiel all report demonic forces behind governments that were especially wicked. When its citizens turn away from the Lord and His standards, even the freest and most democratic of governments, including that of our own United States, will eventually inhibit the free expression and practice of the Christian faith in hostility to Christ and His Word.

THE PROVISION

But when they deliver you up, do not become anxious about how or what you will speak; for it shall be given you in that hour what you are to speak. For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you. (10:19-20)

To be maligned, persecuted, arrested, and beaten is traumatic, and while that is being experienced it is extremely difficult not to **become**

anxious. When we are charged with a wrongdoing, the natural reaction is to **speak** out in our own defense, to convince our accusers of our innocence.

Paul admonishes us to be at all times “anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let [our] requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6). But in the special circumstance of being brought before a religious or civil court we have the additional promise that **it shall be given [us] in that hour what [we] are to speak.** Those who suffer for Christ will be defended by Christ.

Many of the most memorable and powerful testimonies of the great martyrs were uttered just before they were put to death. God gave them a special presence of mind and clarity of thought to present a testimony more powerful than they would otherwise have been able to give.

For the apostles, that promise included the added provision of divine inspiration. When Paul, for example, gave testimony while he was on trial, he spoke the Word of God. **For it is not you who speak,** Jesus assured the apostles, **but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.**

The well-known commentator R. C. H. Lenski writes,

Without previous thinking, planning, imagining, at the time of their trials in court, the Apostles will receive directly from God just what to utter. It will come into their minds just as it is needed, and thus they will utter it aloud.... The apostles, indeed, make utterance, and yet they do not, for their act is due to the Holy Spirit, so that most properly he is the one who does his uttering. Everything that is mechanical, magical, unpsychological is shut out. . . . The apostles will not be like the demoniacs, their organs of speech and their very wills being violated by a demon. Absolutely the contrary: mind, heart, will operate freely, consciously, in joyful, trustful dependence on the Spirit's giving, who enables them to find just what to say and how to say it down to the last word, with no mistake or even a wrong word due

to faulty memory or disturbed emotions occurring. This, of course, is Inspiration, Verbal Inspiration. (*The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964], p. 402)

THE HATRED

Persecution of believers is also expressed through the hatred of families who betray their own members and through the hatred of society in general.

BY FAMILY

And brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents, and cause them to be put to death. (10:21)

Believers are promised that they may even be persecuted by their own families. During this same time of instruction, Jesus said, "For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law" Then, quoting Micah 7:6, He warned that "a man's enemies will be the members of his household" (Matt. 10:35-36). A year or so later, as He taught about the Tribulation, Jesus repeated the same warning (Mark 13:12).

During Roman persecutions of the second and third centuries an untold number of Christians were betrayed to civil authorities by a **brother** or **father** or **child**. That tragic practice has been repeated many times, and it is not unknown even in our own day.

In certain religious cultures a funeral service is held for a family member who becomes a Christian, because in the eyes of his relatives he

is no longer alive. In some instances the converted member has been poisoned to death. Someone has observed that only two things are stronger than natural love; one is born of hell and one is born of heaven. Stronger than natural love are the love that is of God and the hatred that is of Satan.

Speaking of the end times, perhaps the kingdom age, Zechariah prophesied: “And it will come about that if anyone still prophesies, then his father and mother who gave birth to him will say to him, ‘You shall not live, for you have spoken falsely in the name of the Lord,’ and his father and mother who gave birth to him will pierce him through when he prophesies” (Zech. 13:3). It may be that one day believing parents will kill their children who are false prophets.

BY SOCIETY

And you will be hated by all on account of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved. (10:22)

All is obviously not an absolute term in this context. Believers will not be hated by every single unbeliever on earth. The idea is that of **all** people in general, society as a whole. As verified by the last two thousand years, believers find they are **hated by all** classes, races, and nationalities of mankind.

Some believers live lives of almost constant conflict with the world, while others seem to escape it entirely. Some Christians are not persecuted simply because their testimony is so weak it goes unnoticed by the world. When biblical doctrine and standards are compromised to accommodate fallen human nature, society has little argument with that kind of Christianity and will give little opposition to Christians.

But to confront the world as Paul did with the declaration that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18) is to guarantee society’s wrath against the gospel and those who preach it.

Because they were so uncompromising in proclaiming the gospel, Paul declared himself and his fellow apostles to be “men condemned to

death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake,... weak,... without honor,... both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless" (1 Cor. 4:9-11).

When a Roman general won a great victory, he would parade his captives through the streets in a grand triumphal procession, purposely making a spectacle of his conquered foes, especially of the military officers and the rulers. That is the sort of spectacle the ancient world figuratively made of the apostles.

In summary, false religion reacts against believers because it is generated by Satan. Government reacts against believers because it is under the control of the prince of the power of the air, the ruler of this world. Ungodly families and society react against believers because they cannot tolerate righteous people in their midst.

Endurance of persecution is the hallmark of genuine salvation: **It is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.** Endurance does not produce or protect salvation, which is totally the work of God's grace. But endurance is *evidence* of salvation, proof that a person is truly redeemed and a child of God. God gives eternal life "to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality," Paul says (Rom. 2:7). The writer of Hebrews expresses the same truth in these words: "For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end" (3:14). We do not earn our salvation by endurance, but prove it. Continuance is a verification of being a real Christian. Theologians call this the perseverance of the saints. The following Scriptures also emphasize perseverance: Matthew 24:13; John 8:31; 1 Corinthians 15:1-2; Colossians 1:21-23; Hebrews 2:1-3; 4:14; 6:11-12; 10:39; 12:14; 2 Peter 1:10.

Persecution quickly burns away chaff in the church. Those who have made only a superficial profession of Christ have no new nature to motivate them to suffer for Christ and no divine power to enable them to endure it if they wanted to. Nothing is more spiritually purifying and strengthening than persecution (cf. James 1:12).

It is because God's Word assures us that absolutely nothing can separate us from Christ that we can count on such unshakable endurance. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Paul asks rhetorically. "Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or

peril, or sword?” He then answers his own question. “But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:35, 37-39).

THE RESPONSE

But whenever they persecute you in this city, flee to the next; for truly I say to you, you shall not finish going through the cities of Israel, until the Son of Man comes. (10:23)

Persecution is never to be sought or endured for its own sake; nor should we intentionally bring it on ourselves, supposedly for Christ’s sake. We have no right to provoke animosity or ridicule. And Christ here urges escaping persecution when doing so is expedient and possible. We are not obligated to stay in a place of opposition and danger until we are killed, or even imprisoned. **Whenever they persecute you in this city**, Jesus says, **flee to the next**.

That is the pattern Paul followed throughout his ministry (see Acts 12-14,17). When persecution became so severe in one place that he could no longer minister effectively, he left and went to another. He was not afraid of persecution, and many times he was severely beaten before he left a city. At least once he was stoned and left for dead. But he did not try to test the limits of the opposition. He endured whatever ridicule, reviling, beatings, and imprisonment were necessary while he ministered. But he left a place when his effectiveness there ceased.

That is the pattern that every faithful minister and missionary is to follow **until the Son of Man comes**. Even during the Great Tribulation, Christ’s faithful 144,000 Jewish people will preach all over the world and keep moving from place to place as they are persecuted and afflicted.

Despite their many misunderstandings, shortcomings, failures, and boastings, the disciples knew that Jesus was their only resource, that

without Him they could do nothing (John 15:5). They hung close to Him and huddled around Him whenever there were problems or difficulties. He continually turned nature into one grand parable of God's sovereignty, power, and love. Every field, mountain, tree, flower, animal, leaf, and threshing floor became a picture of spiritual truth. He not only taught them, but He cared for them, loved them, and provided for them. When they finally realized He was actually going to leave them, they panicked.

The Lord would indeed send the twelve out among wolves into dangers they could never have imagined while they were with Him. But just as He promised to send them out among wolves, He also promised to send His own Spirit to indwell, empower, and encourage them. If the world persecuted the Master, it would certainly persecute His servants (John 15:20), and a time would soon come when those who killed His followers would actually think they were "offering service to God" (16:2). It was therefore both advantageous and necessary that Jesus go away, in order that the Holy Spirit, the divine Helper and Comforter, could come to them (v. 7). "These things I have spoken to you," Jesus told them, "that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (v. 33).

The Hallmarks of
Discipleship—part 1
(10:24-31)

A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. It is enough for the disciple that he become as his teacher, and the slave as his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household! Therefore do not fear them, for there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Therefore do not fear; you are of more value than many sparrows. (10:24-31)

Jesus' most crucial and definitive teaching about discipleship, setting forth its true nature and its real demands, is presented in the remainder of this chapter. The call of the Great Commission is the call to "make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19). Disciple-making is the central work of the people of Christ's church, the work of bringing men and women to a saving relationship to Jesus Christ and of helping them grow in His knowledge and likeness. It is what Paul calls "the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12).

When Jesus called the twelve to Himself, He carefully instructed them about what they would be expected to do and to endure. In so doing, He excluded the halfhearted people who wanted the benefits of the

kingdom but not its commitments. He elected to Himself only those who were willing to enter the narrow gate and walk the narrow road.

In Matthew 10:24-42 Jesus sets forth the essence of this Christian dedication and consecration. The truths He teaches here were obviously of great importance to Him, because He repeated them frequently throughout His ministry. Like every effective teacher, He understood the importance of emphasizing and reemphasizing basic truths. Each area of study has a core of information that is absolutely foundational, and the good teacher continually goes back to that information and reinforces it.

As an aside, it should be noted that redaction criticism fails largely at that very point. Because certain biblical analysts do not recognize the validity and importance of repetitive teaching, they assume that the gospel writers pulled together various sayings of Jesus and arbitrarily decided to insert them at different places in His ministry. They maintain that we therefore cannot be sure of what Jesus actually spoke on any given occasion. But to accept the redaction critic's view is to reject the integrity of the gospel writers and therefore of Scripture itself.

Like every good teacher, Jesus taught the same truths with many formats, in various circumstances and with various applications. The Lord is here providing the twelve apostles with the body of His basic teaching on discipleship. Using a variety of phrases and illustrations throughout His ministry, He would repeat these truths over and over again to the disciples and to the multitudes.

Because the truths of Matthew 10 are so foundational and so profound, believers who have wholeheartedly lived out these truths are the men and women who have made great marks on the world for Jesus Christ. They are the ones with total dedication, total commitment, and total obedience.

Florence Nightingale wrote in her diary: "I am thirty years of age, the age at which Christ began His mission. Now, no more childish things, no more vain things." Years later, near the end of her heroic life of service, she was asked the secret of her ability to accomplish so much for the Lord. She replied, "I can give only one explanation, and that is this: I have kept nothing back from God." That is exactly what Jesus is talking about in this passage—keeping nothing back from Him.

When the famous surgeon Howard A. Kelly graduated from medical school he wrote in his diary: "Today I dedicate myself, my time,

my capabilities, my ambition, everything to Him. Blessed Lord, sanctify me to Thy uses; give me no worldly success which may not lead me nearer to my Saviour.”

Soon after graduating from college, Jim Elliot wrote in his diary: “God, I pray Thee, light these idle sticks of my life that I may burn for Thee. Consume my life, my God, for it is Thine. I seek not a long life but a full one like You, Lord Jesus.” God answered that prayer, and in the flower of young manhood Jim Elliot’s life was cut short by the spear of an Auca Indian as he and several other young men sought to take the gospel deep into the jungles of Ecuador.

Jonathan Edwards, the great preacher and theologian whom God used to bring revival to colonial America, wrote:

I claim no right to myself, no right to this understanding, this will, these affections that are in me. Neither do I have any right to this body or its members, no right to this tongue, to these hands, feet, ears or eyes. I have given myself clear away and not retained anything of my own. I have been to God this morning and told Him I have given myself wholly to Him, I have given every power so that for the future I claim no right to myself in any respect. I have expressly promised Him, for by His grace I will not fail. I take Him as my whole portion and felicity, looking upon nothing else as any part of my happiness. His law is the constant rule of my obedience. I will fight with all my might against the world, the flesh and the devil to the end of my life. I will adhere to the faith of the gospel however hazardous and difficult the profession and practice of it may be. I pray God for the sake of others to look on this as self-dedication. Henceforth, I am not to act in any respect as my own. I shall act as my own if I ever make use of any of my powers to do anything that is not to the glory of God or to fail to make the glorifying of Him my whole and entire business. If I murmur in the least at affliction, if I am in

any way uncharitable, if I revenge my own case, if I do anything purely to please myself or omit anything because it is a great denial, if I trust myself, if I take any praise for any good which Christ does by me, or if I am in any way proud, I shall act as my own and not God's. But I purpose to be absolutely His.

The instruction of Matthew 10 was first of all to the twelve, not only because they were the only ones present with Jesus on this occasion but also because some of the instruction (preaching only to Israel, v. 6) was temporary and because some of it involved use of powers (healing, raising the dead, and casting out demons, v. 8) that were delegated only to them. Much of the teaching, however, applies to every disciple of Jesus Christ in every age. In verse 24 Jesus begins using the indefinite third person (“a disciple,” “a slave,” “everyone,” “whoever”) in addition to the second person “you”—clearly indicating that He is speaking about every believer, every true disciple. Jesus here teaches with the widest possible perspective. “For every person who would be My disciple,” He says, in effect, “here is what I ask. For all who follow Me, this is the cost of discipleship.”

Because Jesus refused to disguise or minimize the cost of discipleship, many would-be disciples left Him. When He made clear that to participate in the kingdom and to follow Him demanded complete identification with Him—pictured by the eating of His flesh and the drinking of His blood— “many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore” (John 6:53-66). When “a certain scribe came and said to Him, ‘Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go,’” and Jesus replied, “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head,” that scribe disappeared (Matt. 8:19-20). When Jesus called two other men to follow Him, one gave the excuse of having to bury his father, meaning he wanted to wait until his father died in order to receive the inheritance. The other man wanted “to say good-bye to those at home,” meaning he wanted to take care of all his family responsibilities before following Jesus. To both of them Jesus said, “No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the

kingdom of God” (Luke 9:59-62). The kingdom is entered and served on God’s terms, not man’s.

Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 10:5-15 led to His warning of the dangers of discipleship (vv. 16-23), which led to His teaching about the characteristics and benefits of discipleship (vv. 24-42). He first gave instruction on how to minister and then described the reaction of the world to faithful ministry. Finally, He presented the characteristics of the faithful disciple, gave additional warnings about the cost of discipleship, and mentioned provisions God promises to make for His true disciples.

Jesus’ teaching and the gospel writers’ presentation of it are always logical and clear. Only the person who doubts either the intelligence or the integrity of Jesus and those writers can miss the purpose and progression of His instruction when it is carefully studied. Jesus was not teaching only for scholars, and the writers were not writing only for scholars. They were teaching and writing for the common man, and their purpose was not to obscure and complicate the message but to make it clear enough for the simplest believer to grasp. Only the blindness of willing unbelief can prevent a person’s understanding the way of salvation and the path of obedience.

In the remainder of the chapter (10:24-42) Jesus identifies a comprehensive definition of discipleship, in which He lists some six hallmarks. The true disciple of Jesus Christ emulates His Master; he fears God rather than the world; he confesses the Lord; he forsakes family; he follows his call; and he receives a reward.

A DISCIPLE EMULATES HIS MASTER

A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. It is enough for the disciple that he become as his teacher, and the slave as his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household! (10:24-25)

Jesus first presents the negative aspect of the truth (v. 24), then the positive (v. 25*a*), and then the consequence (v. 25*b*).

First, it is axiomatic that **a disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master.** By definition, **a disciple** (learner) is beneath **his teacher** in knowledge and wisdom and **a slave** is beneath **his master** in social and economic standing. Also by definition, a disciple who is genuinely a disciple learns from his teacher, and a slave who genuinely is a slave obeys his master.

Man's volition is represented by the figure of disciple and teacher, and God's sovereignty is represented by that of slave and master. The two illustrations unite to emphasize that the first and most obvious principle of discipleship is submission.

From the beginning to the end of his gospel, Matthew's purpose is to reveal Jesus as the divine King of kings, the Messiah and Son of God who came to redeem and to eventually rule the world. He is the only King, the only Messiah, the only Son of God, the only Savior and Lord. In all of those roles He demands and is deserving of total submission.

After David finally became king of Israel, there was still scattered loyalty to the family of Saul, despite that king's poor showing as a ruler. Abner, the commander of Saul's army, refused to recognize David as king and managed to temporarily establish Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, as ruler over part of the kingdom for a period of two years. But when Ish-bosheth made a foolish and ill-founded accusation against Abner, the commander came to his senses, finally realizing how unqualified Ish-bosheth was to rule and how foolish his own thinking had been in opposing David, God's chosen and anointed man for leadership (see 2 Sam. 2:8-3:21).

Matthew calls the Abners of the world, as it were, to abandon their foolish allegiances to false leaders and false gods and to become subjects of Jesus Christ, God's anointed Savior and Lord.

Second, as Jesus goes on to point out, it is also axiomatic that the purpose of a true disciple is to learn from his teacher in order to **become as his teacher** and that the purpose of a faithful **slave** is to serve and become **as his master.** When teaching the same truth on another occasion, Jesus said, "Everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40). A disciple's single, overriding purpose is to emulate his **teacher. It is enough** for him to **become as his teacher,** not only in the teacher's wisdom and character but also in the teacher's treatment. The disciple desires nothing more and settles for nothing less.

“The one who says he abides in [Christ],” John informs us, “ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked” (1 John 2:6). The function of discipleship is clearly stated in the Great Commission: “to observe all that I commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). A disciple becomes like his Christ, his Teacher, when he learns and obeys Scripture. He is one in whom the Word of Christ richly dwells (Col. 3:16). To grow in discipleship is to grow in Christlikeness, looking forward to the day when “we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is” (1 John 3:2).

The logical result of being like Christ is being treated like Christ. **If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household.** Jesus continues to develop the same truth but changes the figure from those of disciple/teacher and slave/master to that of **head of the house/members of his household.** Family **members** and servants should not expect to be treated better than **the head** of the family is treated.

Paul knew that to truly know Christ and the power of His resurrection involves “the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death,” and that apostle desired all of those things, knowing they are inseparable (Phil. 3:10). The true disciple does not demand to be accepted and loved by the world, when His Lord was rejected and crucified by the world. He does not expect his commitment to the Lord to cause him to become famous and respected, when His Lord was considered infamous and was despised.

Beelzebul (sometimes found as “Beelzebub” or “Baalzebub”) was originally the name of a pagan Canaanite deity. The name *Baalzebub* probably meant “lord of the flies,” and it was later changed to Baalzebul, “lord of the dwelling.” Because he was an especially despicable deity, his name had long been used by Jews as an epithet for Satan.

Jesus’ point was that, if people called Him Satan, they would surely call His disciples the same thing. The Pharisees had already done precisely that when they accused Jesus of casting “out the demons by the ruler of the demons” (Matt. 9:34), who was often referred to as **Beelzebul** (Mark 3:22; cf. Matt. 12:24).

Jesus repeated this general warning to the disciples many times. As noted earlier, in one of His last discourses He told them, “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were

of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:18-19; cf. v. 20; 13:16). The day would come when the one who persecuted the disciples would actually “think that he is offering service to God” (16:2). But in reality, those who oppose and persecute Jesus’ disciples do so “because they have not known the Father” or the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 3). As Jesus had already explained, His disciples are not hated because of who they are in themselves but “on account of My name” (Matt. 10:22).

Thus the call to discipleship is the call to be like Christ, including being treated like Christ. To people who are truly seeking God, the lives of His faithful saints are beautiful and attractive. It is often the Christlike qualities of love, joy, peace, and kindness in Christians that attract unbelievers to the Lord. The more we emulate Christ, the more attractive we will become to those God is calling to Himself. But at the same time we will become more unattractive to those who reject God. Because they want nothing of Him, they will want nothing of us.

A DISCIPLE DOES NOT FEAR THE WORLD

Therefore do not fear them, for there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Therefore do not fear; you are of more value than many sparrows. (10:26-31)

The true disciple of Jesus Christ not only emulates his Master but is also not afraid of the world. Three times in these six verses Jesus says, **do not fear**. In light of what He had just promised, His exhortation not to be afraid was in order. He had told the disciples He was sending them out

as sheep in the midst of wolves, that they would be tried and scourged in Jewish courts, “brought before governors and kings” for His sake, delivered up in various ways, betrayed by their families, hated and persecuted by the world in general, and called satanic (vv. 16-25).

We are warned in Proverbs that “the fear of man brings a snare” (29:25). Fear of what people may think, say, or do has strangled many testimonies and hindered much service in the Lord’s name. Human nature wants to avoid problems and conflicts, especially if they might bring ridicule and hardship. People do not naturally want to be thought little of or mistreated, and even less to suffer or die. Christians who have fallen prey to today’s great emphasis on self-preservation find it especially difficult to confront sinful society with the demands and standards of the gospel. Our culture has produced an unacceptable “softness” among evangelicals.

Continued refusal to confront the world gives strong evidence that a professed believer may not belong to Christ at all. “If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him,” John says. “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world” (1 John 2:15-16).

But every believer, like Peter warming himself in the courtyard while Jesus was on trial, at times finds it difficult to speak out for the Lord for fear of being considered foolish, backward, extremist, unsophisticated, obtrusive, or strange.

Because criticism, abuse, and danger would become frequent companions of the apostles, Jesus repeatedly exhorted them not to be afraid (see, e. g., Matt. 14:27; 28:10; Luke 12:32; John 14:27). At this time Jesus gave three reasons for His followers not to be afraid: their vindication by God, their veneration of God, and their valuation by God.

VINDICATION BY GOD

Therefore do not fear them, for there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops. (10:26-27)

First, believers should never be afraid of the world because they know God will one day vindicate them. **Therefore** looks back to what Jesus had said in verse 25. Although God’s children will be mistreated and accused of being wicked and even demonic, Jesus says, **do not fear them**, that is, those who cause you trouble. **For** looks forward, introducing the promise that in the end God will make everything right. All truth and goodness and all falsehood and wickedness will be seen for what they really are.

The world is highly successful at illusion and deception. It can make an impressive and convincing case for sin by covering it over with seemingly good motives and helpful benefits. The world puts the best face on wickedness and the worst face on righteousness. But the Lord has decreed that **there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known**. The world’s wickedness will be shown for what it is, and believers’ righteousness will be shown for what it is. God has bound Himself to vindicate His children.

We should not be concerned about what the world says now but about what God will say at the final day. When the Lord returns, He “will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men’s hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God” (1 Cor. 4:5). What greater motive could we have for faithfully serving the Lord and fearlessly facing the world? Why should we worry about unpopularity in this life when we know we will be fully vindicated in the next? Paul calls this great coming event “the revealing of the sons of God” (Rom. 8:19) and “the freedom of the glory of the sons of God” (8:21; cf. 1 Tim. 5:24-25).

“Now no one after lighting a lamp covers it over with a container, or puts it under a bed,” Jesus said; “but he puts it on a lampstand, in order that those who come in may see the light” (Luke 8:16). When God gives truth to declare, the business of Christians is to make it known, not to hide it—just as one day God Himself will instantly and perfectly make every truth known. In view of what is coming, it is both faithless and shortsighted to hide the light now in order to avoid criticism and persecution.

With mock encouragement Solomon wrote, “Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of

young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes.” He then added, “Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things” (Eccles. 11:9). “The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person” (12:13).

The disciple’s perspective should be God’s perspective. In His eternal view He already sees the final outcome of every life. Those in the world’s eyes who now look like winners will turn out to be losers, and those who seem to be losers will be winners.

There are to be no secrets in Christianity. What the Lord has, in effect, revealed to us **in the darkness** we are to **speak in the light**; and what has been **whispered in [our] ear** we are to **proclaim upon the housetops**.

Fraternal orders and lodges that have secret rites and ceremonies have no part in the work of Christ’s kingdom, no matter how much they may try to defend their religious purposes and standards. All spiritual and moral truth that man needs to know and can know, God has already fully made known; and His desire is for that truth to be proclaimed, not hidden. Christians are not elite defenders of man-made secrets but bold proclaimers of God-given truth. Secrecy has no part in the gospel.

As His followers study, meditate, and pray over God’s Word in solitude and in the company of fellow believers, God opens up His truth to their hearts and minds. But what is learned in those places of figurative **darkness**, hidden from the world, the child of God is then to **speak in the light** of open proclamation. What we figuratively **hear whispered in [our] ear** we are then to **proclaim upon the housetops**.

During New Testament times Jewish rabbis would often train their students to speak by standing beside them and whispering in their ears. What the student heard whispered he would then speak aloud. What the Lord has, in effect, whispered in our ears through His Word we are to speak aloud to the world, holding nothing back. What the Lord has made known to us, we are to make known to others.

In Jesus’ day a person shouting from **housetops** could be heard for a great distance. Both official and personal announcements were often publicized by that means. The objective of shouting from the housetop was to be heard by as many people as possible. The Talmud tells of rabbis blowing trumpets from housetops to announce the beginning of religious

holidays. A modern remnant of that practice is the announcement of Muslim prayer times from high in a minaret.

Making God's truth known includes teaching the so-called hard sayings of Scripture. We are not to be needlessly offensive, and never offensive in our approach or attitude. But when the fullness of God's revelation is taught, the world will invariably be offended, because it will stand accused. Fallen man does not like to hear that he is fallen; sinful man does not like to face the reality that he is sinful; rebellious man does not like to be told that he is God's enemy. Those are truths that Jesus and the apostles never refused to proclaim, and it was because they boldly taught such truths that the world rejected and persecuted them.

The world shows little objection to a gospel that is only "positive," that only mentions God's offers of peace, joy, and blessing. An unbeliever is not offended by those elements of the gospel, true as they are. But he is terribly offended when he is told that he is a sinner under God's judgment and destined for hell.

John 3:16-17 is often only partially preached and taught. That God loves the world, sent His Son to save the world rather than judge the world, and saves everyone who believes in the Son is not the total truth of the passage. Implicit in verse 16 and explicit in verse 18 is the truth that apart from such faith a person will perish, because "he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the "name of the only begotten Son of God."

VENERATION OF GOD

And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.
(10:28)

The second **do not fear** has to do with **those who kill the body**. The harm they do is only temporary. We should instead **fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell**. **Fear** is used here in two senses. The first has to do with fright and terror, while the second has to do with awe and veneration.

There may be a price to pay for speaking God's truth in the light and proclaiming it from the housetops. As Paul determined to go to Jerusalem despite many warnings from his friends, "a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us," Luke reports, "he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, 'This is what the Holy Spirit says: "In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles'"'"(Acts 21:10-11). When his friends began crying at the news, Paul said, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (v. 13). Paul had no fear of those who could only **kill the body**. He had already said, "Neither count I my life dear unto myself" (Acts 20:24, KJV).

Such people, however, and even Satan himself, **are unable to kill the soul**. Physical death is the full extent of the harm they can bring us; they cannot touch the **soul**, the eternal person. Even the bodies they destroy will one day be resurrected and become imperishable (1 Cor. 15:42).

It should be made clear that **destroy** does not here mean annihilation. The lost will not cease to exist, but in their resurrected bodies "will go away into eternal punishment," just as the saved in their resurrected bodies will go into "eternal life" (Matt. 25:46). The word behind **destroy** (*appolumi*) does not convey the notion of extinction but of great loss or ruin. Paul uses the same term in 2 Thessalonians 1:9, where he speaks of "eternal destruction"—a phrase that would not make sense if "destruction" meant annihilation, which by definition cannot be eternal. That which is annihilated ceases to exist.

Jesus' point here is that the only **fear** a believer should have is of **Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell**; and only God can do that. In the last days Satan himself will be cast into hell, which is the Lord's domain, not Satan's.

But this **fear** is not that of terror or fright, but of reverential awe and honor. It is not that a believer is in danger of having his soul and body cast into hell, because his eternal destiny is heaven. God's ability to **destroy both soul and body in hell** is mentioned here only to contrast His unlimited and permanent power with Satan's limited and temporary power.

God is the only One who can determine and bring to pass the destiny of souls and bodies.

Reverence of God in His sovereign majesty is a powerful motivation for Christians to serve Him and to be fearless of any earthly, physical consequences that service may bring. The power of human threats seems rather puny in comparison to the power of God's promises.

When Hugh Latimer was preaching one day in the presence of King Henry VIII, he reports that he said to himself, "Latimer! Latimer! Remember that the king is here; be careful what you say." Then he said to himself, "Latimer! Latimer! Remember that the King of kings is here; be careful what you do not say." For such unflinching faithfulness Latimer was eventually burned at the stake. But He feared failing God more than he feared offending men.

Over a period of some 300 years of terrible persecution, ten generations of Christians dug nearly 600 miles of catacombs beneath and around the city of Rome. Archaeologists estimate that perhaps a total of 4 million bodies were buried there. A common inscription found in the catacombs is the sign of the fish, the Greek word for which (*ichthus*) was used as an acrostic for "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior." Another common inscription found there is "The Word of God is not bound." During the most prolonged period of persecution in the history of the church, those believers revered God more than they feared man:

Since that day, many more millions have given their lives for the cause of Christ. Perhaps as many as 50 million believers were martyred during the Dark Ages, and millions more have been martyred in our own century, largely by communist regimes in Europe, Asia, and Africa. As is said of Lord Lawrence on his memorial in Westminster Abbey, they feared man so little because they feared God so much. In many other countries, state religions prohibit Christian missionary and evangelistic work and seriously restrict worship by those who are already Christians.

The faithful disciple values his **soul** immeasurably more than he values his **body**, and he will gladly sacrifice that which is only physical and corruptible for the sake of that which is spiritual and incorruptible. Jim Elliot, mentioned earlier in the chapter, wrote, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Jesus' warning in verse 28 may have been specially directed at Judas, as an early appeal for him to consider that the God he rejected was

able to destroy both his soul and his body in hell. Beyond that, it stands as a continuing warning to the unbelieving Judases of all time.

VALUATION BY GOD

Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Therefore do not fear; you are of more value than many sparrows.
(10:29-31)

Jesus assures the twelve, and every person who would ever trust in Him, that they are dear to their heavenly Father. With divine intimacy and intensity the Lord loves and cherishes those who belong to Him, and He will not allow any permanent harm come to them.

An *assarion* (**cent**) was the smallest coin in circulation in Jesus' day and was worth one-sixteenth of a denarius, the average daily wage for a laborer. One such **cent** would buy **two sparrows**, which were as common and relatively valueless in New Testament times as they are today. Roasted **sparrows** were often served as cheap finger food, as a type of appetizer or hors d'oeuvre.

Yet not one sparrow will fall to the ground apart from your Father, Jesus says. This most insignificant of little birds cannot even fall without God's knowledge. In some Greek usages, the word for **fall** is translated as "hop"—in which case a little sparrow cannot even hop on the ground without God's knowledge!

God's knowledge of us is so detailed and His interest in us is so keen that **the very hairs of [our] head are all numbered.** The average hair count on the human head is said to be about 140,000, which means that some people have many more hairs even than that. God, who has all knowledge of every person, illustrates that omniscience by this mundane and spiritually inconsequential bit of information pertaining to the number of **hairs** on a person's **head.** If He takes notice of such things as that, how much more is He concerned about spiritual matters of far greater consequence?

Jesus then gives a third exhortation to **not fear** (cf. vv. 26, 28) and another reason *why* we should not fear: we **are of more value than many sparrows**. The obvious understatement illustrates how very dear God's children are to Him. In a similar promise Jesus said, "If God so arrays the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more do so for you, O men of little faith?" (Matt. 6:30). How can we be anxious and fearful, knowing of such care and protection by our heavenly Father?

From among the finest athletes in the Roman Empire, Nero selected a group called The Emperor's Wrestlers. Their motto was: "We, the wrestlers, wrestling for thee, O Emperor, to win for thee the victory and from thee, the victor's crown." The wrestlers were also soldiers and were often sent out on special military campaigns. On a certain mission in Gaul (modern France), many of the wrestlers were converted to Christ. Upon hearing the news, Nero ordered the commander, Vespasian, to execute any wrestler who refused to renounce Christ and swear religious as well as military allegiance to the emperor. The emperor's orders were received in the dead of winter, as the men were encamped on the shore of a frozen lake. When Vespasian assembled the soldiers and asked how many were Christians, forty men stepped forward. Hoping not to lose any of these fine men, many of whom were his friends, he gave them until sundown the next day to reconsider. But at the given hour, all of them still refused to renounce Christ. In order that they not die at the hands of their comrades, the commander ordered the forty men to disrobe and walk naked out onto the ice. Throughout the night the soldiers on shore could hear the forty sentenced men singing triumphantly, "Forty wrestlers, wrestling for Thee, O Christ, to win for Thee the victory, and from Thee, the victor's crown." The singing grew fainter as morning neared, and at dawn a lone figure walked back and approached the fire. He confessed that his faith was not strong enough to face death. When Vespasian then heard the faint strains of "Thirty-nine wrestlers, wrestling for Thee, O Christ," he was so moved that he threw off his armor and clothes and marched out to join the others, shouting as he went, "Forty wrestlers, wrestling for Thee, O Christ, to win for Thee the victory, and from Thee, the victor's crown."

**The Hallmarks of
Discipleship—part 2**
(10:32-42)

Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.

Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household. He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life shall lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake shall find it.

He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you he shall not lose his reward. (10:32-42)

After Henry Martyn spent virtually a lifetime of ministry in India, he announced that God had laid a burden on his heart to go to Persia (modern Iran) and translate the New Testament and Psalms into the Persian language. Doctors had already told him that he would die because of the heat if he stayed in India. He went to Persia, studied the language,

and eventually finished the translation work in 1812. He then learned, however, that he could not print and distribute the Scriptures without the shah's permission. He traveled 600 miles to Teheran but was denied permission to see the shah. He took another 400-mile trip to visit the British ambassador, who gave him proper papers of introduction. Riding a mule at night and resting during the heat of the day, he came back to Teheran and managed to obtain the needed permission. Ten days later he died. Shortly before his death he had written in his diary, "I sat and thought with sweet comfort and peace of my God. In solitude my Companion, my Friend, and Comforter."

Bound up in the spirit of Henry Martyn was the key to genuine discipleship: being so utterly consumed with the cause of Christ that you take no thought for your own life or welfare.

A DISCIPLE CONFESSES THE LORD

Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven. (10:32-33)

In addition to emulating his Lord and not fearing the world (see chap. 20, on Matt. 10:24-31), a true disciple openly confesses Christ before the world.

In his book *I Love Idi Amin* ([Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1977], p. 112) Festo Kivengere, a leading evangelical minister in Uganda, tells the history of persecution and martyrdom of Christians in that country. In 1885 three Christian boys, ranging in age from eleven to fifteen, were forced to give their lives for Christ because they would not renounce their faith in Him. The king was adamantly opposed to Christianity and ordered the boys' execution if they did not recant. At the place of execution the boys asked that the following message be given to the king: "Tell his majesty that he has put our bodies in the fire but we won't be long in the fire. Soon we will be with Jesus, which is much better. But ask him to

repent and change his mind or he will land in a place of eternal fire.” As they stood bound and awaiting death they sang a song that soon became greatly loved by Christians in that country as “The Martyrs’ Song.” One verse testifies,

O that I had wings like the angels,
I would fly away and be with Jesus.

The youngest of the boys, named Yusufu, said, “Please don’t cut off my arms. I will not struggle in the fire that takes me to Jesus.” Because of the boys’ testimony that day, forty adults trusted in Jesus Christ for salvation, and indirectly countless more converts were won to the Lord over a period of many years. By 1887 a large number of other Christians were martyred, many of them inspired by the fearless, loving testimony of those three boys. None of those martyrs knew much theology or much about the Bible, because most of them were illiterate and all of them were relatively new believers. But they had a deep love for Jesus that they refused to hide, no matter what the cost. As is nearly always the case, those who died were replaced severalfold by new converts who came to Christ because of their testimony.

Everyone is an inclusive term that gives a sober warning to all would-be and all professing believers for careful self-examination. A person’s willingness to **confess** Christ before men determines Christ’s willingness to claim that person before His Father. Paul eagerly confessed, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). He was not ashamed to acknowledge the person and work of Christ because His is the only message that offers salvation and hope to a corrupt and dying world.

Throughout the history of the church, believers who have been unashamed to **confess** Jesus **before men** are those the Lord uses to bring others to Himself. Whether it is through preaching, teaching, personal witnessing, or the courage of martyrdom, those who **confess** Him boldly and unapologetically before the world not only are the Lord’s most faithful disciples but also His most effective disciple makers.

Confess means to affirm and agree with. It is not simply to recognize a truth but to identify with it. Even the demons, for example, recognize that God is one (James 2:19), but they by no means confess God, because they are His implacable enemies. We do not **confess** Christ simply by acknowledging that He is Lord and Savior but by acknowledging and receiving Him as *our* Lord and Savior. “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord,” Paul says, “and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation” (Rom. 10:9-10). Outward confession with the mouth is a reflection of genuine belief in the heart.

Men, like **everyone**, is universal. A true disciple is willing to openly identify with Christ wherever he is, whether before a fellowship of other believers, a group of serious inquirers, or a hostile crowd of unbelievers. “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God” (1 John 4:15). To the faithful church at Pergamum, the Lord said, “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith, even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells” (Rev. 2:13).

Near the end of his life Paul wrote to his beloved Timothy, “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:6-7). But a few verses later he spoke of Demas, who “loved this present world, [and] has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica” (v. 10). Demas had been a faithful helper of Paul’s, but when persecution became severe, he held the things of the world too dear to give them up (cf. Matt. 13:22). Hard times are the test of faith. The church does not lack for supporters when it is popular and respected; but when the world turns against it, its fair-weather friends are not to be found.

Believers can be silenced by much less than persecution. Simple embarrassment or friendly ridicule has closed many Christian mouths. It is sometimes easier to stand up to vicious physical injury by a hostile government than to stand up to unbelieving family and friends who would never do us physical harm.

Every believer has lapses of faithfulness, which is why the Lord's promise of 1 John 1:9 is so dear: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Peter denied the Lord, but he could not live with his denial and he went out and wept bitterly. His heart was broken because he had so terribly failed and grieved His Lord. Timothy was Paul's most promising protege, yet years after he had himself become a leader in the church, Timothy apparently had become reticent about openly proclaiming the gospel. Paul therefore admonished him, "Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord" (2 Tim. 1:8).

Peter and Timothy had lapses of faithfulness, but feeling shame of the gospel and of the Lord was not their normal attitude. Those whose lives are characterized by confessing Christ, in name and in obedience, are those whom Jesus **will also confess . . . before [His] Father who is in heaven**. What an incredibly wonderful thought, to know that all Christians will stand before the **Father . . . in heaven** and hear Jesus tell Him that they are His, that He claims them because they have claimed Him!

When Pliny was governor of the province of Bithynia, in northern Asia Minor, he wrote a letter to the emperor Trajan trying to explain why he had been unsuccessful in stamping out the sect called Christians. He had tried arrest, fines, imprisonment, beatings, torture, and various forms of execution in order to get them to renounce Christ and to burn incense to Caesar as an act of worship, but to no avail. In trying to excuse himself before the emperor, he said, "None of these acts, those who are really Christians can be compelled to do." Even a pagan ruler knew that a person with such unflinching conviction must be a true believer.

The negative side of Jesus' warning is sobering: **But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven**. This warning applies to a person who makes an outward profession of Christianity but turns away when hard testing comes.

It is possible to **deny Christ before men** by silence, by failing to witness for Him and trying to be an unnoticed Christian—whose friends and neighbors, and perhaps even family, would never suspect of being a believer. It is also possible to deny Christ by actions, living like the rest of the world lives, with no higher standards or values. It is possible to deny Christ by words, using the world's profanity, vulgarity, and blasphemy. It is

possible to deny Christ in many ways that are short of verbally and publicly renouncing Him.

The future tenses in verses 32-33 tell us that Jesus is speaking of future judgment. In that day, those who confess Him, He **will also confess**, and those who deny Him, He **will also deny**.

The difference between true and false discipleship is a much-repeated theme in Matthew. Near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20). Later during the sermon He distinguished between false disciples, who go in the wide gate and travel the broad way, and true disciples, who enter by the narrow gate and walk in the narrow way (7:13-14).

He spoke of those who bear good fruit and those who bear bad fruit (7:16-20) and then said, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’” (vv. 21-23). Immediately after that He distinguished between the person who builds his religious house on the sand of man’s wisdom and is destroyed and the person who builds on the rock of His Word and is saved (vv. 24-27).

In chapter 13 Jesus gives the parables of the sower, of the wheat and tares, and of the dragnet (vv. 1-30, 47-50), all three of which illustrate distinctions between true and false faith. He pictured the judgment of the nations at the end of the Tribulation as the separation of believing sheep to His right and unbelieving goats to His left. “Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’” (Matt. 25:34).

The sheep are those who not only identify themselves with Him but who, by their public confession of Him and their daily obedience to His will, reflect His own love and compassion by serving others in His name (vv. 35-36, 40). They confess Christ by their words and their actions, by loving as He loved, reaching out as He reached out, caring as He cared. The all-essential hallmark of being a true disciple of Christ—and therefore

of truly confessing Christ—is to be like Christ, our Teacher and Master (10:25).

In the story of the sheep and goats Jesus went on to say, “Then He [the King] will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels’” (Matt. 25:41). Although pagans, agnostics, atheists, and every other kind of unbeliever will face the same eternal fire, Jesus was not talking about such people in this illustration. He was speaking of those who claimed to be His followers and who will say to Him on the day of judgment, “Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?” (v. 44). Like Judas, they professed Him but they did not genuinely confess Him. They claimed Him as Lord but they never belonged to Him; they had not trusted in Him or obeyed Him.

I believe that Jesus was continually concerned about Judas, whom He knew did not believe and whom He therefore could not confess before the Father. Judas is the classic example of a professor who is not a confessor.

Every conscientious pastor at times becomes anxious that some people in his congregation may not truly know the Lord and will wake up in eternal damnation, although they may be active in church activities and live moral and seemingly selfless lives.

A DISCIPLE FORSAKES HIS FAMILY

Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s enemies will be the members of his household. He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. (10:34-37)

A fourth hallmark of discipleship is willingness to forsake everything, including one's own family if necessary, for Christ's sake. Jesus introduces this point by using the figure of war and peace. As far as many human relationships are concerned, He did not come **to bring peace on the earth, . . . but a sword.**

The Jews of Jesus' day for the most part expected the Messiah to bring political deliverance for Israel and to usher in an eternal kingdom of righteousness and peace. The Old Testament spoke of the Messiah's peace-making. Isaiah called Him the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6) and spoke of His reign of perfect justice and peace (2:4). Solomon wrote of the Messiah's worldwide rule of peace and abundance (Ps. 72).

Jesus' disciples had already experienced inner peace and bliss that they had never known before, and they no doubt expected that experience to grow in intensity and extent the longer they were with Jesus. They may have expected the world to fall at their feet as they preached the good news of the kingdom and offered lost mankind the way of salvation and happiness.

Therefore, lest they misunderstand the true nature of His first coming and of their own ministry, Jesus began early to prepare them for His own rejection and suffering and also theirs. The gospel is indeed a gospel of peace, because it offers the way to bring peace between a holy God and sinful man, and it shows the only way for having truly peaceful relationships between men and other men. But because the world system is evil and man's fallen nature is sinful, God's offer of peace continues to be rejected and to be offensive to most of the world's people. This brings conflict into the most intimate of human relations, so that **a man's enemies will be the members of his household.**

Using another figure of destruction, Jesus said, "I have come to cast fire upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled! . . . Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; for from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two, and two against three" (Luke 12:49, 51-52; cf. v. 53).

The Old Testament also spoke of that aspect of the Messiah's coming. Micah predicted a time when "son treats father contemptuously, daughter rises up against her mother, daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; [and] a man's enemies are the men of his own household" (Mic. 7:6)—the passage Jesus here quotes. In the ancient rabbinical writings we

find a paraphrase of that passage, which indicates clearly that they recognized the messianic age would involve conflict even within the family: “In the period when the Son of David shall come, daughter will rise up against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. The son despises his father, the daughter rebels against the mother, the daughter-in-law against the mother-in-law, and a man’s enemies are they of his own household.”

Against is from *dixazō*, which means to cut in two, to rend asunder, and is used only here in the New Testament. It denoted complete and often permanent separation. Sometimes the rift between believers and unbelieving relatives is lifelong and irreconcilable. Yet a true disciple must be willing to pay that price. The gospels report at least two would-be disciples who did not accept Jesus’ call to follow Him because they were unwilling to sacrifice their family ties. One wanted to wait for his inheritance before following the Lord, and the other wanted to delay obedience until he had settled everything with his family. Of such half-hearted, divided commitment Jesus said, “No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:57-62).

Husbands or wives will sometimes not come to Christ because of fear of separation from their spouses. Children will sometimes not come because of possibly offending their parents, and vice versa. Such fears are often ungrounded, because one member of a family coming to Christ sometimes leads to the whole family being converted. But the conversion of one member often leads instead to bitterness and permanent disruption of family relationships. No one can be sure in advance what other people’s reactions to his conversion will be, not even the reactions of his own family. Jesus’ point is that the concern for saving one’s own soul and yielding to Christ’s absolute lordship must be paramount, whatever the cost in relationships may be. The phrase **is not worthy of Me** identifies the person who will not come to Christ because of other intimate and meaningful relationships that might be affected.

I once talked to a young girl at a Christian conference who told me she had been raised in a pagan family and that since her conversion her father had refused to speak to her. She said, “I can understand why he objects to my decision, because he knows nothing of the gospel and believes all religion is superstition. But you would think he would at least be happy that I am not an alcoholic, drug addict, prostitute, criminal, or a

cripple. I have never had such joy in my life, and I have never loved my father so much; yet he has cut me out of his life.” Like many others, she had experienced the sword and fire the gospel sometimes brings.

In marriages where one partner is a believer and the other is not, Paul says that “the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband.... Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace” (1 Cor. 7:14-15). If the sword of division causes an unbeliever to sever a marriage, the separation is to be accepted for the sake of the believer’s peace.

Through Zacharias the Holy Spirit proclaimed John the Baptist as the forerunner of “the Sunrise from on high,” who would “guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:78-79). At Jesus’ birth the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased” (2:14). Shortly before His crucifixion Jesus assured the twelve, “Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; ... Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful” (John 14:27); and again, “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace” (16:33). But He qualified both of those promises, explaining in the first instance, “not as the world gives, do I give [peace] to you” (14:27*b*), and in the second, “In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world” (16:33*b*).

At the second coming of Christ a perfect kingdom of peace on earth will be established, ushered in and sovereignly sustained by the Prince of Peace. But for now, during the interval between His two comings, the gospel that brings inner peace to those who believe will also be the cause of their being misunderstood, maligned, and mistreated by those who do not believe—including those nearest and dearest to them. The most heart-rending divisions are always among those who are closest to us. Nowhere can feelings be hurt more deeply than in the home.

Because the intervention in history by the Son of God was going to split and fracture human relationships, Jesus determined that His disciples be prepared for that experience. Martin Luther said, “If our gospel were received in peace, it would not be the true gospel.” Luther’s preaching and teaching produced the greatest rift in the history of religion, challenging the unbiblical teachings and practices of the Catholic Church and shattering its millennium of complacency and political power.

Becoming a Christian requires affirming the lordship of Christ to the point where you are willing to forsake everything else. It is not simply raising a hand, signing a card, or walking down an aisle and declaring love for Jesus. Salvation is by faith alone, apart from any works at all; but faith that is genuine will be manifested in a commitment that cannot be swayed by any influence. The Christian is to love his family with self-sacrificing love. Christian husbands and wives are to love each other and their children with unreserved devotion. Christian children are to love, respect, and care for their parents as unto the Lord. But a believer's commitment to Christ is so profound and far-reaching that any relationship that endangers *that* relationship must be sacrificed if necessary.

John Bunyan was told to quit preaching or be thrown in prison. He knew that if he went to prison his wife and children would be left destitute. They had little enough to eat and wear when he was free; but if he were imprisoned they would be totally impoverished. Yet he knew he must preach the gospel God had called him to preach. Because he refused to stop preaching, he was imprisoned; and from his cell he wrote,

The parting with my wife and poor children hath often been to me in this place as the pulling of the flesh from my bones; and that not only because I am somewhat too fond of these great mercies, but also because I would have often brought to my mind the many hardships, miseries, and wants that my poor family was like to meet with, should I be taken from them, especially my poor blind child, who lay nearer my heart than all I have besides. Oh, the thought of the hardship I thought my blind one might go under would break my heart to pieces.... But yet, recalling myself, thought I, I must venture all with God, though it goeth to the quick to leave you. Oh, I saw in this condition, I was a man who was pulling down his house upon the head of his wife and children; yet thought I, I must do it. I must do it.

A DISCIPLE OFFERS HIS OWN LIFE

And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life shall lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake shall find it. (10:38-39)

Love of one's own life is often the greatest hindrance to full commitment to Christ. Yet Jesus calls His disciples to total self-denial, including, if necessary, sacrifice to the point of death.

No one in the Roman Empire in New Testament times, and certainly no one in Palestine, could have missed Jesus' point when He said, **He who does not take his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me.** The **cross** symbolized the extremes of both excruciating pain and heartless cruelty; but above all it symbolized death. Only a few years before Jesus spoke those words, a zealot named Judas had gathered together a band of rebels to fight the Roman occupation forces. The insurrection was easily quelled, and in order to teach the Jews a lesson, the Roman general Varus ordered the crucifixion of over 2,000 Jews. Their crosses lined the roads of Galilee from one end to the other.

The twelve knew immediately that to **take their cross and follow after Me** meant to abandon themselves without reservation to Jesus' lordship, with no consideration of cost—even of life itself.

No matter how terrible they may be, the hardships and tragedies of human living that often befall Christians are not the crosses of which Jesus speaks. Such things as a cruel spouse, a rebellious child, a debilitating or terminal illness, the loss of a job, or destruction of a house by a tornado or flood, may strongly test a believer's faith; but those are not crosses.

The **cross** of a believer is not a mystical or spiritual identification with the cross of Christ or some "crucified life" idea. Such concepts are foreign to the context, and the cross of Christ was yet future when Jesus spoke here. The disciples would hear **cross** and think only of physical death.

A **cross** is the willing sacrifice of everything one has, including life, for the sake of Christ. It is something that, like the Lord Himself, a believer must **take** on himself when it is thrust upon him by the unbelieving world because of his relationship to God.

But as the Lord goes on to explain, no sacrifice for Him compares with what is received from Christ. The person who thinks he **has found his life** in the things of the world **shall lose it**. Earthly life is temporary, and the person who holds on to it above all else holds on to something that he cannot possibly keep—and in the process he forfeits the eternal life that he cannot lose.

On the other hand, the person who **has lost his life for My sake**, Jesus says, **shall find it**. The Lord is not isolating martyrdom, because no human sacrifice can merit salvation. But the willingness to forsake everything, including physical life if necessary, for the sake of Christ indicates the spirit of true discipleship, and therefore the spirit of a person who is destined for heaven and eternal **life** in God's presence.

When John Bunyan was brought before the magistrate to be sentenced to prison, he said, "Sir, the law of Christ hath provided two ways of obeying: the one to do that which I in my conscience do believe I am bound to do actively; and where I cannot obey it actively, there I am willing to lie down and suffer what they shall do unto me."

A DISCIPLE RECEIVES HIS REWARD

He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you he shall not lose his reward. (10:40-42)

The sixth hallmark of a true disciple is not what he does or is but what he receives. This mark is the most positive one but is also the most

invisible. It is not experienced fully—sometimes very little—in this life, but is primarily reserved for heaven and is enjoyed now by faith and hope.

Although many people reject the gospel, many also believe. Those who accept the gospel will accept the one who brings them the gospel. The true disciple and minister of Jesus Christ is an agent of God. Not even the apostles had within themselves the power to forgive sin or reconcile men to God. But every Christian whose witness brings another person to Christ is God's instrument of salvation. In that sense, Jesus said, **He who receives you receives Me.** A person who receives us and our testimony also receives Christ, because we are His ambassadors.

The person who receives the Son also receives the Father: **and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.** There is no such thing as believing in God the Father without believing in God the Son. Jesus told the unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem, "You know neither Me, nor My Father; if you knew Me, you would know My Father also." A short while later he said to the same group, "If God were your Father, you would love Me; for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me" (John 8:19, 42).

In His limitless grace God not only rewards a prophet for his faithfulness but also rewards anyone else **who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet**, even giving them **a prophet's reward.** The same principle, in fact, applies to every believer who is accepted for Christ's sake. **He who receives a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward.** In an incomprehensible sharing of blessing, God showers His rewards on every person who receives His people because they are His people.

Extending the promise of God's grace still further, Jesus said, **And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you he shall not lose his reward.**

Little ones are believers who seem insignificant and unimportant (cf. Matt. 18:3-1; 25:31-46). They might be new believers who are untaught and are stumbling in their new life; or they might be lifelong believers whose devoted years of service have attracted little attention. Jesus' point is that *any* service done to *any* of His people in His name amounts to service to Him and will be rewarded. The simplest help given to the simplest disciple will not go unnoticed or unrewarded by God.

While a young boy in a country village in England struggled hard to study for the ministry, an old cobbler helped him in whatever ways he could. The godly man encouraged the boy spiritually and helped support him with what little money he could spare. When the young man was finally licensed to preach, the cobbler said to him, “I always had in my heart the desire to be a minister of the gospel; but circumstances never made it possible. You are doing what was always my dream but never a reality. I want you to let me make your shoes for nothing, and I want you to wear them in the pulpit when you preach. In that way I will feel you are preaching the gospel I always wanted to preach, standing in my shoes.”

Whenever we become the source of blessing for others, we are blessed; and whenever other believers become a source of blessing to us, they are blessed. In God’s magnificent economy of grace, the least believer can share the blessings of the greatest, and no one’s good work will go unrewarded.

John Calvin was banished from Geneva by ungrateful citizens who resented his giving them the full truth of God’s Word. In response to the disappointing news he said, “Most assuredly, if I had merely served man, this would have been a poor recompense. But it is my happiness that I have served Him who never fails to reward His servants to the full extent of His promise.”

Overcoming Doubt

(11:1-6)

And it came about that when Jesus had finished giving instructions to His twelve disciples, He departed from there to teach and preach in their cities. Now when John in prison heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples, and said to Him, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?” And Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me.” (11:1-6)

The first ten chapters of Matthew are, in general, a series of testimonies that prove who Jesus is. He presents the testimony of history (1:1-17), of the miraculous birth (1:18-25), of fulfilled prophecy (2:1-23), of Christ’s forerunner (3:1-12), of God the Father (3:13-17), of Jesus’ power (4:1-11), of His words (5:1-7:29), of His works (8:1-9:38), and of His disciples (10:1-42). Matthew marshals all of that evidence in the courtroom, as it were, to testify that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah and Son of God.

In chapters 11-12 Matthew focuses on the reactions of various individuals and groups to that evidence, organized into several general categories of response. In each chapter there is a series of negative responses followed by a positive appeal. Chapter 11 looks at the negative responses of doubt (vv. 1-15), criticism (16-19), and indifference (20-24), followed by a positive appeal to faith (25-30). Chapter 12 looks at the negative responses of rejection (vv. 1-21), amazement (22-23), blasphemy (24-27), and curious fascination (38-45), followed by another positive appeal to faith (46-50).

In the opening six verses of this section, Matthew first mentions Jesus' brief tour of ministering alone (v. 1; see 10:5) and then presents John's negative response of doubt (vv. 2-3) and Jesus' response to that doubt (vv. 4-6).

JESUS MINISTERS ALONE

And it came about that when Jesus had finished giving instructions to His twelve disciples, He departed from there to teach and preach in their cities.

(11:1)

Although the text does not say so explicitly, it can be assumed that, after **Jesus had finished giving instructions to His twelve disciples**, they went out preaching and healing among the Jews of Galilee as He had told them to do (see 10:5). While they were gone, Jesus **departed from there** (the place of instruction; see 10:1) and began Himself **to teach and preach in their cities**, that is, the cities of Galilee. For a relatively brief period of time Jesus ministered alone while the disciples were out on their first mission.

His twofold ministry was **to teach** and to **preach**, to explain and to proclaim the good news. Most of His teaching would have been done in the streets of the cities, but since the synagogues were the normal place where Scripture was taught among the Jews, some of His teaching was probably done there as well. The Jewish historian Philo reports that the main purpose of synagogue services was to read and expound Scripture. Visiting rabbis and scholars were always welcome to teach in the local synagogues, and Jesus availed Himself of that privilege many times (see Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 12:9; Mark 6:2; Luke 6:6; John 18:20).

JOHN DOUBTS JESUS

Now when John in prison heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples, and said to Him, “Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?” (11:2-3)

In the case of John the Baptist, and of countless believers since his time, doubt might better be described as perplexity or confusion. The perplexity dealt with in these verses is the perplexity of a believer, a true child of God and citizen of His kingdom. John was not questioning the truthfulness of God’s Word as revealed in the Old Testament or as revealed to him at the baptism of Jesus. He was rather uncertain about his understanding of those truths. Virtually all the gospel references to doubt pertain to believers rather than to unbelievers; and the kind of questioning John the Baptist experienced concerning Jesus’ identity can only occur in the life of a believer. In that transitional time, before the written revelation of the New Testament, there were many things that seemed unclear and needed explanation and confirmation.

Jesus Himself testified of John that “among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (Matt. 11:11). He was the greatest man who had lived until his time, and, when they are confused, all believers can take comfort in his perplexity. It is also encouraging to remember that it was to His true disciples, primarily the twelve, that Jesus repeatedly said such words as “O you of little faith” and “How long will you doubt?” (Matt. 8:26; 14:31; 21:21; cf. 28:17; Mark 11:23; 16:11; Luke 12:28).

Though the Lord understands the doubts of His children, He is never pleased with their doubt, because it reflects against Him. While Peter was pondering the vision of the unclean animals, the messengers from Cornelius arrived at the house where he was staying, and the Holy Spirit said to Peter, “Behold, three men are looking for you. But arise, go downstairs, and accompany them without misgivings,” that is, without doubt (Acts 10:19-20). James warns believers that “the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind” (James 1:6; cf. Eph. 4:14). But the doubt of which John the Baptist was guilty was the result of weakness rather than sin.

By the time Jesus began this time of ministering alone in Galilee, **John** the Baptist had been put in **prison** by Herod for denouncing the

king's adulterous marriage to his brother's wife (Matt. 14:3-4). John had already announced Jesus' coming as the Messiah, addressed Him as the Lamb of God, baptized Him in the Jordan River, and declared in humility that "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). He had already acknowledged Jesus as the Christ and trusted Him as his own Lord and Savior. Yet he was now perplexed, and **he sent word by his disciples, and said to Him, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?"**

The fact that John sent his disciples to Jesus is a strong testimony to his faith. In his heart he believed that Jesus truly was the Messiah and trusted Him as his Lord; but the events or lack of them caused his mind or emotions to put a cloud of doubt over his assurance. He was saying, in effect, "I have firmly believed You are the Messiah; but have I been wrong?" He was not asking for information but for confirmation. He believed, but his faith had become weakened. John came to Jesus through his disciples, saying, like the father of the boy Jesus cleansed of an evil spirit, "I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

A number of John's disciples had already been observing Jesus for some time, probably on John's instruction. Shortly after the banquet Matthew gave in honor of Jesus and to which he invited fellow "tax-gatherers and sinners," the "disciples of John came to Him, saying, 'Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?'" (Matt. 9:10, 14). And after Jesus raised the son of the widow of Nain, "the disciples of John reported to him about all these things" (Luke 7:18).

Obviously John's disciples had some access to him while he was in prison, and apparently he sent them out on various assignments, primarily to observe and report on Jesus' ministry. After being imprisoned for many months, unable to preach or to have any contact with the outside world except for occasional visits by his disciples, John was plagued with misgivings and doubts about Jesus—the One he had announced, baptized, and declared to be the Christ.

He therefore told two of his disciples (see Luke 7:19) to ask Jesus specifically, **Are You the Expected One?** Along with the Branch, Son of David, King of kings, and other such titles, **the Expected One** (*ho erchomenos*) was a common designation for the Messiah. The title is first found in Psalms 40:7 and 118:26 and is frequently used or alluded to by the gospel writers (see Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:7; 11:9; Luke 3:16; 13:35;

19:38; John 1:27). Every Jew of Jesus' day would have known that to ask if He were **the Expected One** was to ask if He were the Messiah.

It should be reassuring to us that even a man of John's spiritual stature and gifts was subject to doubt. From the text and from John's situation at least four reasons for his doubt can be seen—reasons that also cause many Christians today to doubt. Those reasons are difficult circumstances, worldly influence, incomplete revelation, and unfulfilled expectations.

DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

Humanly speaking the *career* of **John** the Baptist had ended in disaster. He had been the fiery, independent, dramatic, confrontational, courageous man who preached exactly what needed to be preached, to whom it needed to be preached, and when it needed to be preached. He was fearless, aggressive, and faithful to the Lord in every way. He called sin sin and sinners sinners. And now he was **in prison** because of his faithfulness.

On a trip to Rome, Herod Antipas, governor of Galilee, had taken a liking to Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, and had seduced her. After returning to Galilee, Herod divorced his own wife and married Herodias. When John the Baptist heard of it, he publicly confronted Herod with his sin and was promptly thrown into prison. Only Herod's fear of the multitudes kept John from being killed immediately (Matt. 14:5).

John was imprisoned at an old fort at Machaerus, located in a hot and desolate region five miles east and fifteen miles south of the northern end of the Dead Sea. He was placed in a dark, stifling dungeon that was little more than a pit. After some eighteen months in the limelight, this free spirit of the wilderness was confined and isolated. He had been in prison for perhaps a year when he sent the two disciples to Jesus.

William Barclay captures much of the significance of John's situation:

He was the child of the desert; all his life he had lived in the wide open spaces, with the clean wind on his face and the spacious vault of the sky for his roof. And now he was confined within the four narrow walls of an underground dungeon. For a man like John, who had probably never lived in a house, this must have been an agony. In Carlisle Castle there is a little cell. Once long ago they had put a border chieftain in that cell and had left him for years. In that cell there is one little window which is placed too high for a man to look out of it when he is standing on the floor. On the ledge of the window, in the stone, there are two depressions worn away. They are the marks of the hands of the border chieftain, the places where, day after day, he had lifted himself up by placing his hands on the ledge that he might look out on the green dales across which he would never ride again. John must have been like that; and there is nothing to wonder at, and still less to criticize, in the fact that questions began to form themselves in John's mind. (*The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2 [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958], p. 2)

John was a true saint and a true prophet of God—holy, loyal, selfless, and unreserved in His service to the Lord. He had done exactly what God told him to do. He had been filled with the Spirit from the time he was in his mother's womb, and all his life had lived under the Nazirite vow, the highest vow of dedication a Jewish man could take. But now he could not help wondering if prison, shame, hunger, physical torment, perplexity, and loneliness were his rewards.

John knew the Old Testament well, and he could hardly have kept from wondering where the God of comfort (Ps. 119:50; Isa. 51:12) was now. And if Jesus were truly the Messiah, why did He let his forerunner and servant suffer in prison? Where was God's love and compassion, not to mention His justice? Where was God's promise that the Messiah would "bind up the brokenhearted, . . . proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to prisoners; . . . proclaim the favorable year of the Lord, and the day of

vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to grant those who mourn in Zion, giving them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning” (Isa. 61:1-3)?

When a believer has faithfully and sacrificially served the Lord for many years and then experiences tragedy, perhaps even a series of tragedies, it is difficult not to wonder about God’s love and justice. When a child is lost to death or to unbelief, a husband or wife dies or leaves, cancer strikes us or a loved one, we are tempted to ask, “God, where are You now when I really need You? Why have You let this happen to Me. Why don’t You help?” But if we dwell on such thoughts, Satan magnifies them and tries to use them to undermine our trust and confidence in God. Except for when we willingly continue in sin, we are never so vulnerable to doubting God’s goodness and truth and believing Satan’s lies as when we are suffering.

John knew where to go to find the answers to his questions and the resolution of his doubts. He had indeed begun to have doubts about Jesus’ identity as the Christ; but it was to Jesus that he sent his disciples for confirmation. In his mind he had perhaps been crying, “Lord, why don’t You help me?” Now, through his disciples, he was pleading, “Lord, please help me!”

In His great love and mercy, Jesus was glad to respond, performing miracles especially for John’s sake and promising him spiritual blessing if he did not waver in trust even in the midst of mystifying circumstances.

Paul was himself in prison, probably in Rome, when he wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your forbearing spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:4-7). He went on to say, “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. . . . And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (vv. 11-13, 19).

Negative circumstances are painful and trying, but our response should be same as John's—going to the Lord and asking Him to quell our doubts, anxieties, and fears (cf. James 1:2-12).

INCOMPLETE REVELATION

A second major cause of doubt is incomplete revelation. Although John had **heard of the works of Christ**, his information was secondhand and not complete. He had been in prison for a year; but even while he was preaching, He had no direct contact with Jesus after the baptism. If Jesus' own disciples failed to understand Him fully and demonstrated "little faith" after being with Him intimately for three years, it is easy to understand why John had doubts. He was not an "eyewitness of His majesty," as were Peter, James, and John (2 Pet. 1:16-18; cf. Matt. 17:2), nor did he have the opportunity to see with his own eyes or handle with his own hands the Son of God as He taught, preached, and healed, as had the twelve and many others besides (see 1 John 1:1).

John did not experience the full truth about the Messiah he was sent to proclaim. He was in a position not unlike that of the Old Testament prophets. "As to this salvation," Peter explains, "the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow" (1 Pet. 1:10-11).

The information that John's **disciples** brought back to him was still not firsthand, but their report was based on confirming demonstrations of divine power that Jesus performed specifically for John's benefit.

Many believers today also doubt certain truths about God because of incomplete information, because they have inadequate knowledge or understanding of His Word. The Christian who is immersed in Scripture has no reason to stumble. When God is allowed to speak through His Word, doubt vanishes like mist in the sunlight.

Jesus responded to the doubts of the two disciples on the Emmaus road by first rebuking them for being "slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken." Then, "beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the

Scripture” (Luke 24:25,27). After Jesus revealed to them who He was and “vanished from their sight, . . . they said to one another, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?’” (vv. 31-32). Even before they knew it was Jesus who was speaking to them, the truth of His Word began dispelling their doubts and building up their faith.

We all need the continual truth of His Word to protect us from doubt and to dispel doubt when it comes. The Bereans were noble-minded and “received the word with great eagerness” because they examined “the Scriptures daily, to see whether” the things Paul preached were true (Acts 17:11).

WORLDLY INFLUENCE

A third cause of doubt is worldly influence, from which not even the godly John was completely insulated. What Jesus was preaching and doing did not square with what most Jews thought the Messiah, **the Expected One**, would do, and John probably shared some of those misconceptions. The Messiah was expected first of all to free Israel from her bondage, which at the time was under Rome. He obviously could not establish His own kingdom of justice and righteousness without first dealing with the pagan, unjust, and cruel Romans. But Jesus had done nothing to oppose Rome, either in words or actions.

The Jewish people also thought the Messiah would eliminate all suffering—all disease, affliction, hunger, and pain. Yet Jesus’ miracles, marvelous and extensive as they were, had not fully banished those things from Israel, much less from all the world. Many Jews also probably envisioned a type of welfare state, in which all their material needs would be provided for them. They expected health, wealth, and instant happiness, and when Jesus fed the multitude on the far side of the Sea of Galilee, they were ready to immediately crown Him king (John 6:15, 26).

John the Baptist knew Jesus refused to be made king, and that He had done nothing to change either the pagan and brutal political and military systems of Rome or the worldly and corrupt religious system in Israel. Sin was still rampant, injustice was still the rule, political and religious corruption were the norm, and the world was essentially the same

as it had been for thousands of years—except for a few cleansed lives and healed bodies. No visible kingdom was in sight, and no radical changes could be seen.

A common misconception about the Messiah was that His coming would be preceded by the coming of a number of other men. First Elijah would return, then Jeremiah, then a group of other prophets. Therefore when Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”... they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist [who by that time had been killed]; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets’ (Matt. 16:13-14). It is possible that John the Baptist thought that perhaps Jesus was not the Messiah after all but only one of those forerunners, as he himself was.

Jesus’ own disciples had some of those misconceptions concerning the Messiah. They were continually righting doubts about Jesus because He did not fit their preconceived ideas. Even after the resurrection they still expected Him to establish His earthly kingdom. “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” they asked (Acts 1:6). He had repeatedly told them about the nature of His mission and plan, but the ideas they had formed from the world around them clouded and distorted their understanding. What Jesus said to Philip shortly before His crucifixion applied to all the disciples: “Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me?” (John 14:9). Even after Peter confessed that Jesus was “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” he could not accept the truth that the Christ would have to die, even though he heard that truth from Jesus’ own lips (Matt. 16:16, 21-22). The disciples on the road to Emmaus were puzzled for the same reason (Luke 24:19-24). All of them had been victimized by what people around them thought the Messiah should be and do.

The people’s ideas about the Messiah were so distorted and ingrained that they disregarded or misconstrued whatever Jesus said or did that did not fit those ideas. When some of the Jewish leaders said to Jesus, “How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly,” Jesus answered, “I told you, and you do not believe” (John 10:24-25).

People today, including some believers, are confused and perplexed about the plan of God for the same reason. Their minds are so full of the ideas of people around them that they fail to understand God’s plan even

when they read it in Scripture. We continually hear people ask, “If Christ loves everybody so much, why do children die and people starve and get diseased and become crippled? If God is a God of justice, why is there so much corruption and injustice in the world? Why do so many good people have it so bad and so many bad people have it so good? If God is so loving and merciful, why does He send people to hell? If God is so powerful and false religions are so evil, why doesn’t He just wipe out those false systems?” Because the Lord does not fit their preconceived ideas of what He should be like, people are perplexed, often indignant, and sometimes even blasphemous.

The world does not know God or understand His nature or His plan. “A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor. 2:14). The Jews who would not believe Jesus’ claim to messiahship even when He told them plainly of it, did so because they did not belong to Him. “You do not believe,” Jesus said, “because you are not of My sheep” (John 10:26).

To the unbelieving Pharisees who asked Jesus about “when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, “Look, here it is!” or, “There it is!” For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst’” (Luke 17:20-21). Ignorance and unbelief always blind the eyes of men to the realities of the kingdom that are all around them.

UNFULFILLED EXPECTATIONS

The fact that John instructed his disciples to ask, **or shall we look for someone else?** seems to indicate that John’s expectations about the Messiah were unfulfilled. Under the Spirit’s direction, John had been boldly proclaiming, “He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:11-12). John knew that what he preached was true, and he knew that Jesus was the one about whom he preached; yet Jesus had done none of those things. The

Messiah was to come in judgment, and John therefore expected Jesus to take “His winnowing fork in His hand” and start clearing the threshing floor and burning up the chaff. He expected Jesus to display the blazing power of absolute, complete, and worldwide judgment.

But instead of executing judgment, Jesus assembled a group of twelve nondescript followers and began teaching them in the same manner as many other rabbis had done for centuries before Him. He demonstrated miracle-working power, but He used it only to save and heal, never to judge. Especially now that he was imprisoned, John no doubt wanted to cry out with David, “When my enemies turn back, they stumble and perish before Thee. For Thou hast maintained my just cause; Thou dost sit on the throne judging righteously” (Ps. 9:3-4); and, “Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth!” (Ps. 58:11: cf. 35:1-9; 52:1-5). John wanted to cry out like the saints under the altar who said, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev. 6:10). But John saw no divine intervention, no judgment, no execution of justice. Jesus did not avenge the righteous. He did not even defend Himself against His accusers.

It has always been hard for believers to understand why God allows so many of His children to suffer and allows so many wicked, ungodly people to prosper. It was doubly hard for John the Baptist. For one thing, he had a deep devotion to righteousness and was called by God to preach repentance and judgment. More than that, he was called to proclaim the coming of **the Expected One** who would execute that judgment—which he thought would begin shortly, if not immediately, after the Messiah appeared on the scene.

Christians today sometimes get excited about the Lord’s imminent return; but when many years pass and He does not come, their hope, along with their dedication, often fades. They do not stop expecting Him to return some day, but they stop thinking about it and hoping for it as much as they once did. Some scoffers will even say, “Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation” (2 Pet. 3:4).

JESUS REASSURES JOHN

And Jesus answered and said to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me.” (11:4-6)

Jesus did not answer with a simple yes or no, because He knew that would not have satisfied John. He rather told John’s disciples to present their teacher the evidence. **Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.**

Because many of John’s disciples had already been with Jesus and heard Him teach and seen Him perform miracles, part of the **report to John** would be a reminder of what they had reported earlier. In addition to having heard accounts from his disciples, John doubtlessly had heard from other sources as well, because people from all over Palestine—from Syria, “from Galilee and Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan”—had followed Jesus from early in His ministry, largely on account of His miraculous works (Matt. 4:23-25). After Jesus cleansed a man in Capernaum of an unclean spirit, “immediately the news about Him went out everywhere into all the surrounding district of Galilee” (Mark 1:28); after He raised Jairus’s daughter from the dead, “this news went out into all that land” (Matt. 9:26; cf. Luke 4:14, 37); and after He healed the Galilean man of leprosy, “the news about Him was spreading even farther” (Luke 5:15).

John was a great man of God and beloved by Jesus. As His faithful forerunner languished in prison facing imminent death, the Lord Jesus determined to give him a more direct and personal report of evidence. Luke tells us that when John’s disciples asked Jesus if He was “the Expected One,” that “at that very time He cured many people of diseases and afflictions and evil spirits; and He granted sight to many who were blind” (7:20-21). Right on the spot and before their eyes, Jesus put on a display of miracles expressly for the personal benefit of John’s disciples and even more for the benefit of John himself. How it must have thrilled John’s heart not only to receive fresh confirming evidence of Jesus’

messiahship but to know that the Lord had performed that plethora of miracles specifically to reassure him in his time of loneliness and perplexity.

Although Jesus did nothing to relieve John's physical confinement and suffering, He did send back to him special confirmation that He was indeed performing messianic works: **the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them**—just as Isaiah had prophesied (Isa. 35:5; 61:1). Jesus said, in effect, “This, John, is but a preview, a taste, a picture of the coming kingdom. You can see by what I am doing now that I care, that I heal, and that I have power over all things.”

John's circumstances did not improve; in fact, he was soon beheaded at the cruel request of Herodias. But it is safe to assume that Jesus' response was more than enough to encourage John and renew his faith and confidence.

Jesus' closing beatitude was primarily for the sake of John: **And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me.** It was a gentle warning, a tender rebuke. “Don't doubt,” He said to John, “if you want to have the blessing of My joy and peace.” The warning did not take away from Jesus' esteem for John, as his testimony immediately afterward shows (vv. 7-11).

Stumbling is from *skandalizō*, which originally referred to the trapping or snaring of an animal. It was used metaphorically to signify an entrapment or stumbling block and carried the derived meaning of causing offense. Jesus' divine messiahship and the gospel of deliverance from sin through faith in Him are great stumbling blocks to sinful, unbelieving man, and Jesus did not want John to be affected by the world's skepticism and unbelief.

Matthew does not tell of the end to John's doubt until later. After John was beheaded by Herod, “his disciples came and took away the body and buried it; and they went and reported to Jesus” (Matt. 14:12). They went to Jesus because He was the most important Person in John's life and apparently had become the most important Person in their lives as well. When he died, John did not have all his questions answered, and he must have still wondered when Jesus would establish His kingdom, judge the wicked, and usher in the long-awaited kingdom of righteousness. John

must have regretted not being able to witness those marvelous events about which he had so earnestly preached. But he no longer had doubts about who Jesus was or about His goodness and justice or His sovereignty and wisdom. He was content to leave in the Lord's hands the many things he did not yet understand – and that is the secret of being **blessed** and of not **stumbling**.

“If we are faithless, He remains faithful,” Paul assures us; “For He cannot deny Himself” (2 Tim. 2:13). Even when we doubt Him, God is faithful to us. Doubt does not cause a believer to lose his relationship to the Lord, because God cannot deny His own promises to keep those whom He had saved. And because of His faithfulness, we can go to Him even when we doubt Him. In fact, *only* by going to Him as John did can our doubts be relieved.

John the Baptist would have loudly affirmed the apostle John's declaration, “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:2-3).

True Greatness

(11:7-15)

And as these were going away, Jesus began to speak to the multitudes about John, “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ palaces. But why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I say to you, and one who is more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.’ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force. For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you care to accept it, he himself is Elijah, who was to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (11:7-15)

The world has many standards by which it measures greatness. These standards include intellectual achievement, political and military leadership, scientific and medical discoveries, wealth and power, and athletic, dramatic, literary, and musical skill.

Jesus here sets forth *God’s* measure of greatness, first in the human, historical dimension as seen in the life and ministry of John the Baptist. He then briefly contrasts John’s greatness with the superior greatness of kingdom citizens.

From verses 7-14 three marks of John’s greatness can be discerned: his personal character, his privileged calling, and his powerful culmination.

JOHN'S PERSONAL CHARACTER

And as these were going away, Jesus began to speak to the multitudes about John, “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ palaces.” (11:7-8)

HE OVERCAME WEAKNESS

The first characteristic of John's personal greatness demands reflection on two preceding verses (2-3) that demonstrate his ability to recognize and overcome his weaknesses.

Many people cannot rise above their difficulties and circumstances. Everyone has problems; it is overcoming them that separates great people from others. Great people fight through, refusing to give in to their ignorance, handicaps, laziness, indifference, or whatever other obstacles may be in their way. John the Baptist had that characteristic of greatness in full measure.

As discussed in the previous chapter of this volume, John was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb and had been set apart by God to announce the Messiah and to prepare Israel for His coming. He had seen the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus at His baptism and had heard God the Father declare Jesus to be His beloved Son. From many sources, including some of his own disciples, he had heard of Jesus' miraculous powers. Yet—because of difficult circumstances, incomplete revelation, the influence of popular misconceptions, and unfulfilled expectations—John had misgivings about Jesus' identity as the Messiah. Consequently he sent two of his disciples to Jesus to question what had previously been unquestioned (vv. 2-3; cf. Luke 7:19).

John was deeply perplexed by his lingering doubts and probably felt he was betraying the very One he was sent to announce. But because he could not dispel the doubts, he acknowledged them to his disciples and asked two of them to seek out Jesus and confirm the truth from His own lips.

Above all other considerations, John wanted to know the truth about Jesus. He was not concerned about protecting himself by not admitting his doubts to his own disciples, to Jesus' disciples, or to the multitudes among whom he had become so popular. John had no desire to play the hypocrite. He had no interest in religious pretense, illusion, or self-deception. His assurance about certain truths had become clouded, but his humility and his underlying faith protected him from skepticism and denial.

John had no resentment of Jesus' popularity when it began to overshadow his own and had in fact declared of Jesus that "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). He confessed publicly that he was unworthy even to remove Jesus' sandals; and when Jesus asked to be baptized by John, John replied, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" (Matt. 3:11, 14).

Pride curses true greatness, and the person who proudly refuses to admit and deal with personal weaknesses is doomed to hypocrisy and mediocrity. General Douglas MacArthur prayed on behalf of his son:

Build me a son, O Lord, who will be strong enough to know when he is weak, and brave enough to face himself when he is afraid; one who will be proud and unbending in honest defeat, and humble and gentle in victory.

...

Build me a son whose heart will be clear, whose goal will be high; a son who will master himself before he seeks to master other men; one who will learn to laugh, yet never forget how to weep; one who will reach into the future, yet never forget the past.

And after all these things are his, add, I pray, enough of a sense of humor, so that he may always be serious, yet never take himself too seriously. Give him humility, so that he may always remember the simplicity of true greatness, the open mind of true wisdom and the meekness of true strength.

Then I, his father, will dare to whisper, "I have not lived in vain."

STRONG IN CONVICTION

And as these were going away, Jesus began to speak to the multitudes about John, “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? (11:7)

A second characteristic of John’s personal greatness was strong conviction, which made the first characteristic even more remarkable. A person with weak convictions is seldom reluctant to face doubts or change his beliefs. To him, vacillation is no cause for embarrassment or shame. But the very strength of John’s convictions made his admission of doubt all the more admirable.

John’s disciples did not question Jesus privately, which is apparent from the fact that, **as these were going away, Jesus began to speak to the multitudes about John.** The crowds, as well as Jesus’ own disciples, surely were perplexed when they heard that **John**, the symbol of boldness and certainty, would publicly admit to misgivings about the very Person he had been proclaiming. John had had a large and loyal following, and many people recognized him as a prophet with a divine message (Matt. 14:5; 21:26). Was John not as trustworthy as they thought, and was his message not reliable?

To answer the questions in the minds of **the multitudes**, Jesus asked them a question: **What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?** He appealed to their own experiences, asking, in effect, “Was the man you saw preaching and baptizing in **the wilderness** uncertain and vacillating, **a reed shaken by the wind?** Did you ever hear John change his message or compromise his standards?” He asked.

The **reed** to which Jesus referred was common along Near Eastern river banks, including those of the Jordan where John baptized. They were light and flexible, waving back and forth with every breeze. The people knew that John was not swayed like those reeds. If ever there had been a man with unswerving convictions, it was John. He stood up to the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and even to Herod himself—for which boldness he was now in prison. The people knew John was as far as possible from being spineless or irresolute. As John Bunyan points out in his *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Mr. Pliable does not go to prison to be martyred for the truth.

John had many opportunities to play the crowd and win approval of the authorities. He was such a powerful and commanding figure that many people thought he might himself be the Messiah (Luke 3:15). By being less direct and honest he could have gained the support of the hypocritical Pharisees and Sadducees who came to him for baptism. Instead, he confronted them with their sin and hypocrisy, saying, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matt. 3:7-10). Then, speaking of Jesus, he continued, “And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (v. 12). Like William Penn, John believed that “right is right, even if everyone is against it, and wrong is wrong, even if everyone is for it.”

The following incident is reported about John Chrysostom, the famous fourth-century Christian leader:

When the great Chrysostom was arrested by the Roman Emperor, the latter sought to make the Greek Christian recant, but without success. So the Emperor discussed with his advisors what could be done to the prisoner. “Shall I put him in a dungeon?” the Emperor asked.

“No,” one of his counsellors replied, “for he will be glad to go. He longs for the quietness wherein he can delight in the mercies of his God.”

“Then he shall be executed!” said the Emperor.

“No,” was the answer; “For he will also be glad to die. He declares that in the event of death he will be in the presence of his God.”

“What shall we do then?” the ruler asked.

“There is only one thing that will give Chrysostom pain,” the counsellor said. “To cause him to suffer, make

him sin. He is afraid of nothing except sin.”

“A double-minded man [is] unstable in all his ways,” James says (James 1:8). He is the man Paul describes as “tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14). Like Chrysostom, however, John the Baptist was far from being double-minded.

HIS SELF-DENIAL

But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ palaces. (11:8)

Jesus continues to challenge the crowd by asking them another question about John. In doing so He reminds them of a third characteristic of John’s greatness: his self-denial.

Great generals put their lives on the line with their troops. Great athletes train their bodies mercilessly, denying themselves pleasures most people take for granted. Great scientists often risk their health to make an important discovery. Great inventors sacrifice social life in order to develop and perfect an invention. Great medical researchers risk exposure to deadly disease in order to save thousands of lives. The easy way is never the way of success.

The self-indulgent **man dressed in soft clothing** does not live in the wilderness as John did. He wore “a garment of camel’s hair, and a leather belt about his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey” (Matt. 3:4). His life-style was a living, visual protest against self-indulgence and self-centeredness.

Historians report that in order to court the king’s favor, some scribes of Jesus’ day forsook the rather drab garments they usually wore and donned the ornate, luxurious robes of the king’s court. Because it served to silence possible criticism from those religious leaders, the king gladly encouraged the practice.

But John the Baptist was not a self-seeker or self-server. Both physically and symbolically he dressed, ate, and lived far apart from the

hypocritical and corrupt religious and political systems. He was not interested in the ease or approval of the world. He had no penchant for gaining the favor of those who could advance his *carter* or promote his welfare. He was so consumed by the cause God gave him that he was not attracted to the world and its standards. His devotion to his ministry completely superceded any personal interests and comforts.

As predicted before his birth, John had taken a life-long Nazirite vow. John “will be great in the sight of the Lord,” the angel told his father, Zacharias, “and he will drink no wine or liquor” (Luke 1:15). Along with not drinking wine or liquor, the vow also involved never cutting the hair or touching anything, such as a dead body, that was ceremonially unclean. Many Jews, both men and women, took a Nazirite vow for a few months or years. But along with Samson (Judg. 13:7; 16:17) and Samuel (1 Sam. 1:11), John the Baptist is one of only three persons mentioned in Scripture who took the vow for life. His was a life-long, voluntary commitment to self-denial as an act of devotion to God.

John did not think his self-denial had meritorious blessing in itself. He was not like the many ascetics throughout church history who have sought to win God’s favor by feats of self-inflicted poverty, pain, and humiliation. Ascepsimas wore heavy chains about his neck that forced him to crawl on his hands and knees. For forty years the monk Besarion slept only while sitting in a chair. Macarius the Younger lived without clothes in a swamp for six months and was so severely bitten by mosquitos that his body looked leprous. Simeon Stylites, the most famous of the ancient ascetics, died at the age of seventy-two, after having spent thirty-seven years sitting atop various pillars, the last of which was 66 feet high.

When in 1403 the father of the beautiful, respected, and wealthy Agnes de Rocher died, she decided to become a religious recluse. From the age of eighteen until the age of eighty, when she died, Agnes spent her life sealed in a small chamber specially built into the wall of a Paris cathedral. A small opening enabled her to hear the mass, receive communion, and accept gifts of food from friends.

John the Baptist knew nothing of such misguided piety. His self-denial was purposeful; it was for the sake of his ministry and it aided his own physical and spiritual discipline.

JOHN'S PRIVILEGED CALLING

But why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I say to you, and one who is more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.' Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (11:9-11)

John's second mark of greatness was his privileged calling. Until Christ's own ministry began, no human being had been called to a task as high and sacred as that of John the Baptist. In many ways his privilege overshadowed that of Mary, who gave Jesus birth. John was chosen to announce and prepare the way for the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of kings.

Jesus now asked the crowd a third question: **But why did you go out? To see a prophet?** The answer to that question is clearly yes. As already mentioned, John the Baptist had developed a large and dedicated following in addition to his disciples, and most of the people did indeed consider him to be **a prophet** (Matt. 14:5; 21:26).

The prophetic office began with Moses and extended until the Babylonian captivity, after which for 400 years Israel had no prophet until John the Baptist. He was the valedictorian of the prophets, the most dynamic, articulate, confrontational, and powerful spokesman God had ever called. As the last prophet, he would not only announce that the Messiah was coming but that He had arrived.

In true greatness, the right person is always matched to the right position. A person with much potential will accomplish little if his talents are not channeled into work that takes full advantage of those abilities. No person can fulfill his human potential like a Christian can, because God omnisciently matches our talents, gifts, and calling. In John the Baptist the greatest man and the greatest human mission came together by God's sovereign and providential direction.

Jesus assured the people that John not only was a prophet but **more than a prophet**. Quoting Malachi 3:1, He said, **This is the one about**

whom it is written, “Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.” The expression **before Your face** means to be in front of, or to precede. An expanded translation, as interpreted here by Jesus, would read, “Behold, I, Jehovah, send My messenger John the Baptist to be the forerunner of You, the Messiah, and to prepare the people for Your coming.”

John was both prophet and fulfillment of prophecy. He was the Lord’s **messenger** who was to **prepare** [the] **way** for Messiah and who would even baptize Him. He announced the Messiah and ministered to the Messiah with his own hands—as no other prophet had done or would ever again do. After thousands of years of God’s preparation and prediction, John was given the unequalled privilege of being the Messiah’s personal herald.

Continuing His praise of John, Jesus said, **Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist.** To emphasize the unquestionable truthfulness of what He said, Jesus prefaced His words with **verily** (*amēn*), a term of strong affirmation often simply transliterated as “Amen.”

Born of women was a common ancient expression that simply referred to basic humanness, to identification with the human race (see Job 14:1; 15:14). Jesus’ point was that, as far as mankind is concerned, **there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist.** He was the greatest human being who had lived until that time. From an earthly perspective, John’s character and calling made him the greatest man yet born besides Jesus Himself. In superior qualities as a human being, John was unequalled.

Arisen is from *egeirō*, which means to rise up or to appear on the stage of history and was often used of prophets, both true and false (see, e.g., Matt. 24:11, 24). Not only as a human being but as a prophet, no one had **arisen** to equal John, because he was sent on the very threshold of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus.

But lest the people misunderstand the nature of John’s greatness, Jesus added, **yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.** Although he was a spiritual giant among men, John’s unique greatness was in his role in human history, not in his spiritual inheritance, in which he would be equal to every believer. Therefore, **the least in the**

kingdom of heaven, the spiritual dimension, **is greater than he**, that is, than anyone in the human dimension, including John.

JOHN'S POWERFUL CULMINATION

And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force. For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you care to accept it, he himself is Elijah, who was to come. (11:12-14)

Even if a man has outstanding character and an outstanding calling, he must also have opportunity in order to reach the potential of his greatness. **John the Baptist** entered the scene of history at precisely the right time—according to God's own plan, prediction, and provision. After 400 years with no word from the Lord, Israel was expectant; and until Jesus began His own ministry, John was the focal point of redemptive history. He was the culmination of Old Testament history and prophecy.

But John generated conflict wherever he went, because his message upset the status quo. With his call for repentance, he stirred up a hornet's nest among the religious leaders and even with the king. Everywhere he moved there was reaction, and often even **violence**, which eventuated in his being arrested, imprisoned, and finally executed.

From the days of John the Baptist until now (which had been a relatively brief period of time, perhaps eighteen months), **the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force**. Everywhere he went, John evoked strong reaction.

The kingdom of heaven refers to God's general rule, His will for and His work with mankind, especially His chosen people, the Jews. It represents His purpose, message, principles, laws, and activities relating to mankind—all of which had been associated with some form of **violence** since John began preaching.

The form of *biazō* (from which **suffers violence** comes) can be read as either a Greek passive or middle voice. As a passive, it would carry the idea of *being* oppressed or treated violently, which would indicate that

violence is brought on **the kingdom of heaven** by those outside of it. The Pharisees and scribes had attacked John verbally, and Herod had attacked him physically. The **kingdom** was being violently denied and rejected; and because it was being rejected in its spiritual dimension, the kingdom would not come in its earthly, millennial dimension. Soon the enemies of the kingdom would kill not only **John** but even the Messiah Himself. They would destroy both the herald and the King.

In the middle voice the verb carries the active idea of applying force or of entering forcibly—in which case the translation would be, “The kingdom of heaven is vigorously pressing itself forward, and people are forcefully entering it.” With its focus in John the Baptist, the kingdom moved relentlessly through the godless, sindarkened human system that opposed it.

The first of those two interpretations is negative and the second is positive; but both are true. As already seen, the negative is illustrated by the persecution of John. The positive is illustrated by the many people that John’s preaching led to the Lord, just as the angel predicted: “He will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God. And it is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:16-17).

Although both interpretations are possible and true, the second seems preferable in the context. Jesus had already taught that the few who enter the kingdom do so by first finding and then entering the narrow gate and walking the narrow way (Matt. 7:13-14). He also said that citizenship in His kingdom requires denying self, taking up one’s cross, and following Him (Matt. 16:24; cf. 10:38). Following the Lord demands earnest endeavor, untiring energy, and the utmost exertion. To be a Christian is to swim against the flow of the world, to go against its grain, because the adversary—Satan, his demons, and the world system—are extremely powerful. Those who enter the kingdom of grace through faith in Christ do so with great effort through the sovereign power of the convicting and converting Holy Spirit.

All of God’s previous revelation culminated in John the Baptist, **for all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John**. Everything from Genesis to Malachi to John pointed to and moved toward Christ, the

Messiah. Their common theme—sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit—was, “The Messiah is coming!”

And if you care to accept it, Jesus continued, **he himself is Elijah, who was to come.** Through the last words of the last prophet, God had said, “Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse” (Mal. 4:5-6).

This man would not be a reincarnated Elijah but another prophet much like Elijah. That Malachi’s prophecy referred to John the Baptist and not to a literally-returned Elijah is made clear by the angel’s message to Zechariah about John: “It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17); and John himself denied that he was actually Elijah (John 1:21). John was *like* Elijah—internally in “spirit and power” and externally in rugged independence and nonconformity.

Jesus’ point was that if the Jews received John’s message as God’s message and received the Messiah he proclaimed, he would indeed be the Elijah spoken of by Malachi. But if they refused the King and His kingdom, another Elijah-like prophet would be sent in the future.

Because Israel did *not* accept the message of John the Baptist, John could not be Elijah and the kingdom could not be established. Another prophet like Elijah is therefore still yet to come, perhaps as one of the two witnesses of Revelation 11:1-19.

Because most Jews did not accept John or the Messiah he heralded, Jesus gave a final admonition and warning: **He who has ears to hear, let him hear.** “John is indeed the forerunner of the Messiah,” Jesus was saying; “and I am indeed the Messiah, as John has testified to you. I am the King, and I am offering you the kingdom—individually as you turn to Me in personal faith and nationally if you come to Me as God’s chosen nation.”

John was the greatest man to live before Christ, but the highest greatness God offers is not like John’s. John was a unique man and greatly used by God in the redemptive scheme before the New Covenant. But his greatness pales, Jesus says, besides those who enter His spiritual kingdom through trust in Him as Lord and Savior in the New Covenant. True greatness is not being like John the Baptist but being like Christ. That is

the “one pearl of great value” for which it is worth sacrificing everything else (Matt. 13:46).

Responding to
Christ with
Criticism or
Indifference (11:16-24)

“But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places, who call out to the other children, and say, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon!’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

Then He began to reproach the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent. “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment, than for you. And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You shall descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you.” (11:16-24)

Jesus’ words in verse 15 were a warning to the people to take seriously what He had just said about responding to John the Baptist: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” A fundamental teaching of Scripture is that God’s truth demands response.

In the present passage Jesus continues to deal with various responses of men to Himself. John's questioning had reflected honest doubt. For the various reasons already discussed, he came to have some misgivings; but his primary attitude was not doubt but faith, because even when doubts came he looked to Jesus to resolve them.

Now Jesus mentions two negative responses—criticism and indifference—that were much more serious than John's, because they reflect basic rejection of Christ. As is John's case, honest doubt can come even to a believer. But the criticism and indifference Jesus mentions here came from unbelief.

THE RESPONSE OF CRITICISM

“But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places, who call out to the other children, and say, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon!’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”
(11:16-19)

Although Jesus' miracles had already established His messianic credentials beyond any legitimate question, most of the Jewish people who witnessed those miracles refused to recognize the facts or accept Him as the Messiah.

But to what shall I compare this generation reflects a common oriental expression used to introduce a parable or other illustration. The Midrash, an ancient compilation of Jewish traditional teaching, contains many expressions (such as “To what is the matter like?” or “How can I illustrate this point?”) used by rabbis to introduce illustrative metaphors, analogies, and stories. In this tradition Jesus was saying, “How can I

illustrate the responses of **this generation** of God's people to His truth and work? To what do they **compare**?"

Some of those who refused to believe the gospel covered their unbelief with criticism. Jesus compared them to foolish **children sitting in the market place** who objected to everything the other children did. They were like many people today who find fault with whatever the preacher and other church leaders do. No matter what is said or done, such people pick it apart and use the objection—whether real or imagined, justified or unjustified—as an excuse for rejection. Because they have no saving relationship to Christ, they refuse to receive His truth or serve in His church. But they love to harp against both.

The *agora* (**market place**) was a central area of cities and towns where people went to do business and to socialize. On certain days of the week, farmers, craftsmen, and merchants of all sorts would bring their produce or wares to sell from stalls, tents, carts, or simply from a cleared place on the ground.

Children played with each other **in the market place** while their parents sold, bought, or visited. Two games, "Wedding" and "Funeral," were particularly popular. Weddings and funerals were the two major social events, and children liked to mimic their elders by performing mock weddings and mock funerals. Weddings involved festive music and dancing, and when children played the wedding game they expected everyone to **dance** when the imaginary **flute** was played, just like grownups did in the real ceremony. Likewise, when they played the funeral game they expected everyone to **mourn** and wail when the imaginary **dirge** was played, just like the paid mourners did when a person actually died.

There were always holdouts, however, who refused to go along with the rest of the children. If the game was "Wedding," they wanted to play "Funeral," and vice versa. Nothing the other children did satisfied them. They were peevish, perpetual spoilsports who threw a wet blanket on everything their friends did.

Jesus applied the first illustration to the response of the people to John the Baptist. When **John came neither eating nor drinking**, the people said, **He has a demon!** The phrase **neither eating nor drinking** was a figurative description of John's austere life-style. He ate a Spartan diet of locusts and wild honey, and he lived in the desert and dressed in

uncomfortable garments of camel's hair (Matt. 3:4). His message was serious and severe as he cried out for repentance and for corresponding good works.

John's message and way of life were in the funeral mode, so to speak. Some people became so resentful of his continual emphasis on repentance and judgment that they charged him with having **a demon**. He grated against their immoral and unspiritual nerves, and they railed out against him. They tolerated him for a short while, enjoying the novelty and excitement of his preaching. But he would not let them be neutral bystanders, uncommitted onlookers who heard and observed without decision or commitment. When they saw they had to choose, they chose not to believe or follow him. Instead of accepting John's rebuke of their wickedness, they rebuked his righteousness. They charged the prophet who had no equal, who was greater than any other person "born of woman" (11:11), with being demon possessed.

Jesus applied the second illustration to the response of the people to Himself: **The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners!"** Jesus lived basically in the normal pattern of Jewish life, **eating and drinking** like everyone else. In contrast to John's ascetic life-style, Jesus participated in all the normal social activities. He traveled throughout most of Israel, going from city to city, village to village, synagogue to synagogue. He had individual, intimate contact with many hundreds of people as He talked with them, healed their diseases, forgave their sins, and called them to follow Him.

Just as John lived in the funeral mode Jesus lived in the wedding mode. That fact did not escape the notice of John's disciples, who had already asked Jesus, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" (Matt. 9:14). In reply, Jesus used the figure of a wedding: "The attendants of the bridegroom cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they?" (v. 15). But Jesus' critics ridiculously exaggerated His normal activities, charging Him with being **a gluttonous man and a drunkard**.

The wine Jesus and most other Jews drank was *oinos*, a drink made by boiling or evaporating fresh grape juice down to a heavy syrup or paste in order to prevent spoilage and simplify storage. To make a beverage, water would be added as needed to a small quantity of the syrup. That

mixture was nonalcoholic, and even when allowed to ferment it was not intoxicating, because it was mostly water. Perhaps Jesus miraculously made wine from water for the wedding at Cana by creating the paste.

The second charge, that Jesus was **a friend of tax-gatherers and sinners**, was true, but not in the sense His critics meant. In identifying Jesus with those social and moral outcasts the critics also intended to identify Him with the outcasts' sin and wickedness. But when Jesus associated with sinful people, He not only did not participate in their sin but offered deliverance from it—because that is why He came to earth (see Matt. 9:12-13).

As William Barclay points out,

The plain fact is that when people do not want to listen to the truth, they will easily enough find an excuse for not listening. They do not even try to be consistent in their criticism. They will criticize the same person and the same institution from quite opposite grounds and reasons. If people are determined to make no response, they will remain stubbornly and sullenly unresponsive no matter what invitation is made to them. (*The Gospel of Matthew* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958], 2:10)

Jesus' unnamed critics were not interested in truth or justice but in condemnation. John the Baptist and Jesus were enemies of traditional religion, with its elevation of human wisdom and disregard for divine. Because John and Jesus could not be reasoned down they would be shouted down; and if no truth could be found against them, falsehood would be eagerly used.

Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds, Jesus said. Corrupt human **wisdom** produces corrupt human **deeds**, such as the false accusations against John and Jesus. On the other hand, the righteous, divinely empowered **wisdom** of John and Jesus produced righteous **deeds** that resulted in repentance, forgiven sin, and redeemed lives.

Through the centuries the church's detractors have found it easy to criticize its people and its work. Yet they are hard pressed to explain how so many lives have been changed from wickedness to righteousness, from despair to hope, from anger to love, from sadness to happiness, and from selfishness to self-giving by the power of Christ.

Jesus' rebuke of His critics was serious, but it contained a certain restraint, a restraint not seen in the brief series of withering rebukes He proceeded to give those who treated Him with indifference.

THE RESPONSE OF UNBELIEVING INDIFFERENCE

Then He began to reproach the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment, than for you. And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You shall descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you." (11:20-24)

Jesus' harsh **reproach** against **the cities in which most of His miracles were done** seems on the surface to be less justified than His comparatively mild rebuke of those who openly criticized Him. For the most part, the three **cities** mentioned here—which typified all the places where **His miracles were done**—did not take any direct action against Jesus. They simply ignored Him. While the Son of God preached, taught, and performed unprecedented **miracles** in their midst, they carried on their business and their lives as usual, seemingly unaffected. From the human perspective, their indifference appears foolish but it does not appear to be terribly sinful.

But indifference is a heinous form of unbelief. It so completely disregards God that He is not even an issue worth arguing about. He is not taken seriously enough to criticize.

As the young King Josiah declared, the great sin of Israel in that day was that the people had “not listened to the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.” And for that disregard of God’s Word the king said, “the wrath of the Lord . . . burns against us” (2 Kings 22:13).

In the parable of the royal wedding feast, the guests who were first invited “paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business” (Matt. 22:5). They did not mistreat and kill the king’s slaves as some of the other citizens did (v. 6), but they were equally excluded from the feast. They picture the many people Christ calls but whose indifference excludes them from being among the few who are chosen (v. 14).

Indifference to the Lord will continue in the world until He returns. “Just as it happened in the days of Noah, so it shall be also in the days of the Son of Man,” Jesus said; “they were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building;... It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed” (Luke 17:26-28, 30). Some of the people in Noah’s day doubtlessly criticized him abusively for building a ship in the middle of the desert; and some of the worst inhabitants of Sodom tried to homosexually attack the angels who came to rescue Lot. But most of the people in the days of Noah and of Lot paid no attention to the Lord or to His servants. Yet they, too, were totally destroyed, because they rejected God just as totally as those who actively expressed their unbelief.

Jesus’ righteous anger boiled against the privileged **cities** who witnessed the awesome evidence of His divine power and goodness yet **did not repent**. In His holy fury He declared to them, **Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!**

The interjection **woe** is sometimes used in Scripture to represent grief (see, e.g., Rev. 18:10), but most often it represents denunciation, as it clearly does here.

Probably most inhabitants of **Chorazin** and **Bethsaida** had personally witnessed Jesus' **miracles**, and everyone else knew about His mighty works from the reports of friends and relatives. But the number who responded in faith was small (cf. Matt. 7:13-14).

When people have great opportunity to hear God's Word, and even to see it miraculously demonstrated, their guilt for rejection is intensified immeasurably. It is far better to have heard nothing of Christ than to hear the truth about Him and yet reject Him. "For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries" (Heb. 10:26-27). The greater the privilege, the greater the responsibility; and the greater the light, the greater the punishment for not receiving it.

Jesus' marvelous works should have shaken to the foundation every Jew in Galilee, even more than the preaching of Jonah shook every person in pagan Nineveh, from the king down to the least servant (Jonah 3:5). But most Galileans did not respond to Christ at all, much less **repent**.

Chorazin was a small village nestled in the hills some two and a half miles north of Capernaum. It has long ceased to exist, and its ruins are known today as Charaza, a variation of Chorazin. **Bethsaida**, the home town of Philip, Andrew, and Peter, was located still farther north and to the west, in the plain of Gennesaret. These were two of the many towns and villages Jesus visited as He ministered out of His headquarters in Capernaum.

To Galilean Jews, **Tyre and Sidon** epitomized pagan, Gentile corruption and worthlessness. The people in those cities were descendants of the ancient Phoenicians, the renowned seafaring merchants and colonizers of the Mediterranean. Both cities were typical seaports, noted for their immorality and godlessness (even by pagan standards) and were deeply involved in the licentious Baal worship. A certain king of **Tyre** was so proud and evil that Ezekiel used him as a picture of Satan (Ezek. 28:11-15). The city's violence, profanity, pride, injustice, greed, and immorality were so excessive that the Lord destroyed it (vv. 16-19; cf. Jer. 25:22; 47:4). It had even sold many of God's own people into slavery (Amos 1:9).

Yet those two wicked cities **would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes**, Jesus said, if they had had the privileges of Chorazin and Bethsaida. The self-righteous, traditional religion of Galilean Jews

blinded them more to God than the heathen religions did the Gentiles of Tyre and Sidon. Those chosen people had so long rejected God and His Word that they were totally indifferent to His Messiah when He came to them.

Few things Jesus might have said could have stunned Jews more than to be unfavorably compared to Gentiles. **Nevertheless, I say to you,** Jesus continued, **it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment, than for you.** At the great white throne judgment, the dead of all the ages will be brought before the throne of God to be judged and sentenced to eternal punishment. And at that judgment the unbelieving Gentiles of Tyre and Sidon will fare better than the unbelieving Jews of Chorazin and Bethsaida.

Jesus here makes two truths clear: there will be degrees of punishment in hell, and among those given the severest punishment will be those who have received the divine revelation and been the most religious and outwardly upright. Those who thought they were eternally safe—because they were Abraham’s physical descendants and because they kept the religious traditions of their forefathers—looked with contempt on all Gentiles. Yet in hell many Gentiles will look down on those Jews.

But another city of Galilee was guiltier still. **And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You shall descend to Hades.** Jesus made His headquarters in this beautiful, prosperous fishing village on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. He performed more miracles and preached more sermons in and around **Capernaum** than at any other place during His entire ministry. It was there that He raised Jairus’s daughter from the dead and healed the nobleman’s son. It was here that He healed the demoniac, Peter’s mother-in-law, the woman with the hemorrhage, the two blind men, the centurion’s servant, the dumb demoniac, and the paralytic who was lowered through the roof by his friends.

Yet those marvels had little impact on most citizens of **Capernaum**; and because of their indifference they would not **be exalted to heaven** as they thought they deserved but would rather **descend to Hades.**

Although **Hades** is sometimes used in Scripture to represent the place of all the departed dead, it is often used, as here, to represent hell,

the place of eternal punishment for the unsaved.

Jesus said that the **miracles** He performed in Capernaum were so amazing **that, had they occurred in Sodom,... it would have remained to this day. Its** people would have repented of their sin, turned to God, and been spared destruction.

Even in the secular world, **Sodom** is a synonym for moral depravity and has the infamous distinction of lending its name (in sodomy) to the most extreme forms of homosexuality and sexual bestiality. When a group of Sodom's worst perverts tried to rape the angels at Lot's house, they were struck blind. But their homosexual enslavement was so intense that even after being blinded "they wearied themselves trying to find the doorway" in order to satisfy their perverted lust (Gen. 19:11).

As far as is known, the people of **Capernaum** had no homosexual problem or any other apparent moral deficiency. Most of them were upright, law-abiding, and decent. Yet because they ignored and rejected the Son of God, their fate on the day of judgment will be worse than that of **Sodom**.

Capernaum exceeded Chorazin and Bethsaida in privilege, and Sodom exceeded Tyre and Sidon in wickedness. In these striking and sobering contrasts, Jesus makes plain that people who are the most blessed by God will receive the worst punishment if they reject Him. Judgment against the moral abominations of Sodom will be exceeded by judgment against the spiritual indifference of Capernaum. For the respectable and upright unbelievers of Capernaum, **Hades** will be hotter than for the crude and immoral unbelievers of Sodom. The self-righteous orthodox person is even more repulsive in God's sight than the idolatrous and immoral pagan.

The people of **Capernaum** never persecuted Jesus, and few of them even criticized Him. They never mocked Him, ridiculed Him, ran Him out of town, or threatened His life. Yet their sin was worse than if they had done those things. Theirs was not the sin of violence or of immorality but of indifference. As G. A. Studdert-Kennedy has written in his poem "Indifference," "They only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain."

Jesus' teaching perhaps mildly interested them, and His miracles entertained them, but nothing more. His grace never rent their hearts, His truth never changed their minds, His warning about sin never provoked

repentance, and His offer of salvation never induced faith. And because of their indifferent unbelief, Jesus said to them, **I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you.**

The eighteenth-century commentator Johann Bengel wrote, “Every hearer of the New Testament truth is either much happier or much more wretched than the men who lived before Christ’s coming.” Such a hearer is also either more secure or more condemned.

Jesus' Personal **Invitation** (11:25-30)

At that time Jesus answered and said, “I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and intelligent and didst reveal them to babes. Yes, Father, for thus it was well-pleasing in Thy sight. All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son, except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light.” (11:25-30)

The heart of the gospel is that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15). Jesus said that He came “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). He tells men that because He is the Bread of Life, those who come to Him will never hunger and those who believe in Him will never thirst (John 6:35; cf. 7:37). Because He is the Light of the World, those who follow Him will “not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life” (8:12). Because He is “the resurrection and the life,” those who believe in Him will live even if they die (11:25).

The message of salvation is the theme of all Scripture. God’s promise to Adam and Eve after the Fall was that their descendant one day would bruise the serpents head (Gen. 3:15)—a figure of Christ’s conquest of Satan. Through Isaiah, the Lord pleaded, “Turn to Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other” (Isa. 45:22); and again, “Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.... Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may

live” (55:1, 3). Among the last words of Scripture is a final invitation to mankind to be saved: “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost” (Rev 22:17).

As the hymn writer E.W. Faber reminds us,

There’s a wideness in God’s mercy
Like the wideness of the sea.
There’s a kindness in His justice
That is more than liberty.
For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of man’s mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.

THE CONTEXT

At that time Jesus answered and said, “I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth,” (11:25a)

At that time could mean that Jesus’ invitation was given immediately after His upbraiding of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, in order to take advantage of any interest in salvation those sobering words may have evoked.

It is also possible that Jesus was repeating an invitation He had given on other occasions and would continue to give throughout His ministry. In that case, Matthew here calls attention to what may have been Jesus’ last invitation during His first and major Galilean ministry—as He offered the people one final appeal to be saved.

After Jesus’ performing countless miracles to attest His divinity and His messianic credentials (4:23-24), after His preaching in detail the message of the gospel and the Christian life (5-7), and after His having sent out the twelve (10:5-15) and then the seventy (see Luke 10:1-16), the

people of Galilee had the greatest opportunity to learn of God and of His way of salvation than any people in history, before or since. Yet in spite of that great opportunity, the majority willfully rejected Christ and His message, either by hostility or by indifference.

Though the nation had turned its back on the Messiah, He continued to call to Himself that remnant who were weary of carrying their heavy spiritual burdens and who sought rest in God's grace.

Jesus' early period of popularity was ending, and opposition was growing in amount and in intensity. As Jesus would soon make clear, the only possible alternatives are acceptance or rejection. A person is either for Christ or against Him (Matt. 12:30; cf. Mark 9:40). Consequently, Jesus' teaching became more and more specifically directed either to those who accepted or those who rejected Him. Side by side are messages of judgment and of compassion, of warning and of encouragement, just as we see here. Jesus had just presented the God of judgment and wrath (Matt. 11:20-24), and now He presents the God of love and mercy.

Answered and said is a Hebrew idiom that means to speak out openly, as opposed to privately or confidentially. Jesus' invitation to follow Him was universal and open to everyone who would come on God's terms.

Jesus' prayer to His Father was meant to be heard by prospective believers. As He prayed, **I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth**, Jesus called attention both to His unique relationship to the **Father** and to the Father's sovereign control over salvation. Salvation is a provision of the **Lord of heaven and earth**, and is not a result of man's wisdom, plans, purposes, or power; and for that truth Jesus gives **praise** to the **Father**.

Every faithful pastor, evangelist, and witness is sometimes disappointed that more people do not respond. He asks himself, "What more can I do? What new approach can I take? How can I make the message clearer and more persuasive?" Yet he also knows that some people will reject Christ no matter how clear, loving, and powerful the presentation of the gospel may be. If men could reject salvation from the very lips of the Lord Himself—and in the midst of awesome, authenticating miracles—we can hardly expect every person who hears our imperfect witness to fall at Christ's feet.

We weep over those who refuse to be saved, just as our Lord wept over Jerusalem when it would not receive Him. But also like Christ, we should **praise** our heavenly **Father** that all things are under His divine control and that His sovereign plan for the world and for His own people cannot be frustrated. Men's rejection of Christ proves their failure, not God's.

God's sovereignty should be the foremost thought in the mind of every witnessing believer. We should remember with confidence that His plan is always on course and that even the most unrepentant, wicked, vindictive, and cynical rejection of our testimony does not alter God's timetable or thwart His purpose. Our responsibility is simply to make our witness faithful (1 Cor. 4:2); it is God's responsibility alone to make it effective.

Because Jesus had an unyielding trust in His Father's perfect will, He could rest in that will and give Him **praise** no matter what responses people made to Him.

As Jesus compassionately invited His hearers to come to Him and be saved, He set forth the five essential elements that constitute a genuine invitation to salvation.

HUMILITY AND DEPENDENCE

that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and intelligent and didst reveal them to babes. Yes, Father, for thus it was well-pleasing in Thy sight.

(11:25b-26)

Jesus' specific cause for praise is God's sovereign wisdom in hiding **these things from the wise and intelligent and** instead revealing them **to babes**. He thanks His Father that the first step to salvation is humility, coming to God in utter despair of one's own merit or resources. It is not by accident that the first beatitude is "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3). The kingdom belongs only to the humble.

These things refers to the kingdom, on which Jesus' entire ministry focused. Even during the forty days between His resurrection and ascension Jesus was "speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). His teachings about His messiahship, lordship, and saviorhood, and about salvation, submission, and discipleship all centered in the kingdom of God—the realm where He is sovereign, where His people dwell by grace through faith, and where His righteous will is done.

The wise and intelligent sarcastically refers to those who are intelligent in their own eyes and who rely on human wisdom and disregard God's. The Lord does not exclude smart people from His kingdom but rather those who trust in their smartness. Paul was a brilliant, highly educated scholar, and he did not forsake his intelligence when he became a Christian. But he stopped relying on his intelligence to discern and understand spiritual and divine matters. It is not intelligence but intellectual pride that shuts people out of the kingdom. Intelligence is a gift of God, but when it is perverted by pride it becomes a barrier to God, because trust is in the gift rather than in the Giver. "For though the Lord is exalted, yet He regards the lowly; but the haughty He knows from afar" (Ps. 138:6).

The **wise and intelligent** include both religious and nonreligious people, who in their love of human wisdom are much more alike than different. Whether religious or irreligious, the proud person will not submit to God's wisdom and truth and therefore excludes himself from the kingdom. The religious man who relies on tradition or good works to please God is just as far from God as the atheist.

The means God uses to **hide these things** from such people is the darkness of their proud, unregenerate hearts, which prevent them from seeing what God desires them to know and to accept. Paul said, "Just as it is written, 'Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him.' For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God" (1 Cor. 2:9-10). God's spiritual truth is not empirically, objectively knowable. It cannot be externally discovered, but must be willingly received through man's heart as God reveals it. As someone has said, "The heart and not the head is the home of the gospel." No amount of human reasoning or speculation can discover or explain God's saving truth, because, as Paul continues to say,

“a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (v. 14).

No amount of evidence is sufficient to convince the confirmed unbeliever. John says of such people that, though Jesus “had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him; that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke, ‘Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’ For this cause they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, ‘He has blinded their eyes, and He hardened their heart; lest they see with their eyes, and perceive with their heart, and be converted, and I heal them’” (John 12:37-40). Those who hear God’s Word and refuse to receive it are subject to God’s judicial confirmation of that choice.

Just as **wise and intelligent** does not refer to mental ability but to a *proud* spiritual attitude, **babes** does not refer to physical age or capability but to a *humble* spiritual attitude.

A baby is totally dependent on others to provide everything it needs. It has no abilities, no knowledge, no skills, no resources at all to help itself. *Nēpios* (**babes**) is used in 1 Corinthians 3:1 and Hebrews 5:13 of infants who cannot eat solid food but only milk. In 1 Corinthians 13:11 it is used of those who have not yet learned to speak and in Ephesians 4:14 of those who are helpless.

During a question and answer period in a meeting one time, a young girl, perhaps 9 or 10 years old, came up to me and asked, “What happens to babies and retarded children when they die?” She was obviously very serious, and I did my best to answer her from Scripture. Beginning with David’s comment about his infant son who had died, “I shall go to him, but he will not return to me” (2 Sam. 12:23), I explained that God takes to Himself all of those, such as babies and retarded people, who are not *able* to choose Him. Afterward her mother explained that a younger brother was seriously retarded and understood almost nothing of what went on around him. His sister, young as she was, knew the way of salvation and was deeply concerned that her little brother might not go to heaven because he was not able to understand how to receive Christ as Savior. I reminded her that Jesus said, “Unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). She was greatly relieved when I said that her little brother was a

living illustration of the kind of person Jesus came to save and to receive into heaven—the utterly helpless.

It is to spiritual **babes**, those who acknowledge their utter helplessness in themselves, to whom God has sovereignly chosen to **reveal** the truths of His kingdom. It is to the “poor in spirit” who humbly confess their dependency that God makes the way of salvation clear and understandable. By the Holy Spirit they recognize they are spiritually empty and bankrupt and they abandon all dependence on their own resources. They are the cringing spiritual beggars to whom Jesus refers in the first beatitude—the absolutely destitute who are ashamed to lift up their head as they hold out their hands for help.

Babes are the exact opposite of the kind of person the scribes, Pharisees, and rabbis taught was pleasing to God. They are also the exact opposite of the imagined ideal Christian touted by many popular preachers and writers who glorify self-assertion and self-worth.

The contrast between **wise and intelligent** and **babes** is not between the knowledgeable and the ignorant, the educated and the uneducated, the brilliant and the simpleminded. It is a contrast between those who think they can save themselves by their own human wisdom, resources, and achievement and those who know they cannot. It is a comparison between those who rely on themselves and those who rely on God.

People who are famous, highly educated, wealthy, powerful, or talented are often difficult to reach for Christ, simply because human accomplishments easily lead to pride and pride leads to self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction.

Yes, Father, Jesus continues, **for thus it was well-pleasing in Thy sight.** God is well-pleased with the gospel of grace because it brings glory to Him, which is the supreme purpose in the universe. “For thus says the high and exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy, ‘I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite’” (Isa. 57:15). God loves to help the humble and the repentant, because they know they are helpless. He is pleased when they come to Him for help, because that honors His grace and gives Him glory (cf. Luke 18:9-14).

Still to the lowly soul
He doth Himself depart,
And for His dwelling and His throne
He chooses the humble heart.

(Author unknown)

“For consider your calling, brethren” Paul reminded the Corinthian believers, “that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong” (1 Cor. 1:26-27).

Jesus referred to Nicodemus as *the* “teacher of Israel,” suggesting that he was perhaps the most highly respected rabbi in the land. He was a student of the Old Testament and of the many traditional writings of Judaism. Yet with all his religious training and knowledge he could not grasp Jesus’ teaching that “unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Even after Jesus explained, Nicodemus did not understand, and Jesus said to him: “Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen; and you do not receive our witness. If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how shall you believe if I tell you heavenly things?” (John 3:3-12). Before he could comprehend or receive the gospel, Nicodemus had to go all the way back and start over as a spiritual babe, putting aside his human knowledge and achievements and coming to Christ with no merit of his own.

REVELATION

All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son, except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.
(11:27)

These words of Jesus are basically a commentary on verse 25, expanding on the truth that God has chosen to reveal His will to babes, the

spiritually humble and helpless, rather than to those who are proud and self-reliant. A genuine invitation to salvation must consider God's revelation, because no person, even the most determined or sincere, could know the way to Him unless the Lord had already made it known. The way of salvation is disclosed only through the sovereign revelation of God.

The first important truth of this verse is not so much taught as taken for granted. Jesus unequivocally equates Himself with God, calling Him **My Father** in a way that Jews would never do except when referring to His corporate fatherhood of Israel. Here is one of Jesus' clearest statements of His deity, disclosing the intimate and absolutely unique relationship of the **Father** and the **Son**. In essence they are one and are inseparable.

There was no doubt in the minds of Jesus' hearers that His referring to God as **My Father** was a claim to deity. The Jews had earlier accused Jesus of making Himself "equal with God" and sought to kill Him (John 5:18). When on another occasion He said, "I and the Father are one," the crowd wanted to stone Him to death for blasphemy (John 10:30-31; cf. vv. 15, 17-18, 25, 29, 32-38).

That Jesus is Himself God is the heart of the gospel, because apart from His deity He could not save a single soul. No heresy so corrupts the gospel and robs it of its power as the teaching that Jesus is not God. Apart from His deity, there *is* no gospel and no salvation.

The second truth of this verse is explicit. In His deity Jesus not only was intimate with His Father but had received **all things**—all authority, sovereignty, truth, and power—from the **Father**. At some time in preexistent eternity the Father committed these **things** to the Son (cf. John 5:21-24).

It was because all authority had been given to Him "in heaven and on earth" that Jesus had the right to send out His followers to "make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:18-19). The underlying purpose of Jesus' miracles was to demonstrate His authority over illness, disease, demons, nature, life, death, and sin. He had authority to forgive sins, to save from divine judgment, and to sovereignly control everything on earth and in heaven. **All things** in the universe and pertaining to the universe are under His divine sovereignty. His power displayed during His ministry was

a preview of the full display in the coming earthly Millennium, when He will reign over the earth.

The third truth of this verse is that **no one knows the Son except the Father**. Man has no way in himself of discovering what God is like, because his finite mind cannot grasp God's infinite nature. Because **the Son** is divine, Jesus says, only the divine Father truly **knows** Him. The obverse is equally true: **nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him**. Divine truth can only be divinely perceived and divinely imparted (cf. 1 Cor. 2:9-16).

Philosophy and religion are utterly incapable of reasoning out God or His truth because they are of a finite, lower order. Human ideas and concepts are earth-bound and totally fruitless in producing spiritual truth or guidance. God must break into the darkness and emptiness of man's human understanding and show Himself before man can know Him.

What Jesus teaches here about God's revelation of Himself is at once simple and utterly profound. It is to the person who sets aside all human knowledge and wisdom and becomes as an unlearned, helpless infant, that God chooses to **reveal** Himself. "No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him" (John 1:18). Only the person emptied of human wisdom can be filled with divine truth.

Martin Luther said, "Here the bottom falls out of all merit, all powers and abilities of reason or the free will men dream of, and it all counts nothing before God. Christ must do and must give everything."

FAITH

Come to Me, (11:28a)

Just as man's part in salvation is to come humbly, it is also to **come** in faith. Although finite minds cannot fully comprehend the truth, divine grace and human faith are inseparable in salvation. God sovereignly provides salvation, which includes the fact that man must give himself to the Lord Jesus Christ in commitment before it becomes effective. Jesus

said, “All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me,” and then immediately added, “and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out” (John 6:37).

Salvation is not through a creed, a church, a ritual, a pastor, a priest, or any other such human means—but through Jesus Christ, who said, **Come to Me. To come** is to believe to the point of submitting to His lordship. “I am the bread of life,” Jesus declared; “he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). *Comes* and *believes* are parallel just as are *hunger* and *thirst*. Coming to Christ is believing in Him, which results in no longer hungering and thirsting. Other biblical synonyms for believing in Christ include confessing Him, receiving Him, eating and drinking Him, and hearing Him.

Peter declared, “Of Him [Jesus Christ] all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins” (Acts 10:43). And the Lord Himself said, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:14-16).

REPENTANCE AND REST

all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. (11:28b)

All who are indicates a condition that already exists. Those whom Jesus invites to Himself are those who already **are weary and heavy-laden**. Although this aspect of Jesus’ invitation is mentioned after faith (“Come to Me”), chronologically it precedes faith, referring to the repentance that drives the humble, seeking person to Christ for salvation.

Kopiaō (to grow **weary**, or “to labor”) carries the idea of working to the point of utter exhaustion. John uses the term to describe Jesus’ fatigue when He and the disciples reached Sychar after a long, hot journey from Jerusalem (John 4:6).

Weary translates a present active participle and refers figuratively to arduous toil in seeking to please God and know the way of salvation. Jesus calls to Himself everyone who is exhausted from trying to find and please God in his own resources. Jesus invites the person who is wearied from his vain search for truth through human wisdom, who is exhausted from trying to earn salvation, and who has despaired of achieving God's standard of righteousness by his own efforts.

Heavy-laden translates a perfect passive participle, indicating that at some time in the past a great load was dumped on the wearied person. Whereas **weary** refers to the internal exhaustion caused by seeking divine truth through human wisdom, **heavy-laden** suggests the external burdens caused by the futile efforts of works righteousness.

In Jesus' day, the rabbinical teachings had become so massive, demanding, and all-encompassing that they prescribed standards and formulas for virtually every human activity. It was all but impossible even to learn all the traditions, and was completely impossible to keep them all. Jesus spoke of the heavy loads of religious tradition that the scribes and Pharisees laid on the people's shoulders (Matt. 23:4); and at the Jerusalem Council, Peter noted that the Judaizers were trying to saddle Christianity with the same man-made "yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10).

Although the term itself is not used in the text, Jesus gives a call to repent, to turn away from the self-centered and works-centered life and come to Him. The person who is **weary and heavy-laden** despairs of his own ability to please God. He comes to the end of his own resources and turns to Christ. Desperation is a part of true salvation, because a person does not come to Christ as long as he has confidence in himself. To repent is to make a 180-degree turn from the burden of the old life to the restfulness of the new

Repentance was the theme of John the Baptist's preaching (Matt. 3:2) and the starting point of the preaching of Jesus (4:17), Peter (Acts 2:38; 3:19; cf. 5:31), and Paul (17:30; 20:21; cf. 2 Tim. 2:25). The person who humbly receives God's revelation of Himself and His way of salvation, who turns from the unbearable burden of his sin and self-effort, and who comes to Christ empty-handed is the only person God will save.

Anapauō (to **give ... rest**) means to refresh or revive, as from labor or a long journey. Jesus promises spiritual **rest** to everyone who comes to

Him in repentance and humble faith.

God's **rest** is a common Old Testament theme. The Lord warned Israel, "Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the wilderness; when your fathers tested Me, they tried Me, though they had seen My work. . . . Therefore I swore in My anger, truly they shall not enter into My rest" (Ps. 95:7-9, 11). After quoting that passage, the writer of Hebrews warns those who make a pretense of faith in Christ but have not really trusted Him: "Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God" (Heb. 3:12). To intellectually acknowledge Christ's deity and lordship is a dangerous thing if it does not lead to true faith, because it gives a person the false confidence of belonging to Christ.

In the time of the early church many Jews were attracted to the gospel and outwardly identified themselves with the church. But for fear of being unsynagogued, ostracized from the worship and ceremonies of Judaism, some of them did not truly receive Christ as saving Lord. They went part way to Him but stopped before full commitment. "As a result" of such superficial allegiance, John says, "many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore" (John 6:66). Consequently they would not enter God's rest, that is, His salvation, because they still possessed "an evil, unbelieving heart" (Heb. 3:11-12).

Just as those Israelites who rebelled against Moses in the wilderness were denied entrance into the Promised Land because of unbelief, so those who refuse to fully trust in Christ are denied entrance into God's kingdom rest of salvation for the same reason (v. 19). "Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it. For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard. For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said, 'As I swore in My wrath, they shall not enter My rest'" (4:1-3).

The dictionary gives several definitions of rest that remarkably parallel the spiritual **rest** God offers those who trust in His Son. First, the dictionary describes rest as cessation from action, motion, labor, or exertion. In a similar way, to enter God's rest is to cease from all efforts at self-help in trying to earn salvation. Second, rest is described as freedom from that which wearies or disturbs. Again we see the spiritual parallel of

God's giving His children freedom from the cares and burdens that rob them of peace and joy.

Third, the dictionary defines rest as something that is fixed and settled. Similarly, to be in God's rest is to have the wonderful assurance that our eternal destiny is secure in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. It is to be freed from the uncertainties of running from philosophy to philosophy, from religion to religion, from guru to guru, hoping somehow and somewhere to discover truth, peace, happiness, and eternal life.

Fourth, rest is defined as being confident and trustful. When we enter God's rest we are given the assurance that "He who began a good work in [us] will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6). Finally, the dictionary describes rest as leaning, reposing, or depending on. As children of God, we can depend with utter certainty that our heavenly Father will "supply all [our] needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19).

SUBMISSION

Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light." (11:29-30)

Salvation involves submission, because it is impossible for Christ to exercise lordship over those who refuse to obey Him. Jesus' invitation therefore includes the call to submission, symbolized by a **yoke**.

A **yoke** was made of wood, hand-hewn to fit the neck and shoulders of the particular animal that was to wear it in order to prevent chafing. For obvious reasons, the term was widely used in the ancient world as a metaphor for submission. The **yoke** was part of the harness used to pull a cart, plow, or mill beam and was the means by which the animal's master kept it under control and guided it in useful work. A student was often spoken of as being under the yoke of his teacher, and an ancient Jewish writing contains the advice: "Put your neck under the yoke and let your soul receive instruction."

That is the particular meaning Jesus seems to have had in mind here, because He adds, **and learn from Me.** *Manthanō* (to learn) is closely related to *mathētēs* (disciple, or learner) and reinforces the truth that Christ's disciples are His submissive learners. They submit to Christ's lordship for many reasons, among the most important of which is to be taught by Him through His Word. A yoke symbolizes obedience, and Christian obedience includes learning from Christ.

The power of salvation is entirely of grace and nothing of works. An unbeliever has neither the understanding nor the ability to save himself, just as a babe has neither the understanding nor the ability to help itself. But although good works do not produce salvation, salvation does produce good works. Believers are, in fact, "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

But because Jesus is **gentle and humble in heart**, He gives **rest**, not weariness, to the **souls** of those who submit to Him and do His work. His **yoke is easy, and His load is light**. His burden is not like that of Pharaoh, who bitterly oppressed the children of Israel, or like that of the scribes and Pharisees, who burdened the Jews of Jesus' day with a grievous legalism.

Christ will never oppress us or give us a burden too heavy to carry. His **yoke** has nothing to do with the demands of works or law, much less those of human tradition. The Christian's work of obedience to Christ is joyful and happy. "For," as John explains, "this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

Submission to Jesus Christ brings the greatest liberation a person can experience—actually the only true liberation he can experience, because only through Christ is he freed to become what God created him to be.

Thy precious will, O conquering Saviour,
Doth now embrace and compass me;
All discords hushed, my peace a river,
My soul a prisoned bird set free.
Sweet will of God still fold me closer,

Till I am wholly lost in Thee.

(William E. Blackstone)

The Lord of the Sabbath (12:1-14)

At that time Jesus went on the Sabbath through the grainfields, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, “Behold, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath.” But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did, when he became hungry, he and his companions; how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those with him, but for the priests alone? Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath, and are innocent? But I say to you, that something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

And departing from there, He went into their synagogue. And behold, there was a man with a withered hand. And they questioned Him, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—in order that they might accuse Him. And He said to them, “What man shall there be among you, who shall have one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it, and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Then He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand!” And he stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like the other. But the Pharisees went out, and counseled together against Him, as to how they might destroy Him. (12:1-14)

The events recorded in Matthew 12 mark a major turning point in Jesus’ ministry, focusing on the rejection of the Messiah by His own

people. Verses 1-21 depict the mounting unbelief of Israel crystalizing into conscious rejection, and verses 22-50 depict the blasphemy that follows the rejection. After the King was presented and attested, He was then rejected and blasphemed before finally being put to death on the cross.

Herod's wicked plan to destroy the prophesied King of the Jews by killing all the male babies in Judah was the first evidence that the Messiah would not be accepted. When His forerunner, John the Baptist, confronted the Pharisees and Sadducees by calling them a generation of vipers and warning them to flee from the wrath to come, the rejection became still more evident. From the beginning of Jesus' own ministry the Jewish leaders were skeptical of Him, and that skepticism rapidly escalated into criticism, open hostility, and direct opposition.

As Jesus increasingly attacked the man-made religion of rabbinical tradition, the leaders of that religion increasingly attacked Him. They accused Him of blasphemy (9:3) and of fellowshiping with tax-collectors and sinners (v. 11). They even accused Him of being demon possessed (v. 34). The more directly Jesus confronted the Jewish leaders with their internal sinfulness and their external emptiness, the more they hardened their antagonism to Him. Criticism and indifference grew into sharp rebuke and then into furious rage.

One of the primary causes for opposition centered on observance of the Sabbath, the problem with which the present text (12:1-14) deals. It deals with the incident that prompted the opposition, then Jesus' indictment, instruction, and illustration, and finally the insurrection against Him.

THE INCIDENT

At that time Jesus went on the Sabbath through the grainfields, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat. (12:1)

Sabbath observance was the heart of the Jewish legalistic system, and when Jesus violated the traditions as to how that day should be

honored, He struck a raw nerve.

Both the English **Sabbath** and the Greek *sabbaton* transliterate the Hebrew *shabbāt*, which has the basic meaning of ceasing, rest, and inactivity. At the end of creation “God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made” (Gen. 2:3). In honor of that day, the Lord declared it to be a special time of rest and remembrance for His people and incorporated its observance into the requirements of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:9-11).

But that law is the only one of the Ten Commandments that is nonmoral and purely ceremonial; and it was unique to the Old Covenant and to Israel. The other nine commandments, on the other hand, pertain to moral and spiritual absolutes and are repeated and expanded upon many places in the New Testament. But Sabbath observance is never recommended to Christians, much less given as a command in the New Testament.

When Jesus began His ministry, the Old Covenant was still in effect and all of its requirements were binding on Jews, the special people of that covenant. Jesus observed every demand and met every condition of Scripture, because it was His own Word, which He came to fulfill and not destroy (Matt. 5:17). But for several hundred years the various schools of rabbis had added regulation after regulation, going far beyond the teaching of Scripture and in many instances actually contradicting it (see Matt. 15:6, 9). In no area were those additions more extensive and extreme than in regard to Sabbath observance.

Keeping the Sabbath was still a binding ceremonial obligation for Israel, but most Jews had little idea of the original purpose of the Sabbath or of how God intended it to be honored. Instead of being a day of rest it had become a day of incredible burden. Because of the thousands of man-made restrictions regarding it, the Sabbath was more tiresome than the six days devoted to one’s occupation. It was harder to “rest” than to earn a living.

Jewish tradition had even caused the Sabbath to be dangerous. The apocryphal book of 1 Maccabees (2:31-38) tells of an incident during the time of Judas Maccabaeus when a group of Jews refused to defend themselves on the Sabbath against the Greek army led by Antiochus Epiphanes. As the soldiers of Antiochus attacked, the Jews “answered

them not, neither cast they a stone at them, nor stopped the places where they lay hid; but said: 'Let us die in our innocency: heaven and earth shall testify for us, that ye put us to death wrongfully.' So they rose up against them in battle on the Sabbath, and they slew them with their wives and children and cattle, to the number of a thousand people."

In his *Antiquities*, the Jewish historian Josephus reports that it was also because Jews would not defend themselves on the Sabbath that the Roman general Pompey was able to capture Jerusalem. As was the custom in ancient Roman warfare, Pompey began building a high mound from which his troops could bombard the city. Aware that the Jews defending Jerusalem would not oppose him then, the general did all construction work on the Sabbath. "Had it not been for that practice, from the days of our forefathers, to rest on the seventh day," Josephus wrote, "this bank could never have been perfected, by reason of the opposition the Jews would have made; for though our Law gave us leave then to defend ourselves against those that begin to fight with us and assault us (this was a concession), yet it does not permit us to meddle with our enemies while they do anything else."

One section alone of the Talmud, the major compilation of Jewish tradition, has twenty-four chapters listing Sabbath laws. One law specified that the basic limit for travel was 3,000 feet from one's house; but various exceptions were provided. If you had placed some food within 3,000 feet of your house, you could go there to eat it; and because the food was considered an extension of the house, you could then go another 3,000 feet beyond the food. If a rope were placed across an adjoining street or alley, the building on the other side, as well as the alley between, could be considered part of your house.

Certain objects could be lifted up and put down only from and to certain places. Other things could be lifted up from a public place and set down in a private one, and vice versa. Still others could be picked up in a wide place and put down in a legally free place—but rabbis could not agree about the meanings of *wide* and *free*.

Under Sabbath regulations, a Jew could not carry a load heavier than a dried fig; but if an object weighed half that amount he could carry it twice. Eating restrictions were among the most detailed and extensive. You could eat nothing larger than an olive; and even if you tasted half an

olive, found it to be rotten and spit it out, that half was considered to have been eaten as far as the allowance was concerned.

Throwing an object into the air with one hand and catching it with the other was prohibited. If the Sabbath overtook you as you reached for some food, the food was to be dropped before drawing your arm back, lest you be guilty of carrying a burden.

Tailors did not carry a needle with them on the Sabbath for fear they might be tempted to mend a garment and thereby perform work. Nothing could be bought or sold, and clothing could not be dyed or washed. A letter could not be dispatched, even if by the hand of a Gentile. No fire could be lit or extinguished—including fire for a lamp—although a fire already lit could be used within certain limits. For that reason, some orthodox Jews today use automatic timers to turn on lights in their homes well before the Sabbath begins. Otherwise they might forget to turn them on in time and have to spend the night in the dark.

Baths could not be taken for fear some of the water might spill onto the floor and “wash” it. Chairs could not be moved because dragging them might make a furrow in the ground, and a woman was not to look in a mirror lest she see a gray hair and be tempted to pull it out. You could carry ink enough to draw only two letters of the alphabet, and false teeth could not be worn because they exceeded the weight limit for burdens.

According to those hair-splitting regulations, a Jew could not pull off even a handful of grain to eat on the Sabbath unless he were starving—which, of course, is often a difficult thing to determine and would be cause for considerable differences of opinion. If a person became ill on the Sabbath, only enough treatment could be given to keep him alive. Treatment to make him improve was declared to be work, and therefore forbidden. To determine just how much food, medicine, or bandaging would be necessary to keep a person alive—and no more—was itself an impossible burden.

Among the many other forbidden Sabbath activities were: sewing, plowing, reaping, grinding, baking, threshing, binding sheaves, winnowing, sifting, dying, shearing, spinning, kneading, separating or weaving two threads, tying or untying a knot, and sewing two stitches.

The Sabbath was anything but a time of rest. It had become a time of oppressive frustration and anxiety. The people were sick to death of this

system that had been imposed on them by ungodly, worldly legalists, and they were indeed “weary and heavy-laden” (Matt. 11:28).

At that time (cf. 11:25) does not necessarily indicate that the events about to be described occurred directly after those just mentioned, but rather that they occurred in the same general period of **time** (from *kairos*, season).

That **Jesus went on the Sabbath through the grainfields** with **His disciples** was itself a violation of Jewish tradition, though not of Scripture. And the fact that they **became hungry** shows that they were not in the fields for the purpose of finding something to eat. They were simply passing **through**. Because they would have eaten only ripened grain, the time was probably late March or early April (when grain normally ripened in the Jordan valley) and therefore near Passover.

Roads as we know them today were few, and much travel was done on wide paths that went from town to town and passed through many pastures and **grain-fields**. As travelers walked along, they passed within an arm’s length of the crops on either side. Inns were rare even in small towns and villages and were nonexistent between them. If a traveler did not take enough food with him or found his trip extended for some reason, he had to live off the land. The Lord recognized such need in a provision of the Mosaic law: “When you enter your neighbor’s vineyard, then you may eat grapes until you are fully satisfied, but you shall not put any in your basket. When you enter your neighbor’s standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor’s standing grain” (Deut. 23:24-25).

The disciples were not reaping on the Sabbath, which was forbidden by Mosaic law (Ex. 34:21), but simply satisfying their hunger according to the provision of Deuteronomy 23. Rabbinic tradition, however, had ridiculously interpreted the rubbing of grain together in the hands (which the disciples were doing; see Luke 6:1) as a form of threshing; and they regarded blowing away the chaff as a form of winnowing. The Talmud said, “If a person rolls wheat to remove the husks, it is sifting. If he rubs the heads of wheat, it is threshing. If he cleans off the side adherences, it is sifting. If he bruises the ears, it is grinding. And if he throws it up in his hand, it is winnowing.”

The disciples had left everything to follow Jesus and had no source of income other than occasional gifts from their families and fellow

believers. When they **became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat**, they were perfectly within their scriptural and social rights. They lived by faith, and the divine law of the land provided for just such sustenance. Jesus did nothing to discourage the disciples and probably joined them in eating the grain.

THE INDICTMENT

But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, “Behold, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath.” (12:2)

One wonders what the Pharisees were doing out in the grainfields themselves or what the vantage point was from which they **saw** Jesus and His disciples. It may be that certain exceptions were made for these self-appointed guardians of tradition, just as policemen have the right to temporarily break certain laws while performing their duty.

The charge that Jesus’ **disciples** were doing **what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath** was itself sinful, because it put human tradition on a par with God’s own Word. Rabbinic tradition was not legitimate Jewish law, but many centuries of observance had given it that status in the minds of most Jews, especially the legalistic scribes and **Pharisees**. God’s Word was honored in name and was the supposed basis for the traditions. But Scripture was not studied and obeyed directly; it was rather used as a means to justify the traditions, many of which actually contradicted and “invalidated the word of God” (Matt. 15:6).

The **Pharisees** indicted the Lord and His disciples for disobeying their distorted, man-made traditions, thus perverting God’s intention for the **Sabbath**, which was to provide man with a special day of rest, not a painful day of burdens.

THE INSTRUCTION

But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did, when he became hungry, he and his companions; how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those with him, but for the priests alone? Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath, and are innocent? But I say to you, that something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”
(12:3-8)

Have you not read what David did . . . ? was deep-cutting sarcasm, because the account of **David** to which Jesus referred was, of course, from Scripture, about which the Pharisees considered themselves the supreme experts and custodians. They must have winced in anger as Jesus said to them, in effect, “Don’t you teachers of Scripture know what it says?”

In responding to the Pharisees’ false charge, Jesus instructed them about God’s purposes for the Sabbath, particularly about three things it was *not* designed to do.

Like the other nine Commandments, the one to observe the Sabbath was given to promote love toward God and love toward one’s fellow man. The first three pertain to showing love of God through reverence, faithfulness, and holiness. The other seven pertain to love of other people through personal purity, unselfishness, truthfulness, and contentment and through respect for their possessions, rights, and well-being.

The scribes and Pharisees, however, knew nothing of love—for God or for men. They were legalistic functionaries, trapped in their own system of endless, futile traditions. Instead of fulfilling the law by loving their neighbors as themselves (Lev. 19:18; cf. Rom. 13:8-10), they attempted to fulfill it through loveless and lifeless traditions.

Jesus here reaffirms that the Sabbath was given for God’s glory and for man’s welfare. It was never intended to restrict the expression of love through deeds of necessity, service to God, or acts of mercy.

THE SABBATH DOES NOT RESTRICT DEEDS OF NECESSITY

But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did, when he became hungry, he and his companions; how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those with him, but for the priests alone? (12:3-4)

David was the supreme hero of Judaism, loved and honored even above the patriarchs and prophets. He was the great king, poet, and warrior. Jesus reminded the Pharisees of a familiar story about David and **his companions** as they fled for their lives south of Gibeath to escape the jealous and vengeful Saul. When they came to Nob, where the Tabernacle was then located, they asked for food. Ahimelech the priest gave them **the consecrated bread** of the Presence, **which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those with him, but for the priests alone**, because there was “no ordinary bread on hand” in the Tabernacle (1 Sam. 21:4).

The bread of the Presence was baked weekly, and each Sabbath twelve fresh loaves (representing the twelve tribes) replaced the previous ones, which could be eaten only by the priests. On that particular occasion, however, an exception was made on behalf of David and his men, who were weak from hunger. God was not offended by that act, and He did not discipline either Ahimelech or David. The Lord was willing for a ceremonial regulation to be violated when doing so was necessary to meet the needs of His beloved people.

If God makes allowances for His *own* law to be broken under certain circumstances for the welfare of His people, Jesus said, He surely permits purposeless and foolish man-made traditions to be broken for that purpose.

THE SABBATH DOES NOT RESTRICT SERVICE TO GOD

Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath, and are innocent? But I say to you, that something greater than the temple is here. (12:5-6)

Jesus did not have to explain what He meant by saying **that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath**. The Pharisees had often **read in the Law** that priests not only were allowed but required to do many things on the Sabbath that otherwise would have violated God's **Law** of rest, not to mention rabbinic tradition.

In the performance of their duties in the Tabernacle and then the **temple**, the ministering **priests** had to light the altar fires, kill the sacrificial animals, and then lift up the carcasses and place them on the altar. Sacrifices on **the Sabbath** were, in fact, double sacrifices, requiring twice the work of the normal daily sacrifice (Num. 28:9-10; cf. Lev 24:8-9).

The most legalistic Pharisee considered **the priests** who ministered **in the temple** as **innocent** of breaking **the Sabbath**, despite the fact that they worked twice as hard as they did on other days. Similarly, even the most legalistic Christian does not consider preaching, teaching Sunday school, leading a youth group, or any other such work as profaning the Lord's Day, despite the fact that those activities require a great deal of effort.

Jesus embarrassed and angered the Pharisees by pointing out the inconsistency of their legalistic thinking. But their anger turned to rage when Jesus then said, **But I say to you, that something greater than the temple is here**. Even if the Pharisees did not immediately understand that Jesus was referring to Himself, they were horrified—because *nothing*, other than God Himself, was greater than **the temple**. In our day it is difficult even for Jews, much less Gentiles, to grasp how highly the Jews of Jesus' day revered the Temple.

Because of His previous claims to deity (see, e.g., 9:2-6; 11:3-5, 25-27), the Pharisees probably realized Jesus was referring to Himself as being **greater than the temple** and therefore claiming to be God. A few moments later He removed all doubt in their minds about what He meant (12:8).

The Lord's immediate purpose, however, was not to *prove* His deity but to point out that, in light of that deity, He had the right to abrogate Sabbath regulations as He saw fit—immeasurably more than David had the right to violate the Tabernacle laws or the priests had to violate the Sabbath laws in serving in the Temple.

THE SABBATH DOES NOT RESTRICT ACTS OF MERCY

But if you had known what this means, “I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,” you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. (12:7-8)

Jesus’ third point regarding the Sabbath was that its observance was never meant to restrict acts of mercy, as the Pharisees would have known had they understood and honored Scripture as they claimed.

If they **had known what** the Lord meant when He said, **I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice**, they **would not have condemned the innocent** for supposed Sabbath breaking. That one truth alone—a quotation of but one half of one verse from the book of Hosea (6:6a)—would have been sufficient to teach the Pharisees, and any sincere Jew, what God’s primary desire was for His people.

Sacrifice here represents the entire Mosaic system of ritual and ceremony, which was always of secondary and temporary importance in God’s plan. **Sacrifice** was never more than symbolic, a means pointing to God’s gracious and future provision of what no man, and certainly no animal, could provide.

Observing the Sabbath was a kind of **sacrifice**, a symbolic service to the Lord in obedience to His command. It was a reminder of God’s completion of creation and a shadow of the perfect rest His redeemed people look forward to in salvation and in heaven.

Even under the Old Covenant that required it, Sabbath observance was not a substitute for the heart righteousness and **compassion** that characterize God’s faithful children. God is merciful, and He commands His people to be merciful.

God sometimes sets aside His laws for the sake of mercy. If He did not, none of us would be saved—or even born—because Adam and Eve would have been destroyed the moment they sinned. Not only that, but God has always shown mercy in enforcing the temporal penalties for breaking His laws.

The Lord’s desire is not to condemn men for sin but to save them from it. He only condemns those who will not have His mercy (cf. 2 Pet. 3:9). And if righteous, holy God is supremely characterized by love and

mercy—even to the extent of graciously setting aside the penalty for breaking some of His own laws for man’s benefit—how much more are His still-sinful children obligated to reflect His **compassion**?

Because the Sabbath was the Lord’s special day under the Old Covenant, a faithful Jew should have been especially concerned to follow his Lord’s example of **compassion** on that day. But because the Pharisees and most other Jews were far from God, they were also far from understanding His nature and His will. Jesus’ instruction about God’s purpose for the Sabbath further indicted the Pharisees’ unbelief and hardness of heart. *They* were the true violators of the Sabbath, because they “invalidated the word of God for the sake of [their] tradition” (Matt. 15:6). Those who **condemned the innocent** stood condemned themselves. They did not refuse to do acts of mercy because of devotion to God’s law but because of lack of compassion.

To substantiate His authority for saying what He had just said, Jesus added, **For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath**. That statement must have rendered the Pharisees speechless. What He had implied by “something greater than the temple” (12:6), He now made unambiguous. Jesus stood before them and claimed He was greater than God’s Temple and greater than God’s Sabbath. He was God, the **Son of Man**, the divine Messiah whom the Temple honored and the **Sabbath** served.

Because the **Lord of the Sabbath** had come, the shadow of His Sabbath rest was no longer needed or valid. The New Testament does not require Sabbath observance, but rather allows freedom as to whether or not *any* day is honored above others. The only requirement is that, whatever position is taken, it is taken for the purpose of glorifying the Lord (Rom. 14:5-6); and no believer has the right to impose his views in this regard on anyone else (Gal. 4:9-10; Col. 2:16).

From the days of the early church (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2), Christians have set aside Sunday, the first day of the week, as a special day of worship, fellowship, and giving offerings, because that is the day our Lord was raised from the dead. But the Lord’s Day is not the “Christian Sabbath,” as it was considered to be for many centuries and still is in some groups today.

THE ILLUSTRATION

And departing from there, He went into their synagogue. And behold, there was a man with a withered hand. And they questioned Him, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—in order that they might accuse Him. And He said to them, “What man shall there be among you, who shall have one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it, and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” Then He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand!” And he stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like the other. (12:9-13)

Without waiting for a response from the Pharisees, Jesus immediately **went to their synagogue**, into their very lair as it were, and gave them a living illustration of the true meaning of Sabbath observance and of His authority over both man and the Sabbath.

Although what happened in the **synagogue** was planned by Jesus for the purposes just mentioned, when the Pharisees saw **a man with a withered hand** there, they thought they had the perfect trap for Jesus. Completely unaffected by Jesus’ reminder from Scripture that God desires “compassion, and not a sacrifice” (v. 7), **they questioned Him, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”** Their only purpose in listening to anything Jesus said or in watching anything He did was **that they might accuse Him**. They were not looking for the truth but for a way to dispose of this upstart young rabbi who dared to make a sacrilege of their revered traditions and blaspheme God with His claims.

The fact that they asked Jesus this question indicates they acknowledged His power to heal. Because His miraculous power was so indisputable, Jesus’ opponents tried to undercut the significance of it by such means as accusing Him of casting out demons by Satan’s power (Matt. 9:34; 12:24). His miracles made them all the more determined to destroy Him (Matt. 12:14). The same signs that convinced the humble of Jesus’ divinity and messiahship confirmed the proud in their unbelief and rejection.

The Pharisees chose the **man with a withered hand** to test Jesus because the man’s healing was not a life-or-death issue, which according to their tradition was the only justification for giving medical help on the

Sabbath. They reasoned that, if Jesus were truly of God, He would respect that tradition and wait until the next day to heal the man.

The illustration of the **sheep that falls into a pit on the Sabbath** dealt with an economic justification for breaking the Sabbath that was probably provided for in the traditions. The commentator William Hendriksen says, “It is safe to infer, perhaps, that the question asked by Jesus at the moment indicates to us that there was a particular legislation permitting this.” In any case, Jesus’ question was rhetorical, and the answer was obvious and assumed: Any Jew, including a Pharisee, would find some way to rescue his sheep in such a situation. If there were a regulation permitting him to do such a thing, he would certainly take advantage of it. If there were not, he would find some way of circumventing or bending the law in order to save his sheep. Either within the tradition or in spite of it, he would find a way to **take hold of the sheep and lift it out**. The Pharisees did not argue the point with Jesus, proving the assumed answer was correct.

The Lord therefore declared, **Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep!** No Pharisee would have contended that sheep were as valuable as men, who they knew were created in God’s image. But in practice, the Pharisees treated other men with less respect than they treated their animals, because in their hearts they did not respect, much less love, their fellow men, including their fellow Jews. They contemptuously subjugated human life and welfare to religious tradition.

One of the most obvious tragedies of Hinduism is its disregard for human welfare in the name of human welfare. A beggar is not given food because it would interfere with his karma and prevent him from suffering his way to the next highest level of existence. A fly is not killed because it is the reincarnation of some unfortunate human being of past ages. Rats are not killed for the same reason and are allowed to eat and contaminate food supplies without any interference. Cows are considered sacred and are given what food is available, while human beings are allowed to starve.

In a similar way the Pharisees despised other human beings, showing more compassion for a **sheep** than for a crippled **man** who was even a fellow Jew. Mark reports that Jesus then asked the Pharisees, “‘Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save a life or to kill?’ But they kept silent” (Mark 3:4). Had they approved doing good and

saving a life, they would have contradicted tradition; and, on the other hand, they obviously would not have advocated doing evil or killing. They were trapped in the illogic of their heartless, unscriptural traditions. Their only outward recourse was to keep silent; but inwardly they “were filled with rage” (Luke 6:11).

The Lord therefore answered the question Himself: **It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath**—no doubt putting strong emphasis on **is**. At that point Jesus’ righteous anger confronted the Pharisees’ unrighteous anger. “And after looking around at them with anger” (Mark 3:5), Jesus **said to the man, “Stretch out your hand!” And he stretched it out, and it was restored, like the other.** Jesus not only *approved* doing good on the Sabbath but *did* good on the Sabbath. As Lord of the Sabbath He demonstrated that, if anything, the Sabbath was the supreme day for doing good.

THE INSURRECTION

But the Pharisees went out, and counseled together against Him, as to how they might destroy Him. (12:14)

Neither the power of Jesus’ argument nor the power of His miracles moved the Pharisees. They refused to be convinced. Jesus had indisputably connected the heart of God with benevolence, kindness, mercy, goodness, and compassion; and He had connected those virtues with Sabbath observance. But the Pharisees would have none of it, because they “loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). Their trust was in tradition and in their own works, and neither God’s Word nor God’s Son would change them.

Because they could not disprove the truth of what Jesus said or the power of what He did, **the Pharisees went out, and counseled together against Him, as to how they might destroy Him.** True to the nature of their spiritual father, the devil (John 8:44), the Pharisees sought to **destroy** what they could not subvert.

The Pharisees would have killed Jesus on the spot had not Rome restricted them from inflicting capital punishment and had they not been afraid of the many people who followed and admired Him. The Greek term from which **counseled** is translated includes the idea of carrying out a decision already made. Jesus' enemies were already determined to **destroy Him**; the only remaining decision had to do with **how**.

From Mark we learn that the Pharisees were so determined to destroy Jesus at any cost that they enlisted the help of their usual archenemies, the Herodians (3:6)—the irreligious and worldly political party who supported Herod, the half-Jew Idumean king who had bought his title from Rome. The Herodians were the antithesis of the Pharisees in almost every way, and the fact that the Pharisees sought to join forces with them reveals how desperate they were to do away with Jesus. The religious legalists joined forces with the secular libertarians to destroy an enemy they considered to be even more dangerous than each other.

Despite their differences, those two groups had the same spiritual orientation. They both disregarded God's Word in favor of their own ideas; they both rejected His Son; and their mutual unwitting allegiance was to Satan, the spiritual leader of the present world system (cf. John 8:44). Neither the Gentile world nor the Jewish nation recognized or received the divine Visitor who had made them and had come to redeem them (John 1:10-11).

As Donald Grey Barnhouse observed, "It is at this point in history that Israel's clock stopped." Because Israel, God's chosen and specially blessed people, rejected her Messiah, God placed her on the shelf as a nation "until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom. 11:25; cf. Acts 15:14-18).

Legalism is the implacable enemy of grace. Even the Mosaic law, demanding as it was, was a reflection of God's grace, a means of guiding men toward Jesus Christ, the one true and only hope of coming to God. As Paul explains, the law was a "tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:24). If God's own law was only a shadow, how much less spiritual substance does human tradition have? If even divine law cannot save, of how much less value is human tradition?

Just as trust in tradition and good works is a barrier to salvation, it is also a barrier to faithful living after salvation. "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" Paul asked Galatian

believers who were being misled by the legalistic Judaizers (Gal. 3:3). “Does He then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (vv. 5, 13-14).

God's Beloved **Servant** (12:15-21)

But Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed Him, and He healed them all, and warned them not to make Him known, in order that what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet, might be fulfilled, saying, “Behold, My Servant whom I have chosen; My Beloved in whom My soul is well-pleased; I will put My Spirit upon Him, and He shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel, nor cry out; nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets. A battered reed He will not break off, and a smoldering wick He will not put out, until He leads justice to victory. And in His name the Gentiles will hope.” (12:15-21)

Scripture ascribes many titles to Christ [Messiah], and none is more fitting or lovely than My Servant, a title first used by Isaiah (42:1). Just as the prophet predicted of the Messiah, Jesus came in wonder, beauty, and majesty as the divine Servant, serving the Father and serving mankind in the Father's name.

This brief passage is an oasis of refreshing beauty in the desert of chapters 11 and 12—which chronicle the first major rejection of Christ, led by the scribes and Pharisees. After Jesus put them to shame by showing that their Sabbath traditions were hardhearted, illogical, and unscriptural, “the Pharisees went out, and counseled together against Him, as to how they might destroy Him” (12:14). Those ungodly leaders believed the very opposite of the truth about Jesus, even to the point of accusing Him of doing His work by the power of Satan.

In the midst of his account of that mounting antagonism, Matthew here presents some of the outstanding characteristics of this Servant whom the world despises but God dearly loves.

CONFORMED TO GOD'S PLAN

But Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed Him, and He healed them all, and warned them not to make Him known, in order that what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet, might be fulfilled, saying, (12:15-17)

In His omniscience **Jesus** was **aware** of the Pharisees' plan to destroy Him, and He therefore **withdrew from there**. Jesus had not come to do His own will but His Father's (Matt. 26:29; John 6:38), and it was not yet the Father's time for the Son's ministry and life to be ended. When that time came, Jesus accepted His arrest, trial, and crucifixion without complaint or resistance—although at any time He could easily have saved Himself and destroyed those who sought to destroy Him. When the soldiers came to arrest Him in the Garden of Gethsemane, they fell down in awe simply at hearing Him say, "I am He" (John 18:6). When, a few moments later, Peter drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's slave, Jesus said, "Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matt. 26:52-53).

Until the time of the events described in the Matthew 21, Jesus' ministry was a continual cycle that consisted of going to a particular city or region; of preaching, teaching, and healing; of acceptance by some and rejection by others, particularly the religious leaders; and then of withdrawal to another place. As His ministry progressed, the cycles became shorter because opposition came more quickly and more intensely.

Yet Jesus was never forced away from a place of ministry, but always **withdrew** of His own volition. Had He been willing to use His power for that purpose, He could have continued at any place doing entirely as He pleased—because no force, including the crack troops of Rome, could have hindered Him in the least way. But the Father's plan was not to shed Roman blood but His Son's blood, because only His Son's blood could atone for the sins of mankind and open the way to heaven.

The essence of Jesus' life, His very food, was to do His Father's will and "to accomplish His work" (John 4:34). Jesus had the true heart of a servant, and He was submissive to His Father and wholly given to redeeming a lost world. There was never a servant like this Servant, "who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6-8).

After Jesus left the synagogue, **many followed Him, and He healed them all.** The Lord **healed** many people who did not believe in Him to salvation. Of the ten lepers He cleansed on one occasion, only one showed evidence of faith by returning to give thanks. Jesus' words "Your faith has made you well" refer to the man's spiritual healing through salvation, not to his physical healing, which had already taken place. All ten, lepers were physically healed, but only one was healed spiritually (Luke 17:11-19).

Jesus' miracles of healing demonstrated His divine power, but they also demonstrated His divine love and compassion for suffering people. He healed in order to reveal the loving heart of God, which continually goes out to those who are hurting, burdened, and persecuted. The people Jesus healed were despised and neglected by the scribes and Pharisees, as well as by the priesthood, which God had established as a means for bringing His people nearer to Himself. The religious leaders were interested in the rich and influential, not the sick, the poor, and the outcast. As in the case of the man with the withered hand, their only interest in his affliction was to use it as a means of inducing Jesus to break a Sabbath tradition in order to accuse and convict Him (Matt. 12:10).

Jesus, on the other hand, always had time for those who were suffering and in need. When He looked out over "the multitudes, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd" (9:36). Not only were they oppressed by the Romans but by their own religious leaders, those who should have been their shepherds. Those leaders were wolves dressed like shepherds, and instead of feeding the sheep they devoured them (Matt. 7:15; 23:14). They were like the wicked shepherd spoken of by Zechariah who devoured the flesh of the fat sheep and tore off their hooves (Zech. 11:16).

But when the true Shepherd came to Israel, He had great compassion for His suffering people and He lovingly healed them of every kind of disease and affliction. He called out to them saying, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light” (Matt. 11:28-30). False shepherds impose burdens, but the true Shepherd lifts them. That is why Peter tells us to cast our burdens and anxieties on the “Chief Shepherd,” because He cares for us (1 Pet. 5:4, 7).

Christ feels the pain that hurts us and the weight of burdens that grind us down; and in His gracious lovingkindness He heals our hurts and lifts our burdens.

After Jesus healed **all** the afflicted among those who had followed Him, He **warned** them **not to make Him known**, just as He had told the leper, “See that you tell no one” (Matt. 8:4), and the two blind men, “See here, let no one know about this!” (9:30).

There are probably several reasons why Jesus gave such instructions on certain occasions. In the case of the leper, Jesus prescribed the Old Testament procedure for going to the priests to have a cleansing verified (Lev. 14:2-32). The testimony of the priests would give official recognition of the man’s healing and therefore give more dramatic evidence of Jesus’ messianic credentials.

It may also have been that Jesus sometimes commanded that His miracles not be publicized so that He could confront in person as many people as possible with the initial wonder of His miraculous power. When John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus if He were really the Messiah, Jesus did not simply tell them about what He had been doing but performed miracles especially for their sakes, giving them direct proof of His divine power. “At that very time,” Luke tells us, Jesus “cured many people of diseases and afflictions and evil spirits; and He granted sight to many who were blind” (Luke 7:21).

Jesus also may not have wanted His miracles to become too widely known in order to keep them in perspective. The miracles were evidence of His divine power and His rightful claim to messiahship. He did not perform them to become famous or to build up a popular base of power and influence—as many of His followers expected Him to do. And although He had great compassion for the physical afflictions of the

people, His primary work was to save souls, not bodies. Not only that, but continual demonstrations of power could easily have inflamed zealous enthusiasm for Him as a military and political deliverer, which most Jews expected the Messiah to be but which Jesus refused to be. It was for that reason that He withdrew from the crowds after the feeding of the five thousand. “Jesus therefore perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force, to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone” (John 6:15).

Jesus’ miracles also served to further incite the rage of the scribes and Pharisees; and if His fame had spread too widely and quickly it would have prematurely increased the fatal opposition against Him.

But perhaps the most important reason Jesus did not want His miracle power to be too highly acclaimed was that this was not the time of His exaltation but of His humiliation.

Many of the people must have wondered why, if Jesus really was the Messiah, He was not accepted by the religious leaders and why He kept withdrawing from the multitudes and why He spent so much time with the poor and needy instead of the powerful and influential. How could such a person overthrow Rome and restore Israel?

But Matthew assures His readers that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, just as foretold by **Isaiah the prophet**. Jesus did not come to fulfill the confused and unscriptural expectations of the people but to fulfill His divine mission as predicted in His own Word. He was therefore determined that every divine prediction about Him **might be fulfilled**.

Matthew 12:18-21 is a modified quotation of Isaiah 42:1-4 and is one of the most strikingly beautiful descriptions of Jesus Christ anywhere in Scripture. Here we see that Jesus was commended by the Father and commissioned by the Holy Spirit, that He communicated His Father’s message, that He was committed to meekness and to comforting the weak, and that He would consummate the victory over sin and Satan.

COMMENDED BY THE FATHER

Behold, My Servant whom I have chosen; My Beloved in whom My soul is well-pleased; (12:18a)

Pais (**Servant**) is not the usual word for “servant” and is often translated “son.” In secular Greek it was used of an especially intimate servant who was trusted and loved like a son. In the ancient Greek edition of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), *pais* is used of Abraham’s chief servant (Gen. 24:2), of Pharaoh’s royal servants (41:10, 38), and of angels as the Lord’s supernatural servants (Job 4:18).

Jesus Christ is God’s supreme **Servant**, His only Son whom He has **chosen** to redeem the world. The Greek phrase translated **I have chosen** (from *hairtizō*) indicates a firm and determined decision and is used nowhere else in the New Testament. It was used in secular Greek of irrevocably adopting a child into the family as an heir who could never be disenfranchised. The Father had irrevocably **chosen** His **beloved** Son to be His divine **Servant**, the only One qualified for the task of redemption.

Because the prophets frequently spoke of God’s choosing the Messiah, He was often referred to as “The Chosen One.” At Jesus’ crucifixion, “the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, ‘He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ [Messiah] of God, His Chosen One’”(Luke 23:35). The fact that they knew so much truth about the Messiah made them all the more culpable for rejecting Him.

Jesus is the Father’s **beloved, in whom His soul is well-pleased**. It is through the grace of God “which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved,” that “we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (Eph. 1:6-7). The One who is hated and rejected by the world, including His own people, is **beloved** by God, who **is well-pleased**. Against the testimony of Israel and of the world is the testimony of the Father. Jesus said, “If I alone bear witness of Myself, My testimony is not true. There is another who bears witness of Me, and I know that the testimony which He bears of Me is true.... the witness which I have is greater than that of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish, the very works that I do, bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me. And the Father who sent Me, He has borne witness of Me” (John 5:31-32, 36-37).

At Jesus’ baptism the Father declared, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am wellpleased” (Matt. 3:17), and at the transfiguration He declared again, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him” (17:5).

It is not possible for men to be well-pleasing to God unless they come to Him through His Son, with whom He *is well-pleased*. “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God,” Paul tells us. “However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you” (Rom. 8:8-9). God is well-pleased with believers because He sees them as He sees His own Son.

COMMISSIONED BY THE **HOLY SPIRIT**

I will put My Spirit upon Him, (12:18b)

Through Isaiah, God promised that He would **put His Spirit upon** the Messiah in a unique way, and at Jesus’ baptism the Holy Spirit descended upon Him as a dove (Matt. 3:16). But that was not when He was indwelt by the Spirit. Unique to all mankind, Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20); and if John the Baptist was filled with the Spirit from His mother’s womb (Luke 1:15), how much more so was Jesus.

Yet, if Jesus was the preexistent Son, eternally one with the Father and the Holy Spirit, in what way could the **Spirit** have come **upon Him** during His humanity? First of all, the coming of the Spirit upon Jesus was a bestowing of power to His human nature. His divine nature was already one with the **Spirit** and did not require special assistance, but His human nature did. Jesus was fully human, even to the point of being tempted in the same ways every human being is, yet without sinning (Heb. 4:15). As a child, He grew in wisdom, stature, and in favor with God and man (Luke 2:52). He had human feelings and human emotions. He was hungry and thirsty, and He became tired and felt pain and sorrow. His humanness received the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit in order for it to function in concert with His deity. Therefore “God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10:38).

Second, Jesus required the anointing of the Spirit in order to attest to His royal service as the Messiah. For thirty years He had lived in obscurity, but when His ministry began He was given a special attestation of authority and approval by the Father. A prophecy of the Messiah was

quoted by Jesus and applied to Himself as He taught in the synagogue at Nazareth: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19). After He sat down, Jesus explained, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (v. 21).

As the perfect submissive Servant, Jesus functioned not only in the Father’s will and by the Father’s commendation but in the power of the Father’s **Spirit**.

COMMUNICATING THE MESSAGE

and He shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles. (12:18c)

Isaiah prophesied that the Lord’s beloved Servant would **proclaim** a message of truth and **justice** even to the **Gentiles**; and that is what Jesus did. Contrary to the thinking and expectations of most Jews, the Messiah was to be the Redeemer of the whole world, not just of Israel. Israel was, in fact, to be the channel of God’s grace to the rest of the world. In His first great promise to Abraham, God declared, “And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). Israel was called to be God’s agency for reaching the world for Himself; and when the Jews as a nation rejected God, He had to raise up a new agent, the church, to accomplish that purpose.

The first woman to whom Jesus revealed His messiahship was a Samaritan, half Jew and half Gentile (John 4:26). Early in His ministry He had Gentile followers from Idumea, the Trans-Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon (Mark 3:8). Of the Gentile centurion whose servant He healed, Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel” (Matt. 8:10).

But the Jews resented Jesus’ giving any attention to Gentiles, and especially His treating them equally with Jews. And the idea of the Messiah coming to *redeem* Gentiles was anathema. When Paul was

defending himself before a large group of Jews in Jerusalem, he managed to keep their attention as he recounted his former life, his conversion experience, and his vision in the Temple. But when he reported that God told him, “Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles,”... they listened to him up to this statement, and then they raised their voices and said, ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!’” They were so uncontrollably incensed that “they were crying out and throwing off their cloaks and tossing dust into the air” (Acts 22:21-23). Almost no truth of the gospel was as hard for Jews to accept as the truth that salvation and fellowship with God were for Gentiles as well as Jews. The notion was utterly inconceivable to them, and, as is clear from the account just mentioned, they considered it a form of blasphemy.

But God’s plan for redemption had always included the **Gentiles**, and to them the Messiah was to **proclaim justice** and deliverance from sin just as to the Jews.

COMMITTED TO MEEKNESS

He will not quarrel, nor cry out; nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets. (12:19)

Epizō (to **quarrel**) carries the idea of wrangling, hassling, or even brawling. *Kraugazō* (to **cry out**) means to shout or scream excitedly. The term was sometimes used of a dog’s barking, a raven’s squawking, and even a drunk’s bawling.

Jesus did not come to harangue and cajole people with the gospel like a rabble-rousing zealot who inflames his hearers by appealing to their emotions and prejudices. He spoke with dignity and control, and He used no means of persuasion but the truth. He never organized a mob or resorted to trickery, lies, or scheming, as His opponents routinely did against Him. His was the way of gentleness, meekness, and lowliness. Although He was the Son of God, the divine Messiah, and the rightful

King of kings, Jesus never tried to secure a hearing, much less a following, by political power, physical force, or emotional agitation.

Even the wisdom of man knows that no real persuasion can be made by force or intimidation. As Solomon reminds us, “The words of the wise heard in quietness are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools” (Eccles. 9:17; cf. 1 Cor. 2:1-4).

COMFORTING THE WEAK

A battered reed He will not break off, and a smoldering wick He will not put out, (12:20a)

In ancient times reeds were used for many purposes, but once a **reed** was bent or **battered** it was useless. A shepherd would often make a flute-like instrument from a reed and play soft music on it to while away the hours and to calm the sheep. When the reed became soft or cracked, it would no longer make music and the shepherd would **break** it and throw it away.

When a lamp burned down to the end of the wick, it would only smolder and smoke without making any light. Since such a **smoldering wick** was useless, it was **put out** and thrown away, just like a broken reed.

The **battered reed** and the **smoldering wick** represent people whose lives are broken and worn out, ready to be discarded and replaced by the world. Because they can no longer “make music” or “give light,” society casts off the weak and the helpless, the suffering and the burdened. Those were the kind of people the Romans ignored as useless and the Pharisees despised as worthless.

One of the most obvious legacies of the Fall is man’s natural tendency to destroy. Small children will often step on a bug just for the sake of killing it, or snap off a beautiful bud just before it flowers. A tree branch is broken for the sake of breaking it, and a stone is thrown at a bird just to see it fly away or fall to the ground. On a more destructive scale, adults devour and undercut each other in business, society, politics, and even in the family.

The nature of sinful man is to destroy, but the nature of the holy God is to restore. The Lord will **not break off** or **put out** even the least of those who come to Him, and He gives dire warning to those who would do so. “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble,” Jesus said, “it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matt. 18:6).

In the hands of the Savior, the **battered reed** is not discarded but restored, and the **smoldering wick** is not put out but rekindled.

CONSUMMATING THE VICTORY

until He leads justice to victory. And in His name the Gentiles will hope. (12:20b-21)

Ultimately right will win. In spite of oppression, persecution, and rejection, Jesus was destined to be victorious. As **He leads justice to victory**, He will bring with Him all who belong to Him and who have themselves been oppressed, persecuted, and rejected by the world. When Christ takes His rightful place as Lord and King, justice will “roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

Down in the human heart,
Crushed by the tempter,
Feelings lie buried
That grace can restore,
Touched by a loving heart,
Wakened by kindness,
Chords that were broken
Will vibrate once more.

(“Rescue the Perishing,” Fanny J. Crosby)

Blaspheming the Holy Spirit (12:22-32)

Then there was brought to Him a demon-possessed man who was blind and dumb, and He healed him, so that the dumb man spoke and saw. And all the multitudes were amazed, and began to say, “This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?” But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, “This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons.” And knowing their thoughts He said to them, “Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself shall not stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then shall his kingdom stand? And if I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? Consequently they shall be your judges. But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can anyone enter the strong man’s house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house. He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters. Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven men, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. And whoever shall speak a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age, or in the age to come. (12:22-32)

By nature God is forgiving. The Old Testament abounds with teachings about His forgiveness. David declared, “For Thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon Thee” (Ps. 86:5). In another psalm he reminds us that God pardons all our iniquities (Ps. 103:3). Daniel said, “To the Lord our God belong

compassion and forgiveness” (Dan. 9:9). God described Himself to Moses as, “the Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin” (Ex. 34:6-7). Micah extolled the Lord, saying, “Who is a God like Thee, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea” (Mic. 7:18-19).

The Old Testament also abounds with examples of His forgiveness. When Adam and Eve committed sin, God forgave them. When Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob sinned, God forgave them. When Moses sinned God forgave him. When Israel under the judges and under the kings repeatedly sinned, God forgave her. Israel’s history is a history of God’s forgiveness.

Likewise the New Testament pictures God as supremely the God of forgiveness. That is the essence of the gospel: God’s divine and gracious provision for the forgiveness of man’s sin. In Christ, Paul says, “we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace” (Eph. 1:7; cf. Col. 1:14). John assures us that, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” and that our “sins are forgiven [us] for His name’s sake” (1 John 1:9; 2:12).

No matter how severe the sin, God can forgive it. The worst conceivable sin would be to kill God’s own Son—and that while He was on earth for the very purpose of providing salvation from sin and the way to everlasting life. Nothing could possibly be more heinous, vicious, and wicked than that. And, of course, killing Him is exactly what men did to the Son of God. Yet, while hanging on the cross and about to die, Jesus prayed and affirmed the forgiving mercy available to His executioners, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). The *degree* of sin does not forfeit forgiveness, because even killing the Son of God was forgivable.

Nor does the *volume* of sin end the possibility of mercy. A seventy-year-old profligate who has lived a life of debauchery, stealing, lying, profanity, blasphemy, and immorality is just as forgivable as a seven-year-old who has done nothing worse than normal childhood naughtiness.

Nor does the particular *kind* of sin cancel grace. In Scripture we find God forgiving idolatry, murder, gluttony, fornication, adultery, cheating, lying, homosexuality, covenant breaking, blasphemy, drunkenness, extortion, and every other kind of sin imaginable. He forgives self-righteousness, which is the deceiving sin of thinking that one has no sin. He even forgives the sin of rejecting Christ; otherwise no one could be saved, because before salvation *everyone*, to some degree, is a Christ rejecter. There is no forgiveness of even the smallest sin unless it is confessed and repented of; but there is forgiveness of even the greatest sin if those divine conditions are met.

The rejection of Jesus as Messiah and King gradually escalated as His ministry continued. As we have seen, first there was doubt, then criticism, then indifference, culminating in open rejection. The religious leaders of Israel then added blasphemy against the Holy Spirit to their rejection of Christ. Although their animosity would continue to spread and intensify, this blasphemy was the epitome of its expression.

For centuries God's people had longed for the Messiah, their divine Deliverer. The hope of every godly prophet and teacher of Israel was to live to see Him; and every Jewish girl dreamed of being His mother. Yet when He arrived He was denied and rejected. In 12:22-32, Matthew details five features of the climax of that rejection: the activity of Jesus in healing a seriously afflicted man; the amazement of the crowd over the miracle; the accusation against Jesus because of the miracle; Jesus' answer to His accusers; and the anathema His accusers brought on themselves.

THE ACTIVITY

Then there was brought to Him a demon-possessed man who was blind and dumb, and He healed him, so that the dumb man spoke and saw.
(12:22)

The **man** had multiple problems. He was **demon-possessed ... blind and dumb**, and possibly also suffered deafness, so often associated with inability to speak. But the fact that Jesus **healed him** was not unique.

He had healed hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of people who were demon-possessed, blind, dumb, and deaf; and many of those had more than one affliction, just as this man did.

As was often the case, this healing demonstrated in one act Jesus' dominion over both the spirit world of demons and the physical world of disease. He undeniably possessed the power to heal every kind of disease, to cast out any kind and any number of demons, and even to restore life to the dead. He had performed thousands of instantaneous, total, permanent, and verifiable healings. His supernatural powers could no longer be questioned, either by the common multitudes or by the more educated and skeptical religious leaders.

Yet most of the sin-blinded people remained ambivalent about Jesus' identity and the source of His great power. They knew that miracles would be proof signs of the Messiah; but they also expected Him to come with royal fanfare and with military might. But instead of regal robes, sovereign authority, a throne, trumpets, swords, horses, chariots, and a mighty army, they saw a Man of compassion, gentleness, and humility—with a following of twelve nondescript disciples and a multitude of hangers-on whose loyalty could hardly be counted on. Because Jesus did not appear to be a conqueror or a king by their definition, the people would not accept His being the Messiah. They had chosen to be selective about the Old Testament predictions of the Messiah. His predicted coming in power and glory to defeat the foes of Israel and set His people free was easy for them to be excited about. His predicted coming in meekness and humility was not.

The scribes and Pharisees had been dogging Jesus' footsteps for some time and were already convinced He was an enemy of Judaism—so much so that they even collaborated against Him with the Herodians, who normally were their arch foes (Mark 3:6). The religious leaders were no longer merely skeptical and resentful but had become adamantly hostile to Jesus. It would be over a year before Jesus would be crucified, but the irrevocable decision to destroy Him had already been made (Matt. 12:14).

Jesus therefore seems to have performed the particular healing on this occasion especially for the benefit of the Pharisees, forcing them to make their verdict concerning Him public. Before their eyes they saw a man become immediately and dramatically delivered of three great

afflictions, and he now stood before them in sound mind and spirit and both **spoke and saw**. The miracle was incontestable.

THE AMAZEMENT

And all the multitudes were amazed, and began to say, “This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?” (12:23)

Although many people among **the multitudes** present that day had doubtlessly seen Jesus perform many miracles of healing, they were especially **amazed** by this one. *Existēmi* (to be **amazed**) means to be totally astounded, beside oneself with amazement and wonder. One writer suggests that “it means to be literally knocked out of your senses,” and another that “it means to be out of your mind with amazement.” In ways that we may not fully see from the narrative, this particular miracle was unusually overwhelming, as if Jesus meant to intensify its demonstration of supernaturalness.

Although it comes down on the negative side of probability in their minds, the very question the people **began** to ask among themselves—**This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?**—reveals that they recognized such miracles as possible messianic signs. **Son of David** was one of many scriptural titles for the Messiah (see 2 Sam. 7:12-16; Ps. 89:3; Isa. 9:6-7), and for the people to consider whether Jesus could be **the Son of David** was a query related to His being the Messiah. That was the title later ascribed to Jesus by the crowds who welcomed Him into Jerusalem as their Messiah and King (Matt. 21:9; cf. v. 5).

THE ACCUSATION

But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, “This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons.” (12:24)

The fact that the multitudes were seriously wondering if Jesus might be the Messiah drove **the Pharisees** to panic, and they unwittingly reacted with the foolish accusation that Jesus cast **out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons**. These Jewish religious leaders, of whom the Pharisees were always the most zealous and vocal, could not tolerate the thought that this man who denounced them as unrighteous hypocrites and trampled on their human system of traditions could be the prophesied and long-awaited Deliverer of Israel.

Matthew's telling us that Jesus knew their thoughts (v. 25) indicates that the Pharisees were some distance from Jesus, perhaps on the fringe of the crowd or standing outside as Jesus ministered within a house. Their intent was to poison the minds of the people against Jesus by answering their question about Him with a resounding no. They said, in effect, that He was the antithesis of the Son of David. He was the servant of **Beelzebul the ruler of the demons**.

They had only one option. Because Jesus' power was indisputably supernatural, because the only two sources of supernatural power are God and Satan, and because they refused to recognize Jesus as being from God, they were forced to conclude that He was an agent of Satan. He must serve **the ruler of the demons**, for whom **Beelzebul** (or Beelzebub) was a popular title, derived from the name of an ancient Canaanite deity. (See chapter 9 of this volume for a discussion of the name *Beelzebul*.)

THE ANSWER

And knowing their thoughts He said to them, "Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself shall not stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then shall his kingdom stand? And if I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? Consequently they shall be your judges. But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can anyone enter the strong man's house and carry off his property, unless he first binds

the strong man? And then he will plunder his house. He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters. (12:25-30)

Although the Pharisees were speaking to the crowd beyond Jesus' hearing, He nevertheless knew **their thoughts**. Mark tells us that some scribes from Jerusalem joined the Pharisees in accusing Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul, and that Jesus "called them to Himself and began speaking to them in parables" (3:22-23). They would not confront Him directly with their accusation, but He confronted them directly with its absurdity, its prejudice, and its rebelliousness.

THE ACCUSATION WAS ABSURD

"Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself shall not stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then shall his kingdom stand?" (12:25b-26)

Jesus first showed His accusers that their charge was a logical absurdity. It is axiomatic that a **kingdom divided against itself** would soon be **laid waste** by self-destruction. The truism also applies to **any city** or **any house**. If one or the other becomes **divided against itself**, it obviously **shall not stand**.

Applied to the spirit world, the principle is just as clear: **If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how shall his kingdom stand?** Outside of the Trinity, Satan is the most intelligent being in existence, and he certainly does not assign his forces to fight against each other and internally destroy his own program.

It is true, of course, that evil is destructive by nature, and that destruction often includes self-destruction. Satan is the father of hatred and lies, and where such things rule there is confusion and inconsistency. There can be no true harmony within or among evil beings. Just as God is

the Lord of order and harmony, Satan is the lord of disorder and chaos, whether he chooses to be or not.

It is also true that although Satan is brilliant, powerful, and able to move from place to place with seemingly instantaneous speed, he is nevertheless not omniscient, omnipotent, or omnipresent. And the supreme deceiver is supremely self-deceived, especially in thinking he can overpower God and usurp His kingdom.

And it is further true that Satan often disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). In that role he may pretend to cast out a demon by restricting its power over the possessed person in order to give the impression of a cleansing. That sort of supposed exorcism has been common throughout the history of the church and is practiced today by various cults, false healers, and exorcists.

Even Satan's demons may on occasion act inconsistently and in conflict with him and each other. But despite the disorder of his kingdom, his creaturely limits, his false exorcisms, and demon confusion, **Satan** does not cast **out Satan**, and **he is not divided against himself**. There is no harmony, trust, or loyalty in his **kingdom**, but he tolerates no disobedience or division. It was therefore preposterous to accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the power of the ruler of demons.

THE ACCUSATION WAS PREJUDICED

And if I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out?

Consequently they shall be your judges. (12:27)

Second, Jesus showed that the Pharisees' accusation was also prejudiced, revealing the corrupt, wicked bias of their hearts. **Sons** was often used as an epithet for disciples or followers, as in the common Old Testament expression "sons of the prophets" (see, e.g., 2 Kings 2:3). Certain followers or **sons** of the Pharisees **cast out demons**, and the Jewish historian Josephus reports that they used many strange, exotic incantations and cultic formulas in their rites.

Luke tells of a group of seven brothers, sons of a chief priest named Sceva, who practiced exorcism. When they and other Jewish exorcists heard of the apostles' great success in casting out evil spirits,

they decided to try a new formula—exorcising in “the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, ‘I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches’” (Acts 19:13-14). The fact that they thought the mere use of certain words and names would accomplish the exorcism proves their magical orientation. The demon, however, was not the least affected, and he responded by saying to the seven men, “‘I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?’ And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded” (vv. 15-16).

Jesus pointed out the Pharisees’ extreme prejudice by showing that they approved the exorcisms attempted by the **sons** who were part of their religious establishment. They would never have claimed that those activities were ungodly, much less satanic. Yet when Jesus not only cast out every sort of demon but also healed every sort of disease, they accused Him of being in league with the devil.

The Pharisees’ response reflects the basic response of every person who intentionally rejects Jesus Christ. They did not reject Him for lack of evidence but because they were biased against Him. Their own deeds were evil and they could not handle the intimidating reality of Jesus’ righteousness; they were children of darkness and could not tolerate His light (John 3:19). They were not looking for truth but for ways to justify their own wickedness and to destroy anyone who dared expose them.

To put His opponents further on the spot, Jesus suggested that the Pharisees let their exorcist **sons** be their **judges**. The implied suggestion was that they ask those practitioners by whose power they cast out evil spirits. If they said, “By Satan’s power,” they would condemn themselves and the religious leaders who supported them. But if they said, “By God’s power,” they would undercut the Pharisees’ accusation against Jesus.

THE ACCUSATION WAS REBELLIOUS

But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can anyone enter the strong man’s house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house. He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters. (12:28-30)

The third, and basic, reason behind the Pharisees' accusation was their rebelliousness against God. Jesus had dispelled the foolish charge that He worked under Satan's power, and the only remaining possibility was that He **cast out demons by the Spirit of God.**

If He did His work **by the Spirit of God**, then His miracles were of God and He had to be the Messiah, "the Son of David," just as the multitudes had considered (v. 23). Every religiously literate Jew knew that the prophets predicted that just such signs would accompany the Messiah's coming (Isa. 29:18; 35:5-6). They also knew that the Messiah was to be Israel's supreme and eternal King (Ps. 2:6; Jer. 23:5; Zech. 9:9). "Therefore," Jesus was saying, "if I am the Messiah, I am also the coming King, and if I am the King, **then the kingdom of God has come upon you.**"

Jesus will not reign on earth in His full glory and divine prerogatives until the millennial kingdom, and after that in the eternal kingdom of the new heavens and new earth. But in widest sense, Christ's **kingdom** is the sphere of His rule in any place or age. In that sense He is King wherever He may be, and those who love Him are His subjects; therefore His **kingdom** was always with Him during His earthly ministry. In a similar way it exists now on earth wherever He is served as Lord. "For [God] delivered us from the domain of darkness," Paul says, "and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Col. 1:13). It is in that **kingdom** that every believer begins to live the moment he receives the King as His Lord and Savior.

Or how can anyone enter the strong man's house and carry off his property, Jesus continued, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder the house. Could not the Pharisees see that everything Jesus said and did was opposed to Satan? Jesus healed sickness and disease, which were brought upon mankind by sin, which, in turn, was brought and promoted by Satan. Jesus raised people from death, which was also a consequence of sin and indirectly the work of Satan (cf. Heb. 2:14-17). Jesus cast out demons, which, as He had just pointed out, was in obvious opposition to Satan. He even forgave sins—something Satan neither would nor could do—and verified His authority to forgive sins by His power to perform miracles (Matt. 9:5-6). Every detail of what He taught and did corresponded to the teaching of Old Testament Scripture. And although the scribes and Pharisees often charged Jesus with opposing

and violating their man-made traditions, they could never convict Him of committing sin or of teaching falsehood (John 8:46).

Jesus used the figure of a thief who planned to rob a **strong man's house** while **the strong man** was there. The thief knows that **unless he first binds the strong man** he has no chance of being successful and, in fact, risks being arrested and seriously beaten in the process.

Jesus' point was this: "Haven't I demonstrated before you and all of Israel My power over Satan and his kingdom of evil, darkness, and destruction? Haven't I demonstrated beyond all doubt that My authority is higher than Satan's? Haven't I cleansed people of every kind of disease and freed them from every kind of demonic control and oppression? Haven't I demonstrated My authority over both sin and death? Haven't I rescued souls from hell? Who could have such power and authority but God Himself? Who but God could **enter** the very **house** of Satan and successfully bind him **and carry off his property**? I have shown you that I can defeat Satan and a legion of his demonic hosts at will. How could I be any other than your divine Messiah?"

The death blow to Satan was inflicted at the cross and will be actualized in the future; but even before that ultimate victory Christ repeatedly demonstrated His unlimited and unhindered power to thwart and bind Satan. Christ also committed that power to His disciples, and when the seventy returned from their mission, Jesus "said to them, 'I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning'" (Luke 10:18). Satan is presently still powerful, but His power is limited, his doom is sealed, and his time is short.

Jesus next made clear to the Pharisees that there is no neutral ground as far as relationship to Him is concerned. **He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters.** It is not necessary to oppose Christ in order to be **against** Him; it is only necessary **not** to be **with** Him. Nor is it necessary to actively interfere with His work in order to be one who **scatters**; it is only necessary to **not gather with** Him. The person who does not belong to God is the enemy of God (Rom. 5:10); the person who is not a child of God through Christ is a rebel against God.

There are only two possible relationships to Jesus Christ, and therefore to God: **with** or **against**. It is both spiritually and rationally impossible to accept Jesus as a kind man, a good teacher, and a great man

of God—and nothing more. Only God has the right to claim for Himself the honor and authority Jesus claimed for Himself; and only God has the power over disease, sin, demons, Satan, and death that Jesus both claimed and demonstrated.

THE ANATHEMA

Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven men, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. And whoever shall speak a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whoever shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age, or in the age to come. (12:31-32)

Few passages of Scripture have been more misinterpreted and misunderstood than these two verses. Because of their extreme seriousness and finality, it is critical to understand them correctly.

Jesus first stated that **any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven men**. Although **blasphemy** is a form of **sin**, in this passage and context the two are treated separately—with blasphemy representing the most extreme form of sin. **Sin** here represents the full gamut of immoral and ungodly thoughts and actions, whereas **blasphemy** represents conscious denouncing and rejection of God. **Blasphemy** is defiant irreverence, the uniquely terrible sin of intentionally and openly speaking evil against holy God or defaming or mocking Him (cf. Mark. 2:7). The Old Testament penalty for such blasphemy was death by stoning (Lev. 24:16). In the last days blasphemy will be an outstanding characteristic of those who rebelliously and insolently oppose God (Rev. 13:5-6; 16:9; 17:3).

But even **blasphemy**, Jesus says, is **forgiven**, just as any other **sin** is forgiven when it is confessed and repented of. An unbeliever who blasphemes God can be forgiven. Paul confessed that, “even though [he] was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor,” he was nevertheless “shown mercy, because [he] acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 1:13-14). “Christ Jesus came into

the world,” the apostle continues, “to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all” (v. 15). Peter blasphemed Christ with curses (Mark 14:71) and was forgiven and restored.

Even a believer can blaspheme, since any thought or word that sullies or defames the Lord’s name constitutes blasphemy. To question God’s goodness, wisdom, fairness, truthfulness, love, or faithfulness is a form of blasphemy. All of that is forgivable by grace. Speaking to believers, John said, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

There is one exception, however: **blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven.** Even the person who blasphemes Jesus, who dares to **speak a word against the Son of Man . . . shall be forgiven.** **Son of Man** designates the Lord’s humanity, which He experienced in His time of humiliation and servitude during the incarnation. A person’s perception may not allow him to see more than the Lord’s humanity, and if he only misjudges at that level and speaks against Him in His humanness, such a **word against the Son of Man can be forgiven.** When a person rejects Christ with less than full exposure to the evidence of His deity, he may yet be forgiven of that sin if, after gaining fuller light, he then believes.

It was hard even for the disciples to keep clearly in mind that their Teacher was indeed the Son of God. He ate, drank, slept, and became tired just as they did. Not only that, but many of the things He did simply did not seem to reflect God’s glory and majesty. Jesus continually humbled Himself and served others. He took no earthly glory for Himself, and when others tried to thrust it on Him, He refused to receive it—as when the crowd wanted to make Him king after He miraculously fed the five thousand (John 6:15). It was even more difficult for those outside Jesus’ inner circle to appreciate His deity. Even when He performed His greatest miracles, He did so without fanfare or flare. Jesus did not always look or act like even a human lord, much less like the divine Lord.

But to misjudge, belittle, and discredit Jesus from the vantage point of incomplete revelation or inadequate perception was forgivable, wrong as it was. As already mentioned, the apostle Paul had himself been an ignorant blasphemer of the Lord Jesus Christ of the worst sort and a fierce persecutor of His church. And many of those who had denied and

rejected Christ during His earthly ministry later saw the truth of who He was and asked forgiveness and were saved.

But **the blasphemy against the Spirit** was something more serious and irremediable. It not only reflected unbelief, but determined unbelief—the refusal, after having seen all the evidence necessary to complete understanding, even to consider believing in Christ. This was **blasphemy** against Jesus in His deity, **against the Spirit** of God who uniquely indwelt and empowered Him. It reflected determined rejection of Jesus as the Messiah against every evidence and argument. It reflected seeing the truth incarnate and then knowingly rejecting Him and condemning Him. It demonstrated an absolute and permanent refusal to believe, which resulted in loss of opportunity *ever* to **be forgiven**. . . **either in this age, or in the age to come**. Through **this age** (all of human history), such rejection is unforgivable. **The age to come** implies that through all of eternity there will be no forgiveness. In the age of human history and in the age of divine consummation, no forgiveness.

Scripture is clear that during His ministry on earth our Lord was submissive to the Father (John 4:34; 5:19-30) and empowered by the Spirit (Matt. 4:1; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1, 18; John 3:34; Acts 1:2; Rom. 1:4). Peter said that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth “with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10:38).

Those who spoke **against the Holy Spirit** were those who saw His divine power working in and through Jesus but willfully refused to accept the implications of that revelation and, in some cases, attributed that power to Satan. Many people had heard Jesus teach and preach God’s truth, as no man had ever taught before (Matt. 7:28-29), yet they refused to believe Him. They had seen him heal every kind of disease, cast out every kind of demon, and forgive every kind of sin, yet they charged Him with deceit, falsehood, and demonism. In the face of every possible evidence of Jesus’ messiahship and deity, they said no. God could do nothing more for them, and they would therefore remain eternally unforgiven.

For penitence they substitute hardening, for confession plotting. Thus, by means of their own criminal and completely inexcusable callousness, they are dooming

themselves. Their sin is unpardonable because they are unwilling to tread the path that leads to pardon. For a thief, an adulterer, and a murderer there is hope. The message of the gospel may cause him to cry out, “O God be merciful to me, the sinner.” But when a man has become hardened, so that he has made up his mind not to pay any attention to the . . . Spirit, . . . he has placed himself on the road that leads to perdition. (William Hendriksen, *The Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973], p. 529)

Through Isaiah, the Lord pictured Israel as a vineyard He had carefully planted, cultivated, and tended. He built a tower in the middle of it, representing Jerusalem, and a wine vat in it, representing the sacrificial system. “Then He expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones.” “What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?” God asked. “So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard: I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground. And I will lay it waste; it will not be pruned or hoed, but briars and thorns will come up. I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it” (Isa. 5:1-6). After the people had been blessed with every blessing and had every opportunity but still turned their backs on God, there was nothing left for Him to do but turn His back on them.

During Jesus’ earthly ministry, the unbelieving Pharisees and all the others who blasphemed **the Spirit** cut themselves off from God’s mercy, not because it was not offered but because it was abundantly offered yet rebelliously and permanently rejected and ridiculed as satanic.

Within forty years, God would destroy Jerusalem, the Temple, the priesthood, the sacrifices, and the nation of Israel. In 70 A.D. the Romans razed Jerusalem, utterly destroyed the Temple, slaughtered over a million of its inhabitants, and all but obliterated nearly a thousand other towns and villages in Judea. His own chosen people had said no to Him, and He said no to them. Until He returns and regathers a remnant of His people to

Himself in the last days, except for a few faithful, they are as a nation totally apart from God.

To unsaved Jews who had heard the full gospel message and had seen its evidence in supernatural power, and to all who would come after them with similar exposure to the truth and the biblical record of miraculous evidence, the writer of the book of Hebrews gave a stern warning: “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard [that is, the apostles], God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will” (Heb. 2:3-4). Later in the letter an even more severe warning to those who reject with full revelation is given: “For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame” (Heb. 6:4-6). (For a detailed discussion of that important passage, see the author’s commentary in this series on Hebrews.)

The generation immediately after Christ was on earth was ministered to by the apostles, enlightened by their teaching, and given proof of the truth of the gospel by their miracles. That generation had evidence equivalent to that of those who heard and saw Jesus in person. They had the highest possible revelation from God, and if they refused to believe in the face of such overwhelming evidence, there was nothing more God could do for them. They did not blaspheme; they simply turned away. The guilt of the Pharisees who added blasphemy to unbelief was greater than that of those who saw the same evidence and disbelieved but did not **speak against the Holy Spirit**. But the rebels in both groups left themselves no future but hell.

In a similar way, people today can so totally turn their backs on God’s revelation that they permanently cut themselves off from salvation. “We must work the works of Him who sent Me, as long as it is day,” Jesus said; “night is coming, when no man can work” (John 9:4).

During World War II, an American naval force in the North Atlantic was engaged in heavy battle with enemy ships and submarines on an exceptionally dark night. Six planes took off from the carrier to search

out those targets, but while they were in the air a total blackout was ordered for the carrier in order to protect it from attack. Without lights on the carrier's deck the six planes could not possibly land, and they made a radio request for the lights to be turned on just long enough for them to come in. But because the entire carrier, with its several thousand men as well as all the other planes and equipment, would have been put in jeopardy, no lights were permitted. When the six planes ran out of fuel, they had to ditch in the freezing water and all crew members perished into eternity.

There comes a time when God turns out the lights, when further opportunity for salvation is forever lost. That is why Paul told the Corinthians, "Now is 'the acceptable time,' behold, now is 'the day of salvation'" (2 Cor. 6:2). One who rejects full light can have no more light—and no forgiveness.

Exposing the Truth
About Man's Heart
(12:33-37)

Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil. And I say to you, that every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you shall be justified, and by your words you shall be condemned. (12:33-37)

It has been estimated that from the first “Good morning” to the last “Good night,” the average person engages in thirty conversations a day. Each day, his words could make a book of 50-60 pages—the equivalent of more than one hundred books a year of 200 pages each.

Someone in the last century wrote the following about the incessant talker:

He shakes a man by the ear as a dog does a pig, and never loosens his hold till he has tired himself as well as his patient. He is a walking pillory, and punishes more ears than a dozen standing ones. He will hold any argument rather than his tongue, and maintain both sides at his own charge; for he will tell you what you will say, though perhaps he does not intend to give you leave. His tongue

is always in motion, though very seldom to the purpose: like a barber's scissors, which are kept snipping as well when they do not cut as when they do. He is so full of words that they run over, and are thrown away to no purpose; and so empty of things, or sense, that his dryness has made his leaks so wide, whatsoever is put in him runs out immediately. He is so long delivering himself, that those that hear him desire to be delivered too, or dispatched out of their pain.

It is not surprising that, immediately after Jesus excoriated the Pharisees for their unforgivable blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, He then began to speak about the importance of the tongue. The most self-damning words ever spoken had just been uttered by the religious leaders who accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Satan (v. 24). Now the Lord gives one of His most sobering warnings, and in the process He exposes the truth about the nature of man's heart.

THE PARABLE

Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. (12:33)

Jesus initiates the warning with a short parable to illustrate an obvious maxim: a tree and its fruit correspond. A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit (cf. 7:17, 20; Luke 6:43-44).

Poieō (to **make**) is used here in a figurative sense. As in English, the term can refer physically to creating or constructing—as in making a clay pot or a chair. Also as in English, it can refer metaphorically to considering, evaluating, or judging—as in making up one's mind about something.

Jesus' general point was: "You must make up your minds about Me and My work. Either I am evil and do evil work, or else I am good and do good work. I cannot be evil and do good work or be good and do evil work. If I do good works, it is by God's power; and if I do evil works, it is by Satan's. God empowers nothing evil, and Satan empowers nothing good."

His specific point was: "Sickness and death are the result of sin, as you yourselves recognize. Demon possession is obviously Satan's doing and an evil thing. Therefore, healing the sick, raising the dead, and casting out demons could not be other than good things—the deliverance of men from the destructive work of sin. Consequently, My casting out demons must be by God's power, not Satan's. Because you accuse Me of doing good by Satan's power, you attribute to Satan the work of the Holy Spirit, and that is the supreme and unforgivable blasphemy."

Jesus again trapped the self-righteous Pharisees in their perverted thinking, publicly exposing their hard-heartedness and absurd illogic. As He pointed out to them on other occasions, no matter what they thought of Him personally, His works indisputably testified to His goodness and to His divine power (John 5:36; 10:25, 37-38; 14:11; cf. Matt. 11:4-5).

THE PERSONALIZATION

**You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good?
(12:34a)**

Changing the metaphor, Jesus applies the parable of the good and bad trees directly to the Pharisees, saying, in effect, "**You** are immeasurably worse than a group of bad trees; you are a veritable **brood of vipers.**" That is the same epithet John the Baptist used of the hypocritical Pharisees and Sadducees who came to him for baptism (3:7) and that Jesus used during His long series of "Woes" against the scribes and Pharisees in the Temple (Matt. 23:33).

Those who preach falsehood or practice immorality are invariably offended when they are exposed; but fear of offending should not keep believers from exposing their evil. When, in the name of love and

humility, we fail to expose religions, cults, and philosophies that give men false spiritual hope or we fail to challenge those who promote irreverence and moral filth, we serve neither love nor humility but sin.

Jesus did not shy away from condemning men to their faces, especially when their sin was cruel, hypocritical, self-righteous, or blasphemous. He came to save people from their sin, not help confirm them in it by underplaying its seriousness or their guilt. He was not in a popularity contest, and it was His concern to please His Father, not men. It is never to God's glory or to man's good to encourage in any way those who do evil or to minimize their sin.

Calling the Pharisees a **brood of vipers** was a fierce denunciation that everyone understood. **Vipers** was a general name for a variety of poisonous snakes common to Palestine and the Mediterranean area. A deadly viper bit Paul on the hand as he gathered firewood on the island of Malta after a shipwreck, and the native islanders were amazed that he did not "swell up or suddenly fall down dead" (Acts 28:3, 6).

Vipers not only are deadly but deceptive. Because most of them blend into surrounding rocks or sticks, they can often attack their victims with total surprise, as the one on Malta did Paul. The mother viper normally lays a large number of eggs, and when they hatch the **brood** of little potential killers scurry around like insects.

The Pharisees were the epitome of religious and moral corruption and danger. Like a **brood of vipers**, they traveled from place to place, usually in groups, teaching and promoting their man-made traditions. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites," Jesus later said to them, "because you travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves" (Matt. 23:15). Their unbiblical, legalistic traditions poisoned the minds of fellow Jews against the pure and redeeming truth of God's Word, and their hypocritical self-righteousness led countless others into that same evil attitude. When someone reached into the woodpile of religion, thinking to pick up a stick of truth, he could be bitten to death by those soul-damning liars.

How can you, Jesus continued, being evil, speak what is good? "In light of your **being evil** by nature, how could anything but blasphemy and other ungodliness be expected of you? How could you possibly **speak what is good?**" **Being evil** expresses the depravity of the natural human

heart, which can *produce* only evil because it *is* only **evil**. That is the legacy of fallen man because of Adam's sin. As Paul explained to the Roman church, "Both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, There is none righteous, not even one; . . . there is none who does good, there is not even one,' . . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:9-10, 12, 23). He explained to the Ephesians that every person is "dead in [his] trespasses and sin" until he trusts in Jesus Christ for salvation (Eph. 2:1).

The Old Testament also clearly chronicles the evil heart of man. From the time of Adam's sin mankind was henceforth characterized by hatred, corruption, murder, lying, and every other form of wickedness. David knew that he inherited a sin nature the moment he was conceived (Ps. 51:5), and Jeremiah declared that the human "heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick" (Jer. 17:9).

THE PRINCIPLE

For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil. (12:34b-35)

Here is one of the most basic principles of Scripture regarding man: **the mouth speaks** what is in **the heart**. What a person is on the inside, his mouth will give evidence of on the outside. In fact, James says that one who did not sin with his mouth would be "a perfect man" (James 3:2). The most immediate illustration of that principle showed that it was the evil hearts of the Pharisees that made them blaspheme the Holy Spirit by accusing Jesus of casting out demons by Satan's power. They spoke evil because their hearts were filled with evil, and by their own words they condemned themselves as they sought to condemn Jesus.

In Scripture **the heart** represents the seat of thought and will, rather than the seat of emotions (represented by the bowels, or stomach area, as indicated in the KJV renderings of Song of Sol. 5:4; Jer. 31:20; Phil. 1:8; 2:1; Col. 3:12; Philem. 7, 12, 20; and 1 John 3:17). **The heart**

represents the character of a person, and therefore to say that words reveal what the heart is like is to say they reveal what the person is like. When it **speaks**, the **mouth** simply reproduces verbally what is in **the heart**. Using the same figure, Jesus explained on a later occasion that “the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders” (Matt. 15:18-19).

That which fills translates the Greek noun *perisseuma*, which means great abundance, fullness, or overflow. It carries the idea of excess, which, in the terms of Jesus’ figure, spills over from the heart and out of the mouth in the form of words. What the heart is full of, will overflow from the mouth.

The person who harbors ill will against someone will eventually express those feelings. The person who is filled with lustful thoughts will eventually express those thoughts in crude or suggestive remarks. The person who is persistently angry and hateful will sooner or later put those feelings into words. In the same way, the person who is genuinely loving, kind, and considerate cannot help expressing those feelings in words as well as actions.

After Elihu waited long and impatiently for three older friends to convince Job of his sin, he could hold back no longer. He had to say what was on his heart. “For I am full of words,” he said; “the spirit within me constrains me. Behold, my belly is like unvented wine, like new wineskins it is about to burst. Let me speak that I may get relief; let me open my lips and answer” (Job 32:18-20).

What the heart, or the mind, dwells on and feeds on is what it is full of; and **that which fills the heart** it is that which **the mouth** inevitably **speaks**. A person may carefully monitor his words most of the time, but the pressure of evil thoughts, anger, stress, pain, or the association with vulgar friends will sometimes force his real thoughts and attitudes to the surface in the form of words.

James understood that principle and gave several powerful warnings about the tongue. “If anyone thinks himself to be religious,” he said, “and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless” (James 1:26). Later in the same letter he said, “But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison” (3:8). In summing up his description of men’s depraved nature,

Paul said, “Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness” (Rom. 3:13-14). The mouth is the ultimate expression of the heart. As the writer of Proverbs declared, “For as [a person] thinks within himself, so he is” (23:7).

Expanding on the principle He has just stated, Jesus then gives the positive and the negative aspects of it. **The good man out of his good treasure brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil.**

Treasure is from *thēsauros*, which means storehouse or treasury and is the term from which we get the English *thesaurus*, a treasury of words. A person’s heart is the treasury of his thoughts, ambitions, desires, loves, attitudes, and loyalties. It is the reservoir from which the mouth draws its expressions. It is axiomatic that a **good treasure brings forth what is good** and an **evil treasure brings forth what is evil**. “Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?” James asked (James 3:11).

A common expression in the computer world is GIGO, which stands for “Garbage in, garbage out.” In other words, the quality of data entered determines the quality of the results produced from that data. In exactly the same way, the quality of what is in a person’s heart determines the quality of speech his mouth produces.

THE PUNISHMENT

And I say to you, that every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you shall be justified, and by your words you shall be condemned.
(12:36-37)

Because men’s words are an accurate gauge of their hearts, **they shall render account for their words in the day of judgment**. It is by his **words** that a person is either **justified** or **condemned**. Salvation and condemnation are not produced by words or deeds, but they are manifested

by them. Words and deeds are objective, observable evidence of a person's spiritual condition. **In the day of judgment**, that future general time when the Lord evaluates who belongs in and out of His eternal kingdom, the criteria will include the speech of every person.

The consistent teaching of both Old and New Testaments is that the only way of salvation is by God's grace working through man's faith. Jesus' point is not that words are the *basis* of salvation or condemnation but that they are reliable evidence of the reality of salvation. The speech of a redeemed person will be different, because it comes from his renewed heart. Pure, wholesome, praising speech shows a new heart.

We are not saved *by* good works, but we are saved *for* "good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). In the same way, we are saved for good **words**. "With the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation" (Rom. 10:10), which, in turn, results in "obedience... by word and deed" (15:18). Salvation will produce good words, and it is for that reason and in that sense that **words** bring justification or condemnation.

The ungodly will be eternally condemned for their speech. Apart from what they did, what they said is enough evidence of their unregenerate heart to send them to hell. Jesus does not limit this warning to extremes such as blasphemy, but makes explicit that men will **render account for every careless word that they speak**—whether or not it is immoral, vulgar, cruel, or blasphemous. They will have to **render account** even for words that are **careless**.

The basic meaning of *argos* (**careless**) is useless, barren, unproductive, or otherwise worthless. Such words include those that are flippant, irresponsible, or in any way inappropriate. Hypocritical words are among the most **careless** and worthless that men speak and are, unfortunately, among the most common. When men self-consciously keep their vocabulary orthodox, moral, and evangelically acceptable while among fellow Christians—for the sake of impressing them or to keep from embarrassing ourselves—those words are **careless** and worthless in God's sight, and He will **render** them against their **account**. The calculated hypocrisy of such "holy talk" is a stench in His nostrils.

The Christian's speech will reflect God's transforming work in the heart; but because of our unredeemed humanness, it still needs constant

care if it is to be increasingly spiritual, wholesome, fitting, kind, sensitive, loving, purposeful, edifying, and truthful. With the Psalmist he should pray, “Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips” (Ps. 141:3).

But for the unbeliever, *all* the words of his unredeemed heart are worthless as far as spiritual value is concerned. His evil words are obviously worthless. Among the most common evil words are those that express lust (Prov. 5:3-4); *deceit* (Jer. 9:8); *cursing* and *oppression* (Ps. 10:7); *lying* (Prov. 6:12; 12:22); *destruction* (Prov. 11:11); *vanity* (2 Pet. 2:18); *flattery* (Prov. 26:28); *foolishness* (Prov. 15:2); *verbosity* (Eccles. 10:14); *falsehood* (Titus 1:11); *pride* (Job 35:12); *vulgarity* (Col. 3:8); *hatred* (Ps. 109:3); and *gossip* (Prov. 26:20).

For the unbeliever, **careless** and worthless words also include those that are otherwise good. Although his words of love, encouragement, comfort, and kindness may be sincere and greatly helpful to others, they are of no spiritual value to him because they do not come from a redeemed and righteous heart. No spiritually good thing can come from a heart that is spiritually evil—as Jesus has just pointed out.

A person can get a good indication of his spiritual condition by listening to his own words. A Christian can fall into evil words just as he can fall into evil deeds, but his customary speaking will be pure just as his customary activities will be righteous.

Although this passage has application to both the saved and the unsaved—to the “good man” and the “evil man”—Jesus’ thrust here is directed to unbelievers, represented in the extreme by the blaspheming Pharisees.

The day of judgment for unbelievers culminates at the great white throne judgment, the ultimate and eternal judgment at which all unbelievers **shall be condemned**. Christians’ sins will have all been dealt with at Calvary, dismissed by the atoning blood of Christ applied on behalf of their faith. Every Christian has sinned with his tongue after salvation, but Christ’s sacrifice is sufficient to cover that and every other sin he commits. The evil words and deeds of unbelievers, however, will remain to stand in evidence against them. Like the unfaithful slave in Jesus’ parable, unbelievers will be judged by their own words (Luke 19:22).

In his vision of the great white throne judgment John saw “the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened;

and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.... And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:12,15). When the record books are scanned, no good deeds will be listed by the names of unbelievers; and when the book of life is scanned, not even their names will appear. The books that report deeds and the book that reports faith will alike testify against them.

Scientists theorize that sound waves are never completely lost but gradually fade beyond detection. With sufficiently sensitive instruments, every word ever spoken in the history of mankind presumably could be retrieved. How much more certain can we be that in God's infallible records every word and deed of mankind is perfectly preserved for use as evidence in the coming judgment!

Judgment on Christ

Rejecters (12:38-42)

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him, saying, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.” But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South shall rise up with this generation at the judgment and shall condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. (12:38-42)

Man’s natural sinfulness and lostness are not always apparent. Many outwardly religious, moral, and decent people say they believe in God and are kind and helpful to others. Even completely irreligious people sometimes live law-abiding lives and behave as good neighbors. Sometimes the kindly attitude and good works of unbelievers even put the behavior of some Christians to shame. From the human perspective it can be difficult to see how such people could be inherently sinful and alienated from God. Many of them speak well of God, have high behavioral standards, are loving husbands and wives, caring parents, fair employers or employees, good citizens, and faithful friends. They may even go to church regularly, give generously to its support, serve on its boards and committees, and teach in Sunday school. How, it is often asked, could such obviously “good” people be spiritually depraved and lost?

Although truly righteous people will manifest the godly evidence of that righteousness, some people appear to be righteous who are not, because man's basic sinfulness is not most fully revealed by what he does or says—despite the importance of those evidences, as Jesus has just made clear (vv. 33-37). Sin is most clearly and indisputably manifested by how a person responds to Jesus Christ. No matter what a person's outward life is like, his innate spiritual nature and his true attitude toward God are seen with absolute certainty in his attitude toward Jesus Christ. The person who rejects Christ is dead spiritually and an enemy of God, no matter what religious profession he may make or how morally and selflessly he may appear to live. The issue of sin becomes perfectly focused when a person confronts Christ, and the crux of damning sin is rejection of Him. Men are convicted of "sin because they do not believe in Me," Jesus said (John 16:9).

When Jesus met with His disciples in the Upper Room to celebrate the last Passover meal with them, Israel's unbelief and rejection had reached their climax. Plans for Jesus' death were already set in motion; and that was the night of His betrayal, arrest, and mock trials that led to His crucifixion.

As Jesus spoke to the disciples on that occasion, He revealed many deep insights into His divine plan and gave wonderful promises of encouragement and strength for the time after He was gone. In addition to such positive and appealing promises as the Holy Spirit's being with them to teach and empower, He gave the less appealing but just as certain promise that the world would hate them just as it hated Him. "Remember the word that I said to you," He said; "A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also" (John 15:20). Then He gave the reason behind the persecution: "But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. He who hates Me hates My Father also. If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well" (vv. 21-24).

Jesus' words on that occasion applied to everyone who had seen and rejected Him, but they applied with direct force to the Jewish religious

leaders, those who represented the nation of Israel, God's specially chosen, blessed, and enlightened people. On the surface, those leaders appeared to be righteous men of God, dedicated to His service and to His Word. They wore their religion on their sleeves for all men to see as a supposed testimony to their devotion to God. But when Jesus confronted them, their masks of godliness were ripped off and their real spiritual condition and their devotion to self were laid bare. Despite religious and moral pretensions, their hatred and rejection of Jesus proved their hatred and rejection of God. Both spiritually and morally they were "whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matt. 23:27-28). They were a brood of spiritual vipers (12:34).

Had Jesus not come into their midst and declared to them God's truth and demonstrated God's power, their true evil natures would not have surfaced so dramatically. But Jesus left them no out as He confronted them with truth and righteousness incarnate. To reject Him is to reject truth, and to despise Him is to despise righteousness. To hate Jesus is to hate God; to hate the Son is to hate the Father (John 15:23).

A person may successfully hide his sin for a long time (cf. 1 Tim. 5:24), but when he rejects Jesus Christ, he reveals his true corrupt nature. No matter how good his life appears to be on the surface, and no matter what reasons or rationalizations may be given, the person who refuses to accept the lordship and saviorhood of Christ proves himself to be the most damnable of sinners and in the most literal and absolute sense a hater of God.

Until the present point in Jesus' ministry, the scribes and Pharisees had generally managed to keep a facade of tolerance regarding Jesus. Because of His popularity and obvious supernatural power, they had kept their opposition largely to themselves. Much of their thinking and planning would be lost to us were it not that Jesus read their minds and openly exposed their wicked schemes. He continually pulled away their masks of false piety and refused to let them hide their evil character. It is for that perhaps more than for anything else that they hated him so intensely.

The attitude of the scribes and Pharisees is generally characteristic of any person who maintains an appearance of godliness but who does not

have saving trust in Jesus Christ. It is especially true of members of denominations, cults, or other religious groups who purport to be followers of Christ. They have a false and distorted view of Jesus, just as the scribes and Pharisees had a false and distorted view of the Messiah. They may verbally praise God, honor Jesus, extol Scripture, and often hold high standards of morality—but when they are confronted with Jesus' own claims of unique divine sonship and unique sacrifice for sin, they cannot hide their rejection of the true gospel and the true God. Like the scribes and Pharisees, they are deeply offended at the suggestion that their religion and their works, not to mention their hearts, are not acceptable to God and that they can be made right with Him only through humble and obedient trust in His Son to remove their sin. Their refusal to accept Christ as He declared Himself to be proves their rejection of God, because God's only true and perfect revelation of Himself is through the Son. They do not love God, but hate and despise Him, because they hate and despise the Son and the way of salvation He provides.

By the time the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus to show them a special sign, their opposition to Him had already hardened into implacable hatred. Even before Jesus accused them of blaspheming the Holy Spirit and of thereby eternally forfeiting God's forgiveness, they had been planning "how they might destroy Him" (12:14). He then told them they were corrupt trees bearing corrupt fruit, were a brood of spiritual vipers, and that the evil of their words proved the evil of their hearts, for which they faced God's condemnation (vv. 33-37). Jesus had castigated them as strongly and unequivocally as was possible.

The more the Jewish leaders verbally attacked Jesus and sought to entrap Him, the more He exposed the foolishness, insensitivity, and ungodliness of their traditions and attitudes. They had failed to show that He had broken any scriptural commandment, that He had profaned the Sabbath, or that He cast out demons by the power of Satan. Because of their repeated embarrassment in failing to prove Jesus was either teaching or doing anything unscriptural, the Pharisees were concerned about losing their reputation with the people. They wanted to be sure the next attempt to discredit Him would succeed, and they believed that demanding a special sign from Him would be certain to prove that He was an imposter and deceiver and would save their own reputations.

THE LAST SIGN

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him, saying, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.” But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (12:38-40)

Some of the scribes and Pharisees probably refers to a special committee delegated to present this final challenge to Jesus. **Scribes** had to be at least thirty years old and had to have spent many years in intensive study of the Hebrew scriptures, especially the Torah, or law, and of the rabbinic traditions as set forth in the Talmud. They were known as the supreme interpreters and teachers of the law (see Matt. 22:35; Luke 10:25). Although some **scribes** belonged to the party of the Sadducees, most of them were **Pharisees**, which explains their frequently being mentioned together in the gospels. They were the authorized interpretive scholars and lawyers of Judaism and were generally held in great honor.

That they **answered** Jesus’ scathing accusations by asking Him a seemingly forthright and nondefensive question indicates they were biting their tongues, as it were, determined to give the impression of civility and patience until the appropriate moment to condemn Him.

THE CHALLENGE

“Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.” (12:38b)

That group of scholars and religious leaders considered no person outside their own ranks to be qualified to teach them the least truth about Jewish law and tradition. Their addressing Jesus as **Teacher** was therefore both sarcastic and hypocritical. It was sarcastic in that they considered

Jesus to be a heretic and blasphemer, and it was their intention here, as on previous occasions, to expose Him as *a false* teacher. It was hypocritical in that they used the title to show mock respect for Him in front of the crowd and possibly to try to put Him off guard by flattery.

The request **we want to see a sign from You** amounted to an official demand for Jesus to prove Himself to be the Messiah. For the sake of the people, the question was posed in a seemingly courteous and respectful form, but its purpose was to prove that Jesus was *not* the Messiah but a blasphemous imposter. Because the scribes and Pharisees were the uncontested experts on the law, the people would expect them to know how to properly test the claims of anyone who posed as the Messiah. The implication of the question was that, if Jesus truly was the Messiah, He would have no trouble performing an appropriate **sign** to validate His identity.

The kind of **sign** they wanted is not specified, but it must have been an absolutely extraordinary one and of perhaps worldwide magnitude—such as causing the sun to stand still or a constellation to change its configuration or the moon to race across the sky. Jesus had already performed thousands of public miracles of healing, casting out demons, and raising the dead. The additional **sign** now demanded was therefore obviously meant to be on an even grander scale.

From a parallel passage in Matthew 16 we learn that “the Pharisees and Sadducees came up, and testing Him asked Him to show them a sign from heaven” (v. 1). “A sign from heaven” would be a vast and spectacular sign, one that came from heaven and perhaps could be seen in the heavens, such as those just mentioned relating to the sun, moon, and stars.

In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul noted the commonly known fact that “Jews ask for signs” (1:22). Although the great majority of the Old Testament prophets did not perform miracles or confirm their God-given messages by anything but the truth of what they said, the Jews had come to expect miraculous signs to accompany *every* true prophet or great man of God, especially the Messiah.

According to fallacious Jewish tradition, a certain Rabbi Eliezar was challenged in regard to the authority of his teaching. To prove his genuineness, he is said to have made a locust tree move 300 cubits and a stream of water flow backwards. When he caused the wall of a building to lean forward, it was returned upright only by the bidding of another rabbi.

Finally Eliezar exclaimed, “If the law is as I teach, let it be proved from heaven.” At that moment, the story goes, a voice came out of the sky saying, “What have you to do with Rabbi Eliezar? The instruction is as he teaches.”

No doubt **the scribes and Pharisees** wanted just such a celestial **sign** from Jesus—a spectacular, sensational demonstration of supernatural power. They perhaps expected Him to fulfill Joel’s prophecy of turning the moon into blood (Joel 2:31) or to paint the sky a rainbow of colors with a wave of His hand. Or perhaps He would cause a great procession of angels to descend a heavenly stairway into the Temple, heralding Him with anthems of praise as they came.

It is not that the Jewish leaders expected Jesus to perform any such **sign**, because their very purpose was to prove He could *not* do such a thing and thereby to discredit Him in the eyes of the people. Although no Old Testament prophecy predicted that the Messiah would perform a **sign** of the type they demanded, the leaders gave the impression to the people that such was the case.

THE REPLY

But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (12:39-40)

Jesus responded to the hypocritical challenge by first declaring that the very *request for a sign* reflected the wicked expectations of **an evil and adulterous generation**. The scribes and Pharisees represented the nation of Israel, which had wandered far from God’s Word and fellowship and which had become enmeshed in the superficial, self-righteous, and legalistic religion those leaders epitomized.

The unbelieving Jews were not only physically and mentally but spiritually **adulterous** because they had breached the vows of their unique covenant relationship with God, a relationship the Old Testament

frequently speaks of in terms of marriage (see Ps. 73:27; Isa. 50:1; Jer. 3:6-10; 13:27; Hos. 9:1). Their idolatry, immorality, unbiblical traditions, and hardness of heart marked them as **an evil** people. During the Babylonian captivity Jews had forsaken formal idolatry, in the sense of worshiping physical objects carved from wood, stone, or metal. But in its place they erected idols of man-made tradition in which they trusted and put their hope. They had abandoned the Canaanite gods for ones of their own making and in doing so were just as much in rebellion against the true God as when they offered sacrifices to Baal or Molech.

A Jew who faithfully served God under the covenant given to Moses would accept His Son when He came, because anyone rightly related to the Father could not fail to recognize the Son—just as did the godly Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25-38), John the Baptist (Matt. 3:14), and the twelve disciples, except Judas (4:20-22; Mark 3:13; Luke 5:27-28; John 1:41, 49). Because they knew the Father, they knew the Son and did not need **a sign** to verify His identity.

Consequently, Jesus continued, **no such sign shall be given**. It was not possible for Jesus to perform a miracle of the sort the scribes and Pharisees wanted—not because He did not have the power to do it, but because it was utterly contrary to God’s nature and plan. Jesus could easily have performed it from the standpoint of His omnipotence, but not from the standpoint of His moral nature—because God is not in the business of bending Himself to satisfy the whims of evil people who have no relationship to Him.

On the other hand, He said, another kind of sign *would* be given: **the sign of Jonah the prophet**. When Jonah refused to obey God’s call to preach to Nineveh and fled to Tarshish on a ship, the Lord sent a great storm and Jonah was thrown into the sea to save the rest of the men on board. God then caused him to be swallowed by “a great fish,” or **sea monster**, in whose stomach he remained unharmed for three days and nights (Jonah 1:17).

And **just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster**, Jesus said, **so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth**.

The Old Testament contains two kinds of prophecy regarding Christ. One is what may be called the verbally predictive, in which specific and sometimes detailed predictions are given. Such prophecies

include those that the Christ would be born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14), that He would be a descendant of David who would rule the entire earth with justice and righteousness (Jer. 23:5), and that He would be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2).

The second type of messianic prophecy is typical, in which an Old Testament person or event foreshadowed the person or work of Christ. We can be certain of typical predictions only if they are specifically identified as such in the New Testament. Here Jesus Himself tells us that **Jonah's** spending **three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster** before he was vomited up on the shore typified the burial of **the Son of Man**, for **three days and three nights in the heart of the earth** before His resurrection. It was a predictive prophecy in picture rather than in specific word. Just as Jonah was buried in the depths of the sea, Jesus was buried in the depths of the earth; and just as Jonah came out of the great fish after three days, Jesus came out of the grave after three days.

Jesus obviously believed in the full literalness of the biblical account of Jonah. If Jonah had not been literally swallowed and miraculously protected while submerged for **three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster**, that event could not have typified Jesus' literal burial and resurrection. In light of Jonah's hardhearted stubbornness, it is not difficult to believe that he would lie about his experience; but it is difficult indeed to believe that Jesus would join Jonah in such duplicity or be mistaken about the historicity of the story. In declaring Jonah's experience to be a type of His own burial and resurrection, Jesus also verified the authenticity of Jonah's account of himself.

The matter of **three days and three nights** is often used either to prove Jesus was mistaken about the time He would actually spend in the tomb or that He could not have been crucified on Friday afternoon and raised early on Sunday, the first day of the week. But as in modern usage, the phrase "day and night" can mean not only a full 24-hour day but any representative part of a day. To spend a day, or a day and night, visiting in a neighboring city does not require spending 24 hours there. It could refer to arriving in the late morning and leaving a few hours after dark. In the same way, Jesus' use of **three days and three nights** does not have to be interpreted as 72 hours, three full 24-hour days. The Jewish Talmud held

that “any part of a day is as the whole.” Jesus was simply using a common, well-understood generalization.

Jesus’ resurrection after three days was not the kind of **sign** the unbelieving religious leaders expected and demanded, but it was infinitely more miraculous and wonderful. It was the final sign Jesus directly gave to the world of His messianic credentials and saving power. In His glorified body He appeared miraculously to His disciples on numerous occasions after the resurrection and then dramatically ascended before their eyes into heaven. He also continued to work miracles through the apostles as verification of their unique authority in His behalf. But the resurrection was the last sign given *to the world* that involved Jesus directly. His own resurrection, Jesus told the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees, would be the only **sign** from heaven they would receive.

But the Jewish leaders, and most of the Jewish people, did not believe *that sign* either. Because they did not “listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither [would] they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31). The Jewish leaders not only rejected the truth of Jesus’ resurrection but paid the soldiers who guarded the tomb to spread the false story that His disciples had stolen His body to create the illusion of a resurrection (Matt. 28:11-15).

When a person is confronted with the living Christ and with His atoning death and resurrection, the matter of that person’s eternal destiny is determined. To turn your back on Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for your sins is to show yourself to be the vilest of sinners, no matter how superficially religious and moral you might otherwise be.

THE LAST SENTENCE

The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South shall rise up with this generation at the judgment and shall condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. (12:41-42)

Continuing with His illustration from the life of Jonah, Jesus contrasts the response of the pagan Ninevites to Jonah's message with the response of the Jewish leaders to His. In one of His most scathing denunciations, the Lord tells the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees, those who thought they were the best of God's favored people, that **the men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah.**

Despite Jonah's reluctance to preach God's message to the wicked, corrupt, idolatrous Assyrians of Nineveh, when the prophet finally began to preach, God effected an unprecedented awakening. "Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat on the ashes" (Jonah 3:5-6). Covering oneself with sackcloth and sitting in ashes was an oriental way of showing genuine repentance and sorrow for wrongdoing. Because of their sincere repentance and belief, "God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it" (v. 10).

The men of Nineveh not only were Gentiles, and therefore apart from God's covenant and law, but they were especially wicked and brutal, even by pagan standards. They had no previous knowledge of the true God or of His will, yet their repentance of sin and their belief in God brought them spiritual salvation and spared them physical destruction. Jonah did not preach a message of hope but of judgment: "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). The prophet despised the Ninevites and preached to them only under the Lord's compulsion. He performed no miracles and gave no promise of deliverance, but on the basis of that brief, direct, and confrontative message of doom from a loveless prophet, the people of Nineveh threw themselves on God's mercy and were saved.

Israel, on the other hand, was the chosen covenant people of God, privileged to have been given His law, His promises, His leading, His protection, and His special blessings in ways too numerous to list. Yet her people would not repent and turn from their sin even when God's own Son, **something greater than Jonah**, preached to them in gentle humility and gracious love, performed thousands of miracles as attesting signs of His

divine authority, and offered God's gracious forgiveness and eternal life with Him in heaven. God's own chosen and uniquely blessed people turned their backs on Him—and for that they would stand under the condemnation of former pagans at **the judgment**.

Not only that, Jesus continued, but **the Queen of the South shall rise up with this generation at the judgment and shall condemn it**. The Queen of ancient Sheba, the country of the Sabeans, was often called **the Queen of the South**, because her country was in lower Arabia, some 1,200 miles to the southeast of Israel. The Sabeans were an extremely prosperous people, having earned their wealth from highly productive agriculture and from the lucrative Mediterranean to India trade routes that passed through their land. Yet the wealthy and prominent **Queen of the South**—who was a Gentile, a woman, a pagan, and an Arab—came to visit Solomon, the king of Israel, to learn God's wisdom from him and to pay him homage (1 Kings 10:1-13).

To the people of ancient Palestine, the land **of the South** seemed to be at **the ends of the earth**. Joel referred to it as “a distant nation” (Joel 3:8), and Jeremiah spoke of it as “a distant land” (Jer. 6:20). Yet **the Queen** and her large entourage made the long and arduous trip across the Arabian desert **to hear the wisdom of Solomon**, a man of God. She brought treasure upon treasure to the king, who was already wealthy beyond description, as a testimony of honor and gratitude for the godly **wisdom** he taught.

Again Jesus makes a comparison to the rebellious Jews who rejected Him. “That pagan woman,” He said, in effect, “brought great treasures to Solomon and sat at his feet to glean **wisdom** from his lips. Yet **behold**, when **I, something greater than Solomon**, came **here** to you, preaching not only wisdom but salvation from sin and the way of eternal life, you refused to come. Therefore, that pagan **Queen** will **rise up with this generation at the judgment and shall condemn it**. That Gentile woman, with no advantage and no invitation, came on her own initiative to learn God's truth from Solomon. But you Jews of **this generation**—who have had countless centuries of divine advantage and blessing and who have the invitation of God's own Son to come to Him and be saved—have rejected the Son and thereby rejected forgiveness and eternal life. One day you will stand condemned even by the faith of Gentiles.”

Reformation Versus Relationship (12:43-50)

Now when the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places, seeking rest, and does not find it. Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came’; and when it comes, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and put in order. Then it goes, and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state that man becomes worse than the first. That is the way it will also be with this evil generation.

While He was still speaking to the multitudes, behold, His mother and brothers were standing outside, seeking to speak to Him. And someone said to Him, ‘Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside seeking to speak to You.’ But He answered the one who was telling Him and said, ‘Who is My mother and who are My brothers?’ And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, ‘Behold, My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.’”
(12:43-50)

In recent years there has been a great resurgence of interest in morality and ethics, of returning this nation to the religious and moral standards of its founding fathers. Many denominations, cults, and special interest groups have become highly visible and vocal in their national, and sometimes international, efforts to promote or oppose certain customs, laws, or practices—ranging from civil rights and capital punishment to abortion and divorce.

Some evangelicals have become active in preaching morality, patriotism, and loyalty to traditional American values. Much effort is spent trying to influence legislators and political leaders to assist in

returning America to its former standards of more biblical behavior and integrity.

Christians cannot but be concerned about moral and ethical issues, because God's Word is unequivocal and unmatched in its standards of righteous living, justice, and social responsibility. But Scripture also makes clear that morality by itself, without a right relationship to God, is in many ways more dangerous than immorality. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repeatedly emphasizes that mere outward righteousness is one of the greatest hindrances to the gospel.

The Pharisees were classic moralists. No other Jews, and certainly no Gentiles, were committed to such rigid standards of religion, morality, ethics, and daily living. They lived by a complex and demanding code, a system of laws that regulated virtually every aspect of life. But those man-made standards, purportedly based on God's Word, had led them further and further from God. They were so self-sufficient and self-righteous that when God Himself came among them in human form they rejected, vilified, and finally crucified Him. They had so thoroughly convinced themselves of their righteousness that when the very Source of righteousness stood in their midst they accused Him of being in league with Satan. Under the illusion of their own goodness they became unreachable with the saving message of the gospel. When Jesus came preaching deliverance from sin, they were not interested, because they could not imagine such a message having relevance for them. And when Jesus declared that their self-righteousness was, in fact, the most insidious form of unrighteousness (Matt. 5:20), they were infuriated.

Jesus had little trouble reaching prostitutes, thieves, extortioners, murderers, and the outcasts of society. But He had an almost impossible time reaching religious and moral people who were under the delusion that outward propriety made them acceptable to God. Because they refused to recognize their sin, they recognized no need for a Savior. Their strict standards of morality gave an illusion of safety and prevented them from seeing that trust in themselves was their greatest spiritual danger and a massive barrier between them and God.

In His series of woes against the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23, Jesus repeatedly called them hypocrites and charged them with possessing only spurious righteousness.

For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. . . . For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. . . . For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, "If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets." Consequently you bear witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up then the measure of the guilt of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell. (Matt. 23:25-32)

There has never been a group of men more committed to a demanding religious and moral code than the Pharisees and never a group of men so far from God.

By itself, morality leads to self-righteousness and is a damning thing. A person is better off being grossly immoral and recognizing his need than being highly moral and admitting no need. There is nothing God can do for the person who, like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, prays confidently, "God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get" (Luke 18:11-12). In his own eyes he is already right with God and needs nothing from God (cf. Matt. 19:20). But God can do a great deal for the person who, like the tax-gatherer in that same parable, cries out, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" He is the person who goes "down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts

himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted” (vv. 13b-14).

Matthew 12:43-50 presents another of Jesus’ many warnings to the people not to listen to or follow the example of their moralistic but ungodly religious leaders but to come to Him. Their need was not for the outer reformation offered by the scribes and Pharisees but the inner transformation that could be theirs only as they gained a right relationship to God the Father by trusting in His Son for salvation from sin.

THE DANGER OF REFORMATION

Now when the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places, seeking rest, and does not find it. Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came’; and when it comes, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and put in order. Then it goes, and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. That is the way it will also be with this evil generation. (12:43-45)

In this parable Jesus vividly and frighteningly pictures the consequence of religious and moral reformation apart from a right relationship to Him. Morality apart from the living Christ can never be more than a sham, and the more it is relied on the more dangerous it becomes.

The main character in this illustration is an **unclean spirit**, whose specific evil characteristics are not identified. He is a demon, a fallen angel and a member of Satan’s host of supernatural, evil coworkers. **Unclean** represents the wicked, vile nature of all demon spirits; but this particular **spirit** was not as evil as he could have been, because, as we learn later in the parable, he had demon friends who were worse than himself.

We are not told by what means this **unclean spirit** went **out of a man**. It may be that the **man** made a moral decision to forsake the sin in which this demon had entrapped him and that the demon no longer had

control over the **man**. It may be that the man had been cleansed of the demon but, just as many people whom Jesus cleansed and healed, did not trust in Him for salvation. For whatever reason or by whatever means, the **man** was temporarily freed from the demon's presence and influence.

After he left the man, this demon passed **through waterless places, seeking rest, and [did] not find it**. Being spirits, demons do not need food and water as human beings do, and therefore **waterless places** here figuratively represents desolation, barrenness, and extreme discomfort. In its own corrupt way the demon was **seeking rest**, some place of greater satisfaction. From this and many other passages in the New Testament, it seems evident that demons prefer to indwell bodily creatures, preferably human beings but secondarily even animals (see Matt. 8:31), rather than exist as unattached beings in Satan's evil realm. Perhaps this particular demon was restless because it could not express its evil nature through inanimate, lifeless things. It was most at home in a human being, because it is through human beings that Satan and his demons can most successfully work their evil and oppose God.

When it could find no other satisfactory place to dwell, the demon decided to go back to its former residence: **I will return to my house from which I came**. Whether the spirit was simply being presumptuous or whether it had some continuing access to and control over the man's life, its reference to **my house** indicates a strong sense of ownership and possessiveness. And the fact that it was able to regain entrance so easily proves the boast was not vain. When it returned and found its former **house was unoccupied, swept, and put in order**, the first spirit took **along . . . seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they [went] in and [lived] there**.

That the man's **house was unoccupied** (that is, by another demon), **swept, and put in order** suggests that a genuine moral reformation had taken place. Whether by the power of his own will or by the cleansing of God, he was temporarily free of that sin and its related demon and from any other.

Through fear of imprisonment, disease, social stigma, financial ruin, and many other such motivations, a person can manage to rid himself of certain sinful habits. Sometimes the motive is more positive and the person determines to change because of love for wife, husband, or

children. But such self-cleansing—no matter how thorough and extensive and no matter what the motivation—is never permanent. Even if the cleansing is by the Lord, it is not permanent if not accompanied by saving faith in Him. Surely many of the people whom Jesus cleansed of demons died and joined those demons in hell, because they did not also accept the Lord’s forgiveness and offer of salvation. The vast majority of those to whom Jesus ministered accepted only temporary healing from disease and temporary relief from demonic control. They surrendered the symptoms and consequences of sin to Him, but not sin itself. Of the ten lepers Jesus cleansed on one occasion, only one received the true wholeness of salvation (Luke 17:11-19).

When the basic sin nature is not dealt with through the miracle of repentance and trust in Christ, the removal of a particular sin or even a demon leaves a person’s spiritual **house . . . unoccupied, swept, and put in order**, but subject to reoccupation by **seven other spirits more wicked than the first. And they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first.**

A religious, self-righteous, reformed person is subject to Satan in a way that a guilt-ridden immoral person is not, because his very morality blinds him to his basic sinful condition and need. He is perfectly satisfied with his empty house, thinking that freedom from outward manifestation of sin is freedom from its presence, power, and damnation.

Katoikeō (to **live**) carries the idea of dwelling and settling down. It is the same verb Paul used as he prayed for the Ephesians, “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Eph. 3:17). Where Christ does not live, demons are free to **live**. Satan’s emissaries can **go in and live** in a reformed but Christless life in a settled and secure way, because in his religious delusion their host may be oblivious to their presence. **The last state of that man becomes worse than the first**, but he does not know it. He is like a leper who rubs off his fingers and toes because he feels no pain. In an infinitely more tragic way, self-righteousness desensitizes a person to sin to the point that he is not aware that his very soul is rotting away under demonic corruption.

One of the worst aspects of religious legalism is that it tends to get progressively more ungodly from generation to generation. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites,” Jesus said, “because you travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you

make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves” (Matt. 23:15). A person who is disciplined into legalism often becomes more zealous and self-righteous than his teacher.

To preach morality, even according to biblical standards of behavior, but not salvation through Christ promotes a religion that drives men further from God than they were before they reformed. It is much easier to reach someone who is overwhelmed with a true sense of His sin than someone who is overwhelmed with a false sense of his righteousness. That is what Jesus meant when He said, “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matt. 9:13). It was not the immoral and irreligious people of Israel who put Jesus to death but the religious leaders who prided themselves in their goodness. Christ could not reach them, because they thought they had no need of any spiritual help, least of all salvation from sin.

Peter says of such persons that “after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, ‘A dog returns to its own vomit,’ and, ‘A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire’” (2 Pet. 2:20-22). The reformed but unconverted person will eventually revert to sinful ways for the same reason that the dog returns to its vomit and the washed sow returns to the mud wallow—because in each case the original nature has not been changed.

Jesus’ parable applied to Israel as a nation, to **this evil generation**, as well as to individual Jews. During the Babylonian Captivity the Jews forsook idolatry, and in the more than two thousand years since then they have never, as a people, fallen back into it. But by the time their Messiah came, they had become so satisfied with their reformation and with their religious ceremonies and moral traditions, that they saw no need for a Savior. Consequently, in the end times, that people will find themselves in league with the antichrist during the Great Tribulation.

Whether in the broad range of history or in an individual life, the same principle applies: outer reformation without inner transformation

brings susceptibility to even worse evil than that from which one turned away.

THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIP

While He was still speaking to the multitudes, behold, His mother and brothers were standing outside, seeking to speak to Him. And someone said to Him, ‘Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside seeking to speak to You.’ But He answered the one who was telling Him and said, ‘Who is My mother and who are My brothers?’ And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, ‘Behold, My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.’” (12:46-50)

Reformation is not salvation, regeneration, or redemption. It may, in fact, work toward the very opposite by entrenching a person in self-satisfaction and blinding him to his need for God’s mercy. In order to have salvation there must be a new and right relationship to God, which comes only as a sinner humbly confesses and turns from his sin and receives Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

The arrival of Jesus’ family gave Him the perfect opportunity to give a graphic illustration of the need for personal relationship to Him. **While He was still speaking to the multitudes** in a house (see 13:1), **His mother and brothers were standing outside, seeking to speak to Him.** When Jesus was informed of this, **He answered the one who was telling Him and said, “Who is My mother and who are My brothers?”**

By this time Joseph had probably been dead for many years, and Jesus’ immediate family consisted of His **mother**, Mary, his half **brothers** (James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas), and His half sisters, who are not named (Matt. 13:55-56).

After the resurrection, Jesus’ **brothers** eventually came to believe in Him, His brother James becoming the head of the Jerusalem church (see Acts 15:13-22) and author of the epistle that bears his name. But during Jesus’ preaching and teaching ministry there is no clear evidence that any

member of His family other than Mary fully understood who He really was or trusted in Him as Savior. We are told specifically that His **brothers** did not believe in Him (John 7:5), and it may be that even His **mother**—despite the revelations to her before and after Jesus’ birth and her magnificent confession at that time (see Luke 1:26-2:38)—did not yet personally trust in Jesus as her own Lord and Savior.

We are not told (cf. Mark 3:31-32; Luke 8:19-20) why Jesus’ **mother and brothers were... seeking to speak to Him**, but it seems reasonable to assume that they were greatly concerned about His welfare and perhaps even feared with some of His home town friends that He had “lost His senses” (Mark 3:21). His condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees continued to grow in intensity and seriousness, and those leaders, in turn, were accusing Him of doing His work by Satan’s power. Their plan to destroy Jesus (Matt. 12:14) was probably already rumored among the people. Jesus’ **mother and brothers** were therefore hoping to dissuade Him from continuing His work and perhaps hoped He would flee to a safe place until the religious leaders forgot about Him or lost interest. His family was on a rescue mission to save Him from imminent death.

For most men such an incident would have been embarrassing in the extreme, but Jesus was neither embarrassed nor resentful. He loved and cared for His family, and He understood their concern, misguided as it was. He did not, in fact, respond directly to the request of His family but rather used the occasion to teach an important truth: **And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, “Behold, My mother and My brothers!”**

Jesus was not renouncing His family. He loved them even more than they loved Him. His last request from the cross was for John to care for His mother (John 19:26-27), and through His gracious love His brothers eventually came to believe in Him as their Lord and Savior (Acts 1:14).

The Lord’s purpose in referring to **His disciples** as His **mother and brothers** was to teach that He invites the entire world into His intimate and divine family. Anyone can enter His spiritual family by trusting in Him, and the family of God is the only family that ultimately matters.

Even being a member of Jesus’ own earthly family did not merit salvation by virtue of that relationship. Jesus’ invitation therefore extended to His natural **mother** and half **brothers**, because they, too,

needed to be saved from sin. Apart from personal faith, they were no more spiritually related to Him than any other human being. “All of those, and only those, who believe in Me are spiritually related to Me,” He was saying. **For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.**

The **whoever** indicates the universality of the invitation. No one who believes is excluded. And, on the other hand, no one who does *not* believe will be included. God’s first and most absolute desire and requirement for mankind is belief in His Son. “This is the work of God,” Jesus said, “that you believe in Him whom He has sent” (John 6:29). Until a person believes in Christ, God cannot give him any spiritual help, and that person cannot give God any spiritual service.

At Jesus’ baptism God declared, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased” (Matt. 3:17), and at the transfiguration He spoke the same words to Peter, James, and John, adding, “Listen to Him” (17:5). God’s supreme will for mankind is for them to be well-pleased with the Son, just as He is—and to trust in Him, listen to Him, follow Him, and obey His Word.

After declaring, “For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost” (Matt. 18:11), Jesus told a parable explaining the Father’s great love for mankind and His desire that they be saved. “What do you think?” He asked rhetorically. “If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? And if it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. Thus it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish” (vv. 12-14). Many years later the apostles echoed that truth. Paul wrote, “God our Savior ... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:3-4), and Peter declared that the Lord does not wish “for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

Being rightly related to Christ, however, requires more than a mere verbal declaration of loyalty. “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus warned; “but he who does the will of My Father who is heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will

declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’” (Matt. 7:21-23). Saving relationship to Jesus Christ comes only from submissively believing in Him and receiving the gift of salvation He offers. “There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

At best, reformation changes only the outside of a person; at worst it becomes a barrier to his being changed on the inside. A right relationship to Christ, however, brings completely new life, both inside and outside. All the rest of Scripture surrounds the central truth that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners—to transform them, not reform them. Until a person claims that truth, no other can be of any benefit.

The great message of the gospel, and therefore of the church, is not a call to morality but a call to deliverance from sin through the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Kingdom and the Gospel—part 1

(13:1-17)

On that day Jesus went out of the house, and was sitting by the sea. And great multitudes gathered to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole multitude was standing on the beach. And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, “Behold, the sower went out to sow; and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. And others fell upon the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. And others fell on the good soil, and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.” And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” And He answered and said to them, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. For whoever has, to him shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, ‘You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; and you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I should heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. For

truly I say to you, that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it; and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. (13:1-17)

There seems to be no end of the books being written today on the mission of the church. From many sources and from almost every possible viewpoint, the church and its task in the world are being studied, scrutinized, analyzed, praised, blamed, exalted, damned, criticized, and shored up. Every sort of program, principle, method, and scheme is being applied to its operation. With high visibility, the church is being discussed everywhere from the back room to the boardroom, from the kitchen to the seminary class, and by pastors, theologians, laymen, and even the people of the world. Yet with all that study and concern, in few times of its history has more of the church been less certain about what it is, what it should be, and what it should do.

Some foundational truths for understanding the mission of the church are found in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel. The Lord of the church reveals the nature of the church and the spiritual characteristics of the period of time often referred to as the church age. In this marvelously prophetic chapter Jesus describes the character of the era between His first and second comings.

By His authoritative teaching and His indisputable miracles our Lord had early in His ministry proved Himself to be Israel's long-awaited Messiah and King. He had pronounced judgment on the nation and on individuals because of their unbelief, and He had offered an invitation into God's kingdom and family to any who would believe in Him.

But because Israel had rejected her King, He would not establish the earthly kingdom. For centuries the Jewish people had awaited their Messiah and Deliverer and the kingdom on earth He would establish. They had longed for the promised times of refreshing and restoration, for the throne of David to once again and forever be established. But when the King came, He did not please them and they rejected Him and His kingdom. That most spiritually blessed and enlightened of all generations of mankind turned its back on its King, the Son of God.

In his commentary on Matthew, Stanley Toussaint says, "Not seeing the Messiahship of Jesus in His words and works, they separated

the fruit from the tree.” None of the people denied Jesus’ miracles, and most of them recognized that He performed them by God’s power. While acknowledging the divine source of Jesus’ miracles, they refused to recognize that He was Himself that divine Source. The scribes and Pharisees who charged Jesus with casting out demons by Satan’s power (12:24) did not represent the majority of the common people. But even those who admired Jesus and were awed by His power would not connect the evidence with what it clearly was—proof of His divinity and messiahship.

The questions that come to the thoughtful reader are, “If Jesus came to offer the kingdom to Israel and to establish and rule it as prophesied in Scripture, and it was rejected, was God’s plan totally frustrated? Did His own predictions fail to come true? What, then, is to be the character of the present time? What is to be the nature of the message and mission of the disciples and of all believers? And throughout this time, what response is to be expected from people?” It is those questions that Jesus addresses in Matthew 13 with a series of eight parables. The underlying truth was that the kingdom in its final fulfillment would be postponed until the time that Israel *would* believe in and receive her King. That time will be at the second coming of Christ, when He will establish His earthly kingdom for a thousand years. God cannot forsake His promise, and in His grace He will send His Son again to offer the kingdom. On that day, the Lord promised, “I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born. . . . And it will come about in that day that living waters will flow out of Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern sea and the other half toward the western sea; it will be in summer as well as in winter. And the Lord will be king over all the earth; in that day the Lord will be the only one, and His name the only one” (Zech. 12:10; 14:8-9).

But Zechariah tells us nothing of what would happen between Israel’s piercing of the Messiah and her subsequent mourning over Him. The prophet does not even hint that such an intermediate period would occur—although it has now lasted for almost 2,000 years. It was a mystery until revealed here and more fully throughout the New Testament.

In the end “all Israel will be saved,” Paul declares; “just as it is written, The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob.’ ‘And this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins” (Rom. 11:26-27). But the day of that fulfilled kingdom had to be postponed, because when the King first “came to His own, . . . those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11).

But an *internal* kingdom was established, because “as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name” (John 1:12). Christ’s external, visible kingdom was postponed, but the internal, spiritual kingdom of His saints was established, and in their hearts the Lord reigns and through their lives and testimony He now expresses His will on earth.

The period between Christ’s first and second comings has been called the parenthesis, the interim, the interregnum, and many other such terms. It is a period that was not revealed in the Old Testament, a period to which Jesus refers as “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (13:11). Those mysteries will be discussed below as that verse is expounded. In the eight parables of chapter 13 and in His explanations of them Jesus describes the interim period, the period that began with His rejection and crucifixion and which has continued until the present time. An understanding of this period was essential for the disciples as they set out to evangelize.

THE PLACE: THE SEASHORE

On that day Jesus went out of the house, and was sitting by the sea. And great multitudes gathered to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole multitude was standing on the beach. (13:1-2)

That day refers to the day on which Jesus’ mother and brothers came looking for Him (12:46-47), probably to persuade Him to stop the preaching and teaching they knew could cost Him His life. On **that day** He had healed many people of various unnamed diseases, explained the true character of the promised Messiah, healed and cleansed the blind and

dumb demoniac, charged the unbelieving Pharisees of committing the unpardonable sin by accusing Him of casting out demons by Satan's power, declared that unbelieving Jews would be condemned by believing Gentiles on the day of judgment, and warned against the deceptive danger of moral reform without spiritual rebirth (12:15-45).

It is also interesting to note that, during His earlier ministry, Jesus seemed to spend more time inside, in houses and synagogues. As His ministry progressed, however, and He was more and more rejected by the Jews, He spent more time ministering outdoors—on the seashore and mountainside and in the countryside, highways, and streets.

Although the religious leaders had rejected Him, Jesus remained immensely popular with the common people, and **great multitudes** still **gathered to Him** in fascination to hear Him speak and see Him heal, and some to be healed themselves.

Perhaps pushed by the crowd to the water's edge and seeking to put some distance between the people and Himself in order to address the crowd better, Jesus **got into a boat and sat down, and the whole multitude was standing on the beach.** The fact that He **sat down** in typical rabbinic fashion was necessary because of the moving of the boat in the water; and because the **beach** sloped sharply upward from the water, the people were enabled to see and hear Him best while He was seated in the boat.

THE PLAN: TO SPEAK IN PARABLES

And He spoke many things to them in parables, (13:3a)

On this occasion, and on most future occasions, Jesus **spoke many things to them** [the multitudes, v. 2] **in parables**, and only in parables (v. 34). He did not explain their meaning to the multitudes but only to His disciples (vv. 10-11, 18, 36; Mark 4:34).

Parabolē (**parable**) is a compound word made up of a form of the verb *hallo* (to throw, lay, or place) and the prefix *para* (meaning alongside of). The idea is that of placing, or laying, something alongside of

something else for the purpose of comparison. A spiritual or moral truth would often be expressed by laying it alongside, so to speak, a physical example that could be more easily understood. A common, observable object or practice was used to illustrate a subjective truth or principle. That which was well known was laid alongside that which was not known or understood in order to explain it. The known elucidated the unknown. The parable was a common form of Jewish teaching, and the term is found some 45 times in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament.

In His earlier teaching, Jesus used many graphic analogies to illustrate divine truth. He had spoken of believers as salt and light in the world (Matt. 5:13-16), of their following the example of the birds and lilies in not being anxious about the necessities of life (6:26-30), and of building their lives on the solid rock of God's Word rather than the insecure sand of man's philosophy (7:24-27). Although those and other such figures were embryonic parables, their meaning was clear in the context of Jesus' teaching.

Teaching through **parables** and other figurative means is effective because it helps make abstract truth more concrete, more interesting, easier to remember, and easier to apply to life. When a truth is externalized in the figures of a parable, the internalizing of moral and spiritual meaning is much easier.

In the series of parables in chapter 13, Jesus uses such familiar figures as soil, seed, birds, thorns, rocks, sun, wheat, tares, mustard seed, leaven, hidden treasure, and a pearl. But in these particular **parables** themselves the truth is *not* made clear, because the basic story tells nothing but the literal account, without presenting the moral or spiritual truth. It was only to His disciples that Jesus explained what the soil, the seed, the thorns, and the other figures represent. And an *unexplained* parable was nothing but an impossible riddle, whose meaning could only be guessed at.

THE PARABLE: THE SOWER

saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow; and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. And

others fell upon the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. And others fell on the good soil, and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.” (13:3b-9)

As Jesus told the story of the **sower**, His hearers perhaps could have looked around and seen a man actually sowing seed. In any case, the scene was familiar to them, whether they were farmers or not. A man with his seed bag slung over his shoulder as he **went out to sow** was a common and vivid image. As he walked up and down the furrows of his field, **he sowed** as he went, repeatedly reaching into his bag for a handful of seed to cast on either side.

The various kinds of ground on which the seed could fall in a field were also familiar. When broadcasting seed by hand it was impossible to control accurately where all the seed fell, and **some seeds** were bound to fall **beside the road**. Palestine, especially the highly productive Galilee region, was crisscrossed with fields, and **road** here refers primarily to the narrow paths that separated one field from another. Farmers used the paths to walk between the fields, and travelers walked on them as they went from one part of the country to another. It was along such a **road** through a grainfield that Jesus and His disciples were traveling one Sabbath as they picked grain to eat (Matt. 12:1).

The soil on and **beside the road** would, of course, be unfilled and packed down hard by the walking, which prevented any **seeds** that happened to fall on it from penetrating and taking root. Because those **seeds** were exposed and easily accessible, **the birds came and ate them up** as soon as the farmer got a safe distance down the path. What was not eaten by birds “was trampled under foot” (Luke 8:5). Undoubtedly, birds followed closely after a sower.

The second type of ground on which some of the seeds **fell** Jesus refers to as **the rocky places, where they did not have much soil**. **Rocky** does not refer to loose rocks, because the farmer always removed all

rocks, sticks, and other such objects from his field before planting. It rather refers to underlying beds of solid rock deeper than the plow reached, mostly limestone, which **did not have much soil** covering them. The seeds that fell on such ground **immediately . . . sprang up, because they had no depth of soil**. When the seed began to germinate, its roots could not penetrate the rock that was just below the surface, and the little plant would instead start to **spring up** above ground much faster than it normally would.

For a brief period these plants would look healthier and hardier than those in good soil, because more of them showed above ground and they grew faster. **But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away**. Lack of roots prevented the plants from reaching and absorbing moisture or nourishment. After **the sun had risen** in the morning, the plants that looked so promising **were scorched** and quickly **withered away**.

The third type of ground on which some of the seeds **fell** was infested with **thorns**. After this ground had been cultivated, it looked perfectly good, but when the grain began to sprout, so did the thorns. These tough, thistle-bearing weeds **came up and choked . . . out** the good plants by taking most of the space, moisture, nourishment, and sunlight for themselves.

The fourth type of ground on which some of the seeds **fell** was **good soil**. It was away from the path and was loose and soft. It had sufficient depth to support the good plants and it was free of weeds. Because of those favorable conditions, it **yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty**.

In Palestine during New Testament times, the average ratio of harvested grain seeds to those that were planted is said to have been less than eight to one. Even a tenfold crop would have been well above average; and the yields of which Jesus speaks were truly phenomenal.

At the end of this unexplained parable Jesus said, **He who has ears, let him hear**. That is to say, "If you can understand it, then understand it." Jesus was not mocking His hearers but was rather pointing out to them that they would need more than their own human understanding to interpret the meaning. He may have been giving an invitation to those in the multitudes who were serious about following

Him to come to Him and ask for an explanation, as the disciples were about to do. Otherwise, they would not have **ears** to **hear** what He was really saying.

Only those who accept the King can understand the King and profit from His teaching and lordship. To all others His teaching is meaningless riddles.

THE PURPOSE: TO REVEAL AND TO CONCEAL

And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” And He answered and said to them, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. For whoever has, to him shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, ‘You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; and you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I should heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. For truly I say to you, that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it; and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. (13:10-17)

When the disciples came to Jesus and said to Him, “**Why do You speak to them** [the multitudes] **in parables?**” it was the fact that the **parables** were *unexplained* that puzzled them. They were asking, in effect, “Why do you bother saying anything to them at all, if they can’t understand it?”

At this point Jesus gives the twofold reason for His speaking in **parables**: to reveal meaning to those who receive Him and to conceal meaning from those who do not. **He answered and said to them, “To you [who believe in Me] it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them [who do not believe in Me] it has not been granted.”**

Mysteries does not refer to stories such as those found in modern mystery novels, whose complex plot and unexpected situations pique the curiosity of the reader. In the ancient world a mystery was a sacred secret known only to initiates and sometimes only to upper level religionists. The system of mystery religions began in ancient Babylon and spread in various forms to every part of the civilized world. An influential Greek philosophical system of New Testament times was called gnosticism, a name derived from *gnōsis*, which means knowledge. Gnostics considered themselves the ones “in the know” as far as philosophical matters were concerned.

In ancient Egypt a popular religious mystery involved the mythical god Osiris and his goddess wife Isis. Osiris was a wise and benevolent king who was persuaded by his wicked brother Seth to come to a banquet, where, with the help of seventy-two co-conspirators, Seth placed the king in a coffin and threw him into the Nile River to drown. Osiris was rescued by Isis and brought home; but when Seth discovered his brother was alive, he went to the palace and cut Osiris into fourteen pieces, which he shipped to fourteen far-separated locations throughout Egypt. After Isis managed to collect all the pieces of his body, Osiris miraculously restored himself to life; and from the time of his “resurrection” he became the immortal king of both the living and the dead.

Although the story itself was fascinating to anyone who heard it, its deeper meanings were known only to initiates of the Osiris and Isis cults. For them each person and incident in the story had special significance. For example, Osiris represented all good and was attacked by Seth, who represented all evil. The unrelenting devotion of Isis represented the redemptive and triumphal power of love. The ultimate secret, or mystery, was the formula, “I am thou, and thou art I,” which, when spoken to Osiris, would place the worshiper in eternal union with that god.

Similar attitudes of exclusiveness and concepts of mystery are seen in modern secret societies, whose most important rituals and principles are

known only to members, and sometimes only to the highest ranking leaders.

In Scripture, however, **mysteries** refers to the revelation of something previously hidden and unknown. New Testament **mysteries** are therefore revelations and explanations of divine truths that were not revealed to saints under the Old Covenant.

The particular **mysteries** about which Jesus teaches here have to do with **the kingdom of heaven** (see also vv. 24, 31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52)—which from parallel passages in Mark (4:11, 30) and Luke (8:10; 13:18) is seen to be the same as the kingdom of God (cf. Matt. 19:23-24). One title emphasizes the King (God) and the other emphasizes the sphere of His reign (heaven). Of this kingdom the Old Testament gives only limited and incomplete glimpses. Most messianic prophecies in the Old Testament point to Christ's second coming and the establishment of His earthly millennial kingdom and His subsequent eternal kingdom. Only hints are given about His present earthly **kingdom**, that began with His rejection and crucifixion and will continue until He returns. This is the **kingdom** that exists spiritually in the hearts of His people while the King is physically absent from the earth. He is present with believers, but He is not visible or evident to the world, except as revealed through their lives and testimony.

Some interpreters insist that no present **kingdom of heaven** of any sort can exist because the King is absent. But David's reign over Israel while he was fleeing from his rebellious son Absalom is a classic instance of a king having full rights and authority over his realm while temporarily being unable to exercise those rights because of certain circumstances. During the period of usurpation, David is repeatedly referred to as King David, although he was unable to sit on his throne or even to live in his capital city of Jerusalem (see 2 Sam. 15-17). David's kingship was acknowledged and respected only by those Israelites who remained faithful to him, but his rejection by the followers of Absalom did not make him any less the rightful king. He was the only legitimate monarch, and every faithful citizen of his kingdom recognized it.

In much the same way, Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah of the Old Testament, now rules in the hearts of His people, although He is physically absent from earth and rules them from His heavenly dwelling

through His Spirit—while the usurper Satan temporarily is the spiritual ruler of this world (John 12:31).

The **kingdom of heaven** has two important but distinct aspects. First is the universal kingdom, which includes every created thing in every time and place. God is the Creator and absolute Sovereign of the universe, and will be eternally. Nothing exists or occurs without His divine provision or permission.

David reminds us that “The Lord sat as King at the flood; yes, the Lord sits as King forever” (Ps. 29:10). He ruled the earth even when it was so wickedly rebellious that He destroyed every human being except Noah and his family in the Flood. Again David tells us, “The Lord has established His throne in the heavens; and His sovereignty rules over all” (Ps. 103:19). God is sovereign “over all,” even over Satan and his demons, whom He has allowed certain freedoms for a limited period of time. Their final and certain destiny is hell, which God rules just as surely as He rules heaven. The Lord has prepared that place for the specific purpose of their punishment along with every unbelieving human being (Matt. 25:41). “Thine, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty,” declares the writer of the Chronicles; “indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Thine is the dominion, O Lord, and Thou dost exalt Thyself as head over all” (1 Chron. 29:11).

The second aspect of God’s **kingdom** is what Alva McClain has appropriately called mediatorial, because His rule is mediated through others. Both the universal and the mediatorial aspects of the **kingdom** are seen in the Lord’s Prayer, as Jesus commands us to pray, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). “In heaven” refers to God’s universal and direct reign, whereas “on earth” refers to the present kingdom, in which only His saints are His subjects in the fullest sense.

From the beginning of creation God intended the earth to be ruled by human instruments in His behalf. After everything had been created except man, “God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth’” (Gen. 1:26). When Satan succeeded in leading Adam and Eve into the rebellion he had begun in heaven, he became the temporary ruler and prince of earth (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11).

But, like Absalom, he is a usurper, and his rule is both illegitimate and doomed to end.

Even after the Fall, God maintained certain dominion over the earth through human mediators, and since that time every person who has trusted in Him has been a channel for expressing His will and power on earth. Abel, Seth, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Rachel, Joseph, Moses, David, and countless others mediated the Lord's rule on earth. Through select individuals God gave His holy Word, which was written down for all men to know and obey. In that Word He revealed His nature, His will, His moral and spiritual standards for mankind, and His promises of redemption and restoration. He called out a special people, the nation of Israel, to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6) before the world, to be the forerunners of His Son as "a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa. 49:6). He raised up prophets, priests, and kings to give special leadership on His behalf.

When the Son of God became incarnate, He was God's unique Mediator, the divine/human instrument of rule, who in His own right deserved to establish and reign over God's earthly kingdom. When the Son was rejected, God continued to rule through those who belonged to Christ, those who were now empowered within by His own indwelling Holy Spirit. From Pentecost through the present day and until Christ returns, Christians are God's mediatorial rulers on earth.

Even during the Tribulation, God will raise up 144,000 faithful believers from among the twelve tribes of Israel, and an innumerable host of Gentiles, "a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues," will also be converted and stand "before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes" (Rev. 7:4, 9).

Throughout its history the mediatorial kingdom has attracted both true and false citizens; and it will remain so until its end. Failure to understand that truth has caused untold confusion in interpreting many Bible passages. Among other things, it has caused many sincere Christians to believe that salvation can be lost.

Careful study of Scripture shows that, although the true subjects of God's kingdom are only those who belong to Him by saving faith, those true citizens can be infallibly distinguished from false ones only by God

Himself. God's chosen people, Israel, was always composed of both the true and the false. Jesus spoke of certain "sons of the kingdom" who would "be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:12). Those "sons of the kingdom" obviously were not true subjects of the King. As Jesus makes clear in His explanation of the parable of the wheat and tares, from the human perspective the true sons of the kingdom and the sons of the evil one are often not distinguishable (Matt. 13:38). In the figure of the vine and branches, Jesus illustrates the truth that many branches that seem to belong to the vine really do not. Jesus even spoke of the spurious branches as being "in Me," but those branches will be pruned away, dry up, and be thrown into the fire to be burned (John 15:2, 6). The people represented by those unfruitful branches were closely, but superficially, identified with Christ. Condemned "sons of the kingdom" are never part of God's spiritual kingdom, and unproductive "branches" are never a part of Christ. They only appear to be from man's imperfect view.

Paul says, "They are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants" (Rom. 9:6-7). As the apostle had declared earlier in the same letter, only "he is a Jew who is one inwardly" (2:29). Yet in Scripture such terms as *Israel*, *God's people*, and *disciples* are frequently used in ways that include both nominal and real believers.

The gospels frequently speak of the twelve disciples, or apostles—a group that included Judas, an unbelieving traitor. Throughout its history, the visible church has always included adherents who have not trusted in Christ and who therefore do not belong to Him and are not a part of His spiritual body.

Even during the Millennium, when Christ perfectly and directly rules His kingdom on earth, there will be disloyal citizens of the kingdom. It is from among those false subjects that Satan will gather together his rebellious army in a last futile attempt to defeat Christ (Rev. 20:7-8).

God's universal kingdom over heaven and earth has no conditions. To exist is to be in that kingdom. To be in His mediatorial kingdom, however, requires intentional identity with Him. For the false citizen the identity is hypocritical and superficial. For the true citizen the identity is genuine, being based on repentance, faith in Christ, and the new life that faith in Him brings (Mark 1:15).

When Christ bodily returns to earth, His indirect rule in the mediatorial kingdom will become His direct rule in the millennial kingdom and then in the eternal kingdom of the new heavens and new earth.

God's kingdom and the church are distinct in that the kingdom preceded the church and will continue eternally after the church as such has ceased to exist. But during the present mediatorial period, often called the church age, the kingdom and the church are identical. That truth is part of the mystery "which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (Eph. 3:5-6).

Expanding on the truth that His parables were given to reveal and conceal, Jesus continued, **For whoever has, to him shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.**

Whoever has refers to those who believe, those who have been sovereignly given the gift of eternal life, received by trust in Jesus Christ. These are the true citizens of the kingdom who have received the King. And whoever accepts salvation from God, **to him shall more be given.** The person who accepts the true Light (John 1:9) will receive still further light as he grows in obedience and maturity in the Lord. To the believer who lives up to the light he has in Christ, more and more light will continually be given until **he shall have an abundance.**

But the fate of the unbeliever is just the opposite. Because of his unbelief, he **does not have** salvation, and therefore **even what** light of God's truth **he has shall be taken away from him.** Many thousands of people heard Jesus teach and saw Him perform miraculous signs as evidence of His divine messiahship; but most of them did not recognize Him as Lord or receive Him as Savior. They were exposed to God incarnate, and yet they rejected Him—either by direct opposition or by indifferent neglect. They said no to the King, and because they refused to receive the divine light that shined on them, they drifted deeper and deeper into spiritual darkness.

To this day, no people on earth are more religiously disoriented than Jews. They were called to be God's people, given His promises, His

covenants, His laws, and His immeasurable blessings. They were even sent His only Son as one of their own people—to teach, heal, comfort, redeem, and deliver them—but they would not have Him rule over them (Luke 19:14). Because they rejected God’s perfect Light, even the light they had went out, and everything in their religion lost its true meaning. The Temple was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70, and with it the priesthood and the sacrifices. The ceremonial and sacrificial requirements of their covenant with God could no longer be met; but since that time Jews have continued to follow various aspects of their ancient religion—without prophets, priests, kings, Temple, or sacrifices. Even those who call themselves orthodox believe and practice only a small part of what their own Scripture teaches and commands. The conservative and reformed branches of Judaism believe and practice even less. Most Jews do not even try to make sense out of most of the Old Testament. For most, all that is left is a nonreligious tradition.

All men are either progressing or regressing spiritually. No person remains static in his relationship to God. The longer a person knows and is faithful to Christ, the more his Lord is faithful to reveal His truth and power. The longer a person rejects the knowledge of God he has, whether much or little, the less of God’s truth he will understand. Willful human rejection leads to divine judicial rejection. When a man says no to God, God says no to that person. God confirms men in their stubbornness, and binds them with their own chains of unbelief.

TO CONCEAL

Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, “You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; and you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I should heal them.”
(13:13-15)

Those verses from Isaiah 6:9-10 perfectly describe the unbelieving Jews of Jesus' day. Isaiah wrote during a time of sweeping judgment on Judah. He had just pronounced a series of curses on the people for their drunkenness, debauchery, immorality, dishonesty, injustice, and hypocrisy. While Isaiah was preaching his message of doom, King Uzziah died (6:1) and the nation was plunged into some of its darkest days. They were on the verge of captivity by Babylon as part of God's judgment; yet they refused to turn to Him for mercy and help.

The people kept **on hearing, but they did not understand; and they kept on seeing, but they did not perceive**, because they had intentionally **closed their eyes and their ears** to God and refused to **understand with their heart and return** to Him in order for Him to **heal them**. Because they chose to ignore God and His word, God judicially locked them up in their unbelief so that they would fear His judgment.

The first fulfillment of Isaiah's warning came in the judgment of the Babylonian Captivity, just as the prophet promised. The second fulfillment, Jesus declared, was about to be accomplished as Israel once again turned her back on the Lord and faced the judgment of centuries of darkness and despair.

Jesus' parables were a similar form of judgment on unbelief. Those who would not accept His clear and simple teachings—such as those in the Sermon on the Mount—not only would not be able to understand His deeper teachings but would lose the benefit of the teaching and miraculous witness they had been given.

The gift of languages in the early church was still another form of judgment on unbelievers. Quoting from Isaiah 28:11, Paul wrote, "In the law it is written, 'By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to Me,' says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers" (1 Cor. 14:21-22). Tongues were manifested in an astounding and dramatic way on the day of Pentecost and continued to be manifested from time to time during the apostolic age as a form of testimony against those who refused to believe. The Lord first gave His truth to Israel in simple, clear teaching; and when that was ignored, He spoke to them in parables, which, without explanation, were no more than meaningless riddles. Finally He spoke in unintelligible languages that could not be understood at all without translation.

TO REVEAL

But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. For truly I say to you, that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it; and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. (13:16-17)

When men choose to believe God's Word and trust in His grace, He gives them salvation and more and more truth by which to walk and to worship. **Blessed are your eyes, Jesus said to His disciples, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.**

Christians can understand even the deep things of God's Word, because they have them written in the New Testament and illumined by the indwelling Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 2:9-10). When Jesus finished explaining the parables to His disciples and asked, "Have you understood all these things?" they could honestly answer, "Yes" (Matt. 13:51). It was not that they were smarter than the unbelieving Jews. The scribes and Pharisees were highly educated and had studied the Scriptures diligently since their youth. But their eyes were blinded to the truth of Jesus' teaching because of their unbelief. The **eyes** of the disciples, on the other hand, were able to **see** and their **ears** were able to **hear**, because they *did* believe.

Part of the Lord's ministry was to give understanding of His Word to those who trusted in Him. In his account of this occasion, Mark says Jesus "was explaining everything privately to His own disciples" (4:34). During perhaps His last appearance to the disciples after His resurrection, Jesus "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45). The psalmist knew he could not comprehend God's Word in his own intellect, and he prayed, "Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Thy law" (Ps. 119:18).

Not even the most faithful and enlightened saints of the Old Testament were given the insights that the apostles and every believer since have been given the privilege of having. **For truly I say to you, Jesus continued, that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it; and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.** "As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know

what person and time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look” (1 Pet. 1:10-12).

Even for believers there must be divine illumination, and that is promised to every Christian who searches God’s Word and relies on the Holy Spirit within him (see 1 Cor. 2:9-16; 1 John 2:20, 27). As Christians, we not only have God’s completed revelation in Scripture but the very author of that Scripture living within us—to explain, interpret, and apply its truths.

**The Kingdom and
the Gospel—part 2**
**The Interpretation
of the Parable**
(13:18-23)

Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. And the one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word, and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit, and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.” (13:18-23)

Privately to the twelve and a few other genuine followers (v. 10; Mark 4:10), Jesus began to explain the meaning of **the parable of the sower**. For them, to **hear** was to understand, because, as the Lord had just told them, their faith allowed their eyes to see and their ears to hear what unbelievers could not (Matt. 13:11-12,16-17).

Jesus does not here identify **the sower**, but in the parable of the wheat and tares He says, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man” (v. 37). In the present passage He takes for granted that the disciples understand the identity of the seed, which is made explicit in Luke’s account: “The seed is the word of God” (8:11; cf. Mark 4:14). In

particular, **the sower** sows the **word of the kingdom**, the good news of entrance into the kingdom by grace through faith.

In a broader sense, of course, any believer who preaches or testifies to the gospel is a **sower** who sows Christ's **word** in his Lord's behalf. The parable therefore applies to any true presentation of the gospel.

The nineteenth-century commentator William Arnot wrote of sowers: "As every leaf of the forest and every ripple on the lake, which itself receives a sunbeam on its breast, may throw the sunbeam off again, and so spread the light around; in like manner, everyone, old or young, who receives Christ into his heart may and will publish with his life and lips that blessed name."

The most faithful and dedicated Christian cannot create **the word of the kingdom** any more than a farmer or a scientist can create the simplest seed. Just as only God creates seeds that reproduce themselves, only God creates **the word** of the gospel that brings the life of His Son to a believer. The work of Christ's witnesses is not to manufacture a message to create a synthetic seed, or to modify the seed given to them, but to sow God's revelation by proclaiming it exactly as He has given it. The power of new spiritual life is in **the word**, just as the power of plant life is in the seed. The seeds in the parable are all of the same nature, sown from the same bag by the same sower. The only variables are in what happens to those seeds when they are sown on the different types of soil.

The Bible is the written **word**, but Jesus Christ is the living **word** who gives it life. The Bible, as it were, is the husk and Jesus is the kernel. "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life," Jesus told a group of unbelieving Jewish leaders in Jerusalem; "and it is these that bear witness of Me" (John 5:39).

The parable of the sower revolves around proclaiming the saving gospel, heralding **the word** about the King and His **kingdom**. But the main teaching has to do with the heart soils on which the truth of that **word** falls as it is preached. Jesus mentions four different soils onto which the seed falls as it is sown, representing four kinds of hearts that hear the gospel.

The soils themselves are basically the same—dirt that, given the right conditions, could support the growth of crops. Although every human heart is naturally sinful and hostile toward God (Rom. 8:7; Eph. 2:15-16), every human heart is also capable of being redeemed. There is no such thing as a naturally unredeemable heart. If a person is not saved it is

because he does not want to be saved. “The one who comes to Me,” Jesus says categorically, “I will certainly not cast out” (John 6:37). Every person *could* receive the seed of the gospel and participate in its life if he believed. The differences in the soils, and in the hearts to which they correspond, are not in their composition but their condition.

Jesus was preparing the apostles, and every other proclaimer of the gospel, to understand the four basic kinds of hearers they could expect to encounter: the unresponsive, the superficial, the worldly, and the receptive.

THE UNRESPONSIVE HEARER

When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. (13:19)

The hard-packed soil beside the road (v. 4) represents the person who **hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it**. The reason he **does not understand** is not due to any deficiency in the message but to his own hardheartedness. He is the person often referred to in the Old Testament as stiff-necked. He is unconcerned with the things of God, completely indifferent to anything spiritual. The word makes no penetration into his mind or heart. He does not give the gospel the least consideration, thinking it to be total foolishness. He has so continually and consistently resisted anything that smacks of spirituality, that the soil of his heart has become pounded down until it is impervious and insensitive.

Because it makes no penetration, the seed of God’s word is fully exposed to the enemy of the soul, and **the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in the person’s heart**. His lack of repentance or of any sense of guilt and shame insulates him from God’s help and leaves him utterly exposed to Satan’s attack. **His heart** has never been softened by remorse, never broken up by conviction of sin, never cultivated by the smallest desire for anything good, pure, and holy.

That person is the fool who hates wisdom and instruction (Prov. 1:7) and who says there is no God (Ps. 14:1). He is self-sufficient, self-satisfied, and often self-righteous. On such a person the gospel has no effect, because it is veiled to determined unbelievers, “in whose case the

god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4).

The evil one uses many means as he **snatches away what has been sown**.

Luke adds that some seed was trampled under the feet of those who walk the hard path (8:5; cf. Heb. 10:29). Satan uses false teachers, who promote spiritual lies and contradict God’s truth. He uses fear of what other people might think about a person’s becoming a Christian. Satan constantly uses pride to blind people to their sinful condition and need of salvation. He makes them believe they are not really so bad, or that, if they do need improvement, they can improve themselves. He uses doubt, prejudice, stubbornness, procrastination, love of the world, love of sin, and every combination of those ploys.

THE SUPERFICIAL HEARER

And the one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word, and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. (13:20-21)

The second patch of soil covers unseen **rocky places** and has no depth. This soil represents **the man who hears the word, and immediately receives it with joy**. By his quick response to the gospel it seems as if he has been waiting eagerly to hear it and cannot embrace it soon enough. In contrast to the person with the hardened, unresponsive heart, this **man** offers no resistance at all, but rather manifests emotional excitement in his response to the message.

Sometimes shallow acceptance of the gospel is encouraged by shallow evangelism that holds out the blessings of salvation but hides the costs—such as repenting from sin, dying to self, and turning from the old life. When people are encouraged to walk down the aisle, raise their hand, or sign a card without coming to grips with the full claims of Christ, they are in great danger of becoming further from Christ than they were before

they heard the message. They may become insulated from true salvation by a false profession of faith.

In any case, the superficial convert accepts the message of salvation with open arms and is overcome with **joy** and enthusiasm. He cannot say enough good about the gospel, the preacher, the church, and the Lord. He is on an emotional high, in a state of grand euphoria. He is certain he has found the answer to his felt needs. He has been accepted with those who believe and cannot wait to tell everyone of the new meaning, purpose, and happiness in his life.

Because his emotional response to the gospel is so immediate and positive, this sort of convert stands out above most others. He is often more vocal in talking about his experience and may even be zealous in church attendance, Bible study, and prayer for a while.

But because the soil of his heart is shallow, **he has no firm root in himself**. The gospel prompts an immediate positive reaction, but it is **temporary**, and all the change is on the surface, rather than in the depths of his heart. His feelings were changed but not his soul. God's life-giving **word** cannot take **root** because just below the surface of his heart is a **rocky** base that is even harder to penetrate than the soil beside the road. There is no repentance, no remorse over sin, no recognition of lostness, no contrition, no brokenness. And there is no humility, which is the first mark of true conversion (Matt. 5:3).

When this person hears the gospel it brings a religious experience but it does not bring salvation—evidenced by the fact that **when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away**. The gospel truth has not penetrated his heart but only the edge of his mind, and it is therefore as **immediately** renounced as it was immediately received. He has come to Christ for what he thought he would get in the way of personal benefit, but when confronted with the high cost of salvation, he will not pay the price. He has built his religious house on the sand of emotional experience, and when the storms of **affliction or persecution** beat on his house, it crumbles and washes away (Matt. 7:26-27). He has the foliage of a religious experience, but he has no root in spiritual reality and therefore cannot produce spiritual fruit, which, as Jesus goes on to say (13:22-23), is the only reliable evidence of true conversion.

The falling away comes **immediately** after the **affliction and persecution because of the word**, but it may be many years before that severe testing comes. The superficial believer may be baptized, serve in the church, and apparently function as a model member for a long time. But testing will eventually come that will expose his lifelessness.

The **affliction and persecution** Jesus is talking about does not have to do with the ordinary hardships and troubles of life, but specifically with problems that result **because of the word**. When the cost of discipleship becomes too high, this person **falls away** and becomes lost to the visible church just as he was always lost to the spiritual.

Falls away is from *skandalizō*, which means to cause to stumble or fall and is the term from which we get *scandalize*. It is sometimes translated with the idea of causing offense—as in the Authorized Version of this verse. All of those meanings are appropriate here, because the superficial Christian is scandalized, offended, stumbles, and **falls away** when his faith is put to the test (cf. John 8:31; 1 John 2:19).

When friends, family, fellow students, co-workers, or employers begin to criticize him for his faith or pressure him to compromise or even renounce it, he cannot resist. He becomes ashamed of the gospel and of the One he had so joyously proclaimed as Lord. Because his profession had no conviction or sincerity, he never experienced the new birth and the new life that Christ gives—and his sham faith soon withers.

William Arnot again has a helpful comment: “If the law of God has never rent the ‘stony heart’ and made it ‘contrite,’ that is, bruised it small, you may, by receiving the Gospel on some temporary, superficial softness of nature, obtain your religion more easily and quickly than others who have been more deeply exercised; but you may perhaps not be able to hold it so fast or retain it so long. He that endureth to the end shall be saved; but he that falls away in the middle shall not.”

If a person’s profession of Christ does not involve a deep conviction of sin, a genuine sense of lostness, a strong desire for the Lord to cleanse and purify, a hungering and thirsting for righteousness and a love of His Word, along with a genuine willingness to suffer for His sake, there is no root to his spiritual life and it will be only a matter of time before his religious house falls.

It is encouraging, however, that the same persecution that makes the false believer wither will make the true believer stronger. “All who

desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12); but “after you have suffered for a little while,” Peter assures us, “the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you” (1 Pet. 5:10).

THE WORLDLY HEARER

And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. (13:22)

The third patch of soil is infested with **thorns** and represents **the man who hears the word** but who is too worldly for it to take root and grow in his heart. This person **hears the word** of the gospel and may make a token profession of faith. But his first love is for the things of **the world**, and his **worry** about or preoccupation with those things blinds him to the importance of the gospel or anything else spiritual and eternal. He loves **riches** and lives as if they are the answer to all his needs and desires. He is oblivious to their **deceitfulness**, to their utter inability to satisfy the heart or bring lasting happiness. He does not notice his deceiving worldliness **chokes the word**, because his attention is on his **riches**, possessions, prestige, position, and other things of **the world**. He is not even aware that he has lost what knowledge of **the word** he once had or that his spiritual life is totally **unfruitful**—because he has no real interest in such things.

There are few barriers to the gospel greater than love of **riches** and of **the world** in general. Paul warns that “the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang” (1 Tim. 6:10). And John warns, “Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world” (1 John 2:15-16).

Some years ago the U. S. Department of Agriculture developed a soil treatment that contains 6 percent ethyl alcohol. When the solution is applied to a field in the proper amount, it reportedly causes all the weeds to sprout and grow vigorously. Once they are grown, the weeds can then be

mechanically removed before they have a chance to develop seeds. The field becomes virtually free of weeds for up to five years.

That is something of a picture of true conversion. Christ's cleansing is complete and thorough. The preaching of the law of God makes sin flourish (cf. Rom. 7:7-12), and in salvation He removes all the weeds of sin in order to cleanse the field of the heart and prepare it for the pure seed of His Word. Subsequent sin requires subsequent cleansing; and that sin, too, when confessed, Christ is also "faithful and righteous to forgive" (1 John 1:9). The Lord's desire is to keep His people free from all sin at all times.

A professing believer who is unconcerned about sin in his life and does not hate evil and love righteousness gives strong evidence that the soil of his heart is weedy. He will eventually discover that his love of the **world** and his identification with Christ's **word** cannot coexist. If his faith is genuine, he will forsake the **world**; if it is not, his sin will **choke** out what knowledge of the **word** he has.

A person who comes to church but never becomes committed to serving, who is continually preoccupied with money, career, fashions, sports, and everything but the Lord's work is a person with a weed-infested heart. A person who claims to love Christ but who cannot remain faithful in marriage has a weedy heart. The person who refuses to let go of his worldliness is a person in whom the seed of God's saving gospel has not found root and is in danger of being choked out altogether.

THE RECEPTIVE HEARER

And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit, and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty." (13:23)

The fourth patch of ground **on whom seed was sown** is **good soil**. It is **good** not because it has a different basic composition than the other kinds of soil, but because it is rightly prepared. Because his heart is prepared by the Spirit and receptive to God (cf. John 16:8-11), the person this soil represents **hears the word and understands it**. Before salvation, the person who receives Christ had the same basic nature as those who

reject Him. He is not necessarily any less sinful or more perceptive than they. A person who is saved may have lived a life of debauchery and utter wickedness, whereas many who do not believe are humanly moral and respectable. A person who is saved may have little education and a low IQ, whereas many who do not believe are highly intelligent and trained.

The only barrier to salvation is unbelief, and anyone who is willing to accept Jesus Christ on His terms is **good soil**. He **hears the word** of the gospel because God honors his humility and opens his spiritual ears; and he **understands** the gospel because God honors his faith and opens his spiritual mind and heart.

Jesus told of this kind of hearer in order to encourage His disciples and all other believers who witness in His name. Despite the hardness, shallowness, and worldliness of most human hearts, there are *always* those who are **good soil**, in which the gospel can take root and flourish. There will always be people whom the Spirit has prepared to receive **the word** with sincere, surrendered hearts.

The ultimate mark of the genuine believer, **the good soil**, is fruitbearing. He not only **hears** and **understands** but also **indeed bears fruit**. Spiritual **fruit** is the inevitable product of spiritual life.

The spiritual fruit of attitude is described by Paul in Galatians: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (5:22-23). The genuine believer also bears fruit of behavior, which Paul refers to as “the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God” (Phil. 1:11). Fruit is the spiritual reality that God produces in the lives of His children. The Spirit-filled life of the believer “is constantly bearing fruit” (Col. 1:6).

The psalmist rejoiced that the believer who delights in God’s Word and meditates on it day and night is “like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season. And its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers” (Ps. 1:2-3). Jesus declared that true and false branches—those who are genuinely related to Him and those who only seem to be—are distinguished by their bearing or not bearing fruit (John 15:2-5). We are not saved *by* bearing fruit or by any other good work, because we cannot bear spiritual fruit or do any truly good work until after we are saved. But we are saved *for* fruitbearing. “We are His workmanship,” Paul says, “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

Not only does Jesus assure us that true believers bear fruit but that they bear it in great abundance: **one a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty**. Those figures represent phenomenal yields of 10,000 percent, 6,000 percent, and 3,000 percent. Believers differ in fruitbearing because they differ in commitment to obedience, but all are profusely fruitful.

As mentioned above (under v. 8), the average yield ratio of grain crops in Palestine was less than eight to one. Therefore even the least productive **thirty** to one was almost four times the average. It is not that a believer produces a hundred, sixty, or thirty times the amount of fruit that an unbeliever produces—because an unbeliever can produce no spiritual fruit at all. Jesus simply used these figures to represent the great productivity He gives to the faithful proclamation of His Word. That is the point of the entire parable: *true believers produce fruit*.

To His witnesses Jesus is saying, “Go and preach, and realize as you go that some people will reject your message outright. Because they want nothing to do with God, Satan will not allow the gospel to have any impact on them whatsoever. Others will seem to accept it gladly but will soon fall away, because they only had a superficial religious experience and were not born again. These are the ones who live by the flesh, whose lives are controlled by emotion, feeling, and sentiment. Others will seem to accept the gospel while holding on to the old life and its ways; and their faith will also prove vain and will eventually disappear as it is choked out by the world. But others will truly believe. In humility they will confess and repent of their sins, look to Me for help, and be given new life. You will know these true believers from the others by the evidence of fruit in their lives.”

He is also saying to His witnesses that they should not lose heart. God alone can plow up the heart that is hard and resistant. In His sovereign will He gives the shallow heart depth, and the cluttered heart cleansing. The Lord guarantees that His faithful witnesses will produce fruit and will do so abundantly. It is impossible for a faithful sower of the Word to fail, because the Lord of the harvest will not permit it. So we anticipate the wrong and right responses. What marvelously helpful insight for those who sow!

The Lord is teaching His people that anyone who belongs to Him can and should be a witness for Him. The responsibility of the one who sows the gospel in His name is not to produce the seed, the soil, or the

fruit. His only responsibility is to faithfully spread the seed as far and wide as he is able. When they fall on good soil, the seeds that a little child throws here and there as he follows his father through the field will produce fruitful plants just as genuine and productive as those the experienced father plants. And the untrained Christian who faithfully scatters his few seeds will produce a greater harvest than the most learned and experienced believer who never bothers to sow at all.

To those who are considering His claims or have made a perfunctory decision for Him, Jesus gives an appeal to think about the kind of soil that represents their heart. If it is hardpacked and beaten down by continual neglect of God, or perhaps even by conscious opposition, He calls that person to allow His Spirit to break up the ground and make it receptive to His Word. If the soil of his heart is shallow and superficial, He calls that person to allow the Spirit to remove the rocky resistance that lies beneath the surface of his seeming acceptance of the gospel and give him true faith. If the soil of his heart is infested with the weedy cares and concerns of the world, He asks that person to allow the Spirit to cleanse him of his worldliness and to receive Him with no reservations or competing loyalties.

The Kingdom and the World (13:24-43)

He presented another parable to them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprang up and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. And the slaves of the landowner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’ And he said to them, ‘An enemy has done this!’ And the slaves said to him, ‘Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?’ But he said, ‘No; lest while you are gathering up the tares, you may root up the wheat with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, “First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.”’”

He presented another parable to them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds; but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.”

He spoke another parable to them, “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three pecks of meal, until it was all leavened.”

All these things Jesus spoke to the multitudes in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable, so that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, “I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world.”

Then He left the multitudes, and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field.” And He answered and said, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, and the field is the world; and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one; and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. Therefore just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.” (13:24-43)

In the first of the eight parables in Matthew 13, Jesus explained the four kinds of responses—three negative and one positive—that people would make to the gospel during the mystery form of the kingdom of heaven that is the church age, the period between His first and second comings (vv. 3-8,18-23), as well as through the Millennium. In the second parable the Lord explains what happens to unbelievers during these periods of the kingdom.

THE PARABLE OF THE WHEAT AND TARES

He presented another parable to them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprang up and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. And the slaves of the landowner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’ And he said to them, ‘An enemy has done this!’ And the slaves said to him, ‘Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?’ But he said, ‘No; lest while you are

gathering up the tares, you may root up the wheat with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, “First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.”” (13:24-30)

This **parable** also uses the figure of a farmer sowing seed in his field; but here the emphasis is not on what happens to the **good seed** (as in the first parable) but rather on what happens to the bad seed that **his enemy came and sowed** alongside the good seed.

This **good seed** is assumed to fall on fertile ground, take root, and grow into healthy and productive grain, identified here as **wheat**. The **man who sowed the good seed** is the landowner (v. 27) who is planting **in his field**.

The phrase **while men were sleeping** does not imply neglect or laziness but simply refers to the nighttime, when the farmer and his **men** were home **sleeping** and were therefore oblivious to what was happening in the newly-planted field. While they slept, the farmer’s **enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away**.

Tares is from *zizanon*, a variety of darnel weed that closely resembles **wheat** and is almost impossible to distinguish from it until the **wheat** ripens and bears **grain**. Because of this resemblance, sowing **tares . . . among the wheat** was sometimes done in ancient times out of spite or revenge by an **enemy** who wanted to destroy or at least greatly reduce the value of someone’s crop. It was a common enough crime for the Romans to have had a specific law against it.

It was not until many weeks later, **when the wheat sprang up and bore grain**, that **the tares became evident also**. When they saw so many **tares** among the wheat, **the slaves of the landowner** asked him how this could have happened. It was not uncommon, of course, for a few weeds, including some **tares**, to grow up among the good plants; but the great quantity of **tares** in this field made it obvious that their crop was intentionally sabotaged. The landowner explained the obvious: **An enemy has done this!**

Realizing the seriousness of the devastating crime, **the slaves said to their master, Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up? No**, he

replied, **lest while you are gathering up the tares, you may root up the wheat with them.** The slaves were rightly concerned, fearing **the tares** would weaken and possibly completely ruin **the wheat** harvest. But the experienced landowner knew that more damage would be done to the good crop by pulling out the weeds at that time than by leaving them alone. Pulling out **the tares** would result in rooting up much of **the wheat with them.** For one reason, the plant roots would have become closely intertwined, and even if all the good and bad plants could be distinguished from each other, uprooting **the tares** would also uproot some of **the wheat.** Not only that, but wheat that was planted or that germinated later would mature later, and some of **the wheat** that had not yet produced heads of grain would be mistaken for **tares.**

Allow both to grow together until the harvest, the farmer instructed, **and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, “First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up.** Only at the time of **harvest** could the good and bad plants be distinguished with certainty. **The reapers** were more experienced than the slaves and were qualified to weed out **the tares** and **burn** them. After that was done, they would proceed with **the harvest** and **gather the wheat into** the landowner’s **barn,** where it would be stored and protected for future use.

TWO PARABLES ABOUT INFLUENCE

He presented another parable to them, saying, **“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds; but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.”**

He spoke another parable to them, **“The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of meal, until it was all leavened.”** (13:31-33)

After hearing the parables of the sower and of the wheat and tares, the disciples no doubt wondered how Christ’s kingdom could survive if so

many people rejected Him and were then allowed to stay on earth with contaminating influence. How could God's people survive, much less thrive, in the midst of such unfavorable circumstances? Would not the great power of Satan and his evil forces, both demonic and human, utterly overwhelm and stifle the few (cf. 7:13-14) of God's saints on earth?

Long before Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion it was evident that the Jewish leaders rejected His claims of messiahship. It was also obvious that the multitudes who praised and followed Him did not understand His true nature or mission and were only superficially attracted to Him. His true disciples were a handful against the whole nation of Israel, not to mention the vast and ungodly Roman empire and the regions beyond. In response to that unspoken concern, Jesus used these two parables to emphasize that small things can have far-reaching effects.

Western music is commonly composed of only twelve notes—the seven basic notes and their five sharps/flats. Every symphony, hymn, love song, oratorio, and other piece of music is made up of various combinations and octaves of those same few notes. Similarly, every poem, essay, novel, letter, and other piece of English literature is composed of combinations of the same twenty-six letters.

Lord Kelvin once suspended a large piece of metal from a cord in his laboratory. He then proceeded to wad up small pieces of paper into balls about the size of a pea and systematically throw them at the metal weight. At first the almost imperceptible impact of paper hitting metal seemed to have no effect. But eventually the steel weight was swaying rhythmically back and forth due to the cumulative force patiently applied against it.

In an immeasurably more dramatic and important way, God would demonstrate through the church how a handful of believers, totally weak and inept in themselves, would in His power turn the world upside down. The kingdom of heaven would grow and prosper in spite of Satan's opposition and would ultimately permeate and influence the whole world in Jesus' name.

THE PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

He presented another parable to them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds; but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.” (13:31-32)

In this **parable** Jesus again uses the figure of planting and compares **the kingdom of heaven** to a **mustard seed** and its growth into a full-grown plant.

Mustard has long been a widely-used herb throughout much of the world, and in modern times it has found additional commercial value in the manufacture of film. Amazingly, years ago it was discovered that cows whose feed was supplemented with mustard seed developed bones that had a superior quality for use in making the silver compounds used in photographic film.

Jesus’ referring to the **mustard seed** as being **smaller than all other seeds** has often been cited as proof that Scripture is errant—that Jesus was either fallible and made a mistake or that He accommodated His teaching to the ignorance of His hearers and knowingly distorted the truth. But He was not comparing this seed to all other seeds in existence but only to the seeds of **garden plants** in Palestine. Many seeds, such as those of the wild orchid, are much smaller than the seed of the mustard plant. But of the many plants grown at that time in the gardens and fields of Palestine, the mustard plant has the smallest seeds, just as Jesus said.

When *sperma* (**seed**) is used in the New Testament in reference to plants, it is always used of agricultural plants, those intentionally grown for food. And of those **plants**, the mustard had seeds that were **smaller than all other seeds**.

Dr. L. H. Shinnars, director of the herbarium at Southern Methodist University in Dallas and lecturer at the Smithsonian Institution, stated in a conversation that

the mustard seed would indeed have been the smallest of those to have been noticed by the people at the time of

Christ. The principal field crops (barley, wheat, lentils, and beans) have much larger seeds, as do other plants which might have been present as weeds and so forth. There are various weeds and wild flowers belonging to the mustard, amaranth, pigweed, or chickweed families with seeds that are as small as or smaller than mustard; but they would not have been known or noticed by the inhabitants. They are wild and they certainly would not have been planted as a crop. . . . The only modern crop plant in existence with smaller seeds than mustard is tobacco, and this plant of American origin was not grown in the old world until the sixteenth century or later.

This parable is also criticized for supposedly exaggerating the size of the mustard plant, referring to it as **a tree**, in which **the birds of the air come and nest in its branches**. Many varieties of mustard plants are rather small bushes whose **branches** are too flimsy for **birds** to **nest** in. But the mustard plant of Palestine often grows to a height of twelve or fifteen feet. Just as Jesus said, **when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants, and, from a comparative viewpoint, becomes a tree**. At certain times of the year the branches become rigid enough to easily support a bird's nest.

But, even though the omniscient Jesus was speaking literally and accurately in this parable, His purpose was proverbial, not technical or scientific. Because of its tiny size, the mustard seed was commonly used in the ancient Near East to represent things that were extremely small. Ancient Jewish literature contains references to a drop of blood or a blemish on an animal that was the size of a mustard seed. To this day Arabs sometimes speak of faith weighing as little as a mustard seed, in much the same way Jesus did (Matt. 17:20).

If Jesus explained this parable to the disciples, we have no record of it, and in the context of His teaching about the kingdom it would not have been necessary. Its meaning was self-evident. As just mentioned, the idea of a small mustard seed growing into a large plant was proverbial, and the disciples would have immediately understood Jesus' point: the

kingdom of heaven, though now very small and seemingly insignificant, would one day grow into a large body of believers. That is the central lesson of this parable.

During Jesus' earthly ministry, the kingdom was almost imperceptible, both because of its few citizens and because it was spiritual and invisible. It did not come "with signs to be observed," Jesus explained on another occasion; "nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:20-21).

When He was born, Jesus was placed in a manger, in the midst of cows, sheep, goats, donkeys, and other animals. The region of Judea, in which He was born, and of Galilee, where He grew up, were insignificant backwaters of the Roman empire. In the region of Galilee, Nazareth was among the least promising towns—a fact that prompted Nathanael to ask Philip, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). None of the twelve disciples came from the Jewish religious leadership or from the economic and social aristocracy. They were few in number, uneducated, fearful, weak, slow to understand and believe, and generally unqualified to be the leaders of any significant earthly kingdom. The group of believers who gathered for prayer in Jerusalem just before Pentecost numbered only about 120 (Acts 1:15). A modern church of that size is thought to be quite small, yet that was the nucleus of the early church. When Jesus ascended to heaven, His kingdom on earth was, figuratively and relatively speaking, much smaller even than a mustard seed.

But the kingdom that started very small would one day become very large. Although the Old Testament writers were not aware that the Messiah would come to earth twice or of the intermediate kingdom that would separate those two comings, they knew that ultimately the Lord would "rule from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth" (Ps. 72:8). The desert nomads would bow before Him, the kings of Tarshish and of the islands would bring Him presents, the kings of Sheba and Seba would offer gifts, all kings would bow down before Him, and all nations would serve Him (vv. 9-11). In the end, "the kingdom of the world [will] become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15).

Another lesson of the parable of the mustard seed is that the kingdom of heaven will be a blessing to the rest of the world. The **tree** that

grows from the small **mustard seed** represents the kingdom of heaven, which in the present age corresponds to the church.

Some interpreters have held that the **birds of the air** represent demons or other evil forces, as they do in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:19). But there is no reason to expect a given figure to always represent the same thing, and the idea of evil is alien to the context of this parable.

The figure of **birds** making nests normally calls to mind that which is positive and helpful. Nesting carries the idea of protection, safety, refuge, and sanctuary, which the mother bird provides for her young.

In Nebuchadnezzar's dream he beheld "a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. The tree grew large and became strong, and its height reached to the sky, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its foliage was beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the sky dwelt in its branches, and all living creatures fed themselves from it" (Dan. 4:10-12). In his interpretation of the king's vision Daniel explains that "the tree that you saw & is you, O king; for you have become great and grown strong, and your majesty has become great and reached to the sky and your dominion to the end of the earth" (vv. 20, 22). Under Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian empire had brought unparalleled advancement in almost every field of endeavor—agriculture, architecture, education, the arts, literature, economics, and many others. Despite the cost in lives and slave labor, it had brought prosperity to a large part of the known world at that time. In the king's vision, the birds and animals who benefited from the tree's shade and food were the other nations of the world.

In a revelation to Ezekiel, the Lord described Assyria as "a cedar in Lebanon with beautiful branches and forest shade, and very high; and its top was among the clouds. The waters made it grow, the deep made it high. . . . Therefore its height was loftier than all the trees of the field and its boughs became many and its branches long because of many waters as it spread them out. All the birds of the heavens nested in its boughs, and under its branches all the beasts of the field gave birth, and all great nations lived under its shade" (Ezek. 31:3-6).

Both Jesus and the disciples were familiar with those accounts, and the parallel to the parable of the mustard seed seems obvious. The kingdom of heaven would grow from tiny beginnings to a great **tree** and

would ultimately provide shelter, protection, and benefit to the entire world.

When Christians live in obedience to the Lord, they are a blessing to those around them. Individual believers become the source of benediction to nations. And with all their faults, those nations of the world who have been so influenced and who have recognized God's sovereignty and have sought to build their laws and standards of living on His Word have proved a blessing to the rest of the world in economic, legal, cultural, and social ways as well as spiritual and moral. It is from the teachings of Scripture through Christian witness that high standards of education, justice, the dignity of women, the rights of children, prison reform, and countless other such social benefits have come. Whenever the gospel of the kingdom of God is faithfully preached and practiced, all the world benefits.

What the church is to the world is a macrocosm of what a believing spouse is to an unbelieving husband or wife. Just as the unbelieving partner is sanctified through the one who believes (1 Cor. 7:14), the unbelieving world is to a degree sanctified by the presence of the true church.

Jesus' point is that, in spite of great opposition, represented by the three bad soils and the tares, His kingdom will start small and spread in power and influence to become victorious.

THE PARABLE OF THE LEAVEN

He spoke another parable to them, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three pecks of meal, until it was all leavened." (13:33)

As always, Jesus constructed the parable out of the common experiences of His hearers. In every household the **woman** responsible for baking would save a piece of leavened dough from a risen batch just before it was baked. When the next batch of dough was mixed, she **took** the saved piece from the previous batch and **hid** it in the new, in order that its **leaven**, or yeast, could ferment the new batch of dough and make it rise.

Three pecks of meal was about the equivalent of a modern bushel. But such a large batch of dough was not uncommon in most households of the day, because bread was the major item of food. That was about the same amount of bread that Abraham asked Sarah to bake for the Lord and the two angelic visitors (Gen. 18:6) and that Gideon prepared before the angel of the Lord at Ophrah (Judg. 6:19).

The first point in this parable is that small things can have great influence, in the way that a small piece of leavened dough can permeate a large piece of unleavened dough to make it rise. The power of **the kingdom of heaven** is great, far greater than its initial size and appearance would suggest. The smallest part of **the kingdom** that is placed in the world is sure to have influence, because it contains the power of God's own Spirit. The influence of **the kingdom** is the influence of the King, of His Word, and of His faithful people.

The second point of the parable is that the influence is positive. Leavened bread has always been considered tastier and more enjoyable than unleavened. To symbolize the break with their former life in Egypt, God commanded His people to eat only unleavened bread during the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, which began on Passover evening. They were not even allowed to have leaven of any sort in the house during the seven days of the feast (Ex. 12:15,18-19). But the bread they ate the rest of the year was leavened and perfectly acceptable to the Lord. To the average person of Jesus' day, Jew or Gentile, there is no evidence that **leaven** carried any connotation of evil or corruption.

The ancient rabbis often referred to leaven in a favorable way. One of them wrote, "Great is peace, in that peace is to the earth as leaven is to the dough." When a Jewish girl was married, her mother would give her a small piece of leavened dough from a batch baked just before the wedding. From that gift of leaven the bride would bake bread for her own household throughout her married life. That gift, simple as it was, was among the most cherished that the bride received, because it represented the love and blessedness of the household in which she grew up and that would be carried into the household she was about to establish.

William Arnot writes insightfully:

Boldly as a sovereign may, this teacher seizes a proverb which was current as an exponent of the adversary's successful strategems and stamps the metal with the image and superscription of the rightful King. The evil spreads like leaven; you tremble before its stealthy advance and relentless grasp: but be of good cheer, disciples of Jesus, greater is He that is for you than all that are against you; the word of life which has been hidden in the world, hidden in believing hearts, is a leaven too. The unction of the Holy One is more subtle and penetrating and subduing than sin and Satan. Where sin abounded, grace shall much more abound.

Because leaven causes fermentation, some interpreters insist that in Scripture it always signifies that which is evil and corrupting when it is used figuratively. But such a restrictive view is arbitrary and certainly does not fit the present text. Jesus specifically says that **the kingdom of heaven**, the most positive of all influences imaginable, **is like leaven**. To take this **leaven** as representing evil that permeates the kingdom is to twist the obvious meaning and construction of words—whether in the Greek or English texts. Nor does that interpretation fit Jesus' development of this group of parables, in which this one parallels that of the mustard seed. They both illustrate the power of the kingdom to overcome the resistance and opposition illustrated in the parables of the sower and of the wheat and tares.

Even when leaven is used in relation to something evil, as in Jesus' warning about "the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy" (Luke 12:1), the point is not that leaven and hypocrisy are both inherently evil but that they both are inherently pervasive and powerful in their influence. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul uses leaven in the same way—not to illustrate the evil of legalism (which is great) but rather to point up its great influence: "A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough" (5:9).

As Paul indicts the Corinthians for arrogant indifference to the gross immorality of some of the church members, he states the same well-known proverb that he uses in Galatians and that Jesus had in mind in this

parable: “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?” (1 Cor. 5:6). He is speaking in the context of demanding that believers remove immoral members from their midst, in order that the evil conduct might not contaminate the rest of the church (vv. 2-5). Here again, the figure of leaven is used in regard to something evil, but the focus of the analogy is not on common evil but on common permeation.

As Paul continues his warning to the Corinthians, he also uses leaven to represent discontinuation. Israel under Moses was commanded not to take any leaven from bread in Egypt as they prepared to leave that land of captivity and oppression and journey toward the Promised Land. In the same way, Christians are commanded to “clean out the old leaven” of “malice and wickedness” that characterized their unsaved lives and take nothing of it into their new life in Christ (1 Cor. 5:7-8a). The bread of their new life in Christ is then called “the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (v. 8b).

But no analogy can be pressed too far. In this instance Paul uses leaven to illustrate the discontinuity that should be evident between an unsaved and a saved life. The relationship of leaven to the evil of the old life and of no leaven to the righteousness of the new life is incidental. The focus is on discontinuity, just as in the parable it is on permeation and influence.

In following out the story of the Exodus it becomes clear that, after the seven restricted days, the Israelites were again allowed to make leavened bread—though not from *Egyptian* leaven. At the Feast of Pentecost, in fact, the bread offered to the Lord *had* to be “baked with leaven” (Lev. 23:17), which He would hardly have required had leaven intrinsically represented evil. Otherwise that feast would have been a perpetual reminder of God’s tolerance of evil rather than of His holiness and goodness (v. 21).

The term *leaven* can incidentally represent something that is good, evil, or morally and spiritually neutral, depending on how it is used. But the primary analogy pertains to pervasive influence, which is leaven’s most obvious and distinctive characteristic.

A third lesson of this parable is that the positive influence of the kingdom comes from within. The **leaven** must be **hid** in order to have any impact. The idea here is not that of hiding so as not to be seen but rather of hiding in the sense of penetrating deeply, completely permeating the world

as leaven completely permeates the dough. Christians are not to be *of* the world, but we are to be *in* the world, because that is the only way the gospel can reach and affect the world (John 17:14-16). Christ sends His people into the world just as the Father sent Him into the world (v. 18). The supreme purpose of the church is to “go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15).

When **the kingdom of heaven** is faithfully reflected in the lives of believers, its influence in the world is both pervasive and positive. The life of Christ within believers is spiritual and moral leavening in the world. A Christian does not have to be a national leader, a famous entertainer, or a sports figure to influence the world for his Lord. It is the power of God’s kingdom within a believer that makes his witness effective, and that is the influence on the world that Christians should seek to have.

That the meaning of these two parables was immediately clear to the disciples is seen in the fact that afterward they did not ask Jesus to explain them. Instead they asked Him to explain the parable of the wheat and tares (Matt. 13:36). The obvious purpose of the mustard seed and leaven parables was to encourage the disciples and all subsequent believers.

Each week, hundreds of new churches are started throughout the world. In China—which is still closed to missionary work, overt evangelism, and free worship—it is estimated that there are perhaps 50 million or more Christians! Most of the world’s people have the Scriptures printed in their own language, and more and more languages are added to the list each year. Through radio and literature, many millions are being reached with the gospel who could never personally hear it preached or taught.

But evangelism and other work and witness of the church often seem to have little immediate or noticeable effect. Even with the great growth and impact of the church in the world today, from the human perspective the world seems to be winning the contest for men’s souls by a wide gap. As the church grows in numbers, so does world population; and, by comparison, God’s people are still a remnant. As thousands of new converts are won daily in some countries, in others the church is losing membership and influence.

How much more reason did the disciples have for being discouraged and perplexed about the prospects of Christ’s kingdom on

earth? The Messiah Himself was daily meeting more and more opposition and receiving more and severer threats against His life. The twelve knew that they themselves were totally unprepared to win the world for the Lord. If the Son of God Himself was rejected and put to death, what could a handful of His weak, insignificant followers hope to accomplish after He was gone?

But Jesus' purpose in these two parables, as in many others teachings, was to assure the apostles, the early church, and every believer in every age that ultimately His kingdom not only would not fail but would prosper and grow Christianity will win, evil will be destroyed, and Jesus will reign. Christ Himself is building His church, and the very "gates of Hades [death itself] shall not overpower it" (Matt. 16:18).

THE INTERPRETATION OF THE PARABLE OF THE WHEAT AND TARES

All these things Jesus spoke to the multitudes in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable, so that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world."

Then He left the multitudes, and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field." And He answered and said, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, and the field is the world; and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one; and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. Therefore just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear." (13:34-43)

Before he presents the interpretation of the parable of the wheat and tares, Matthew explains that Jesus' speaking in parables was not an afterthought but had been prophesied in God's Word hundreds of years earlier. **To the multitudes Jesus did not speak . . . without a parable,** Matthew says, **so that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled.**

Asaph, a **prophet** and seer (2 Chron. 29:30), wrote Psalm 78, from which Matthew here quotes: **I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world.** The rejection of His messiahship did not catch the Lord by surprise, and the postponement of the kingdom was not a backup plan. The **things hidden since the foundation of the world** pertained to "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven," which Jesus explained to His disciples but not the unbelieving multitudes and religious leaders (Matt. 13:11-16). To those who rejected Him, He spoke "in parables; because while seeing they [did] not see, and while hearing they [did] not hear, nor [did] they understand" (v. 13). God made no alterations of His plan of redemption. Everything was exactly on schedule and according to the predictions of His Word.

After telling the parables of the mustard seed and leaven, **He left the multitudes, and went back into the house** where He had been staying (see 13:1). As soon as they were all inside, **His disciples came to Him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field."**

Although they did not fully understand that parable, the fact that they called it **the parable of the tares** shows they realized the major emphasis was on the **tares** rather than the wheat. The parable was obviously about judgment, and **the tares** obviously represented unbelievers. The disciples' question may have reflected the same attitude as that of the slaves in the parable—"Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?" (v. 28). James and John demonstrated their attitude toward unbelievers when they asked Jesus' permission "to command fire to come down from heaven and consume" the Samaritans who refused to receive Him (Luke 9:54).

All the disciples were doubtlessly wondering why the wicked **tares** would be allowed to coexist with the good wheat. Had the landowner done as the slaves suggested and had all the tares immediately been pulled out and destroyed, the disciples would have readily understood. But as it was,

they were perplexed about the landowner's reaction, because they still did not understand the greatness of God's grace or His plan of redemption for the intermediate and millennial periods of the kingdom before Christ would judge the world.

The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, Jesus began, **and the field is the world**. The disciples knew that by **the Son of Man** Jesus referred to Himself. Because it focused on His humility and humanity in the incarnation, it was the title He most commonly used of Himself. It beautifully identified Him as He fully participated in human life as the perfect Man, the second Adam, and the sinless representative of the human race. It was also a title clearly understood by Jews as referring to the Messiah (Luke 22:69; cf. Dan. 7:13). The title is used of Jesus by others only twice in the New Testament, once by Paul (Acts 7:56) and once by John (Rev. 14:14).

The one who sows is Jesus Christ, **the Son of Man**, and He is sowing in His own **field**, which **is the world**. It is difficult to understand why so many interpreters maintain that **the field** in this parable represents the church, and that Jesus' point is that true and false believers, represented by the wheat and tares, will exist together in the church throughout the present age. The Lord could not have identified **the field** more explicitly. It is **the world**, not the church. This is a picture of the church in the world, not of the world in the church.

Although Satan is temporarily the ruler of this **world**, it still belongs to God, who created it and will one day redeem and restore it. God's "creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now" (Rom. 8:21-22).

In the parable of the sower Jesus speaks of **the good seed** as "the word of the kingdom" (13:19); but here it represents **the sons of the kingdom**, whom the Lord scatters throughout **the world**. The Lord plants His people in the world as His witnesses, to grow and become fruitful plants of righteousness. **The sons of the kingdom** are faithful to the King and reflect His will and His standards before a wicked, corrupt, unbelieving **world**. Christians are not left in the world by accident but are placed there on divine assignment from their Lord.

The tares, on the other hand, **are the sons of the evil one**, who is Satan. All human beings are either spiritual children of God and **sons of the kingdom** through faith in His Son or they are spiritual **sons of the evil one**, simply by virtue of their sinful nature and unbelief (John 8:44; Eph. 2:2-3; 1 John 3:10; 5:19).

Jesus does not make the point in this parable, because it would not fit the analogy, but all **good seeds** were once **tares**; all **the sons of the kingdom** were once **sons of the evil one**. To go beyond the scope of this parable, while still using some of its figures, it could be said that the primary purpose of the “good seeds” in the world is to make converts of “tares,” that they might also become **sons of the kingdom**.

The enemy who sowed the tares is the devil, the evil one. As is evident from the wording of the parable itself (see v. 25), **sowed** here carries the idea of thoroughness. Throughout history the tares have outnumbered the wheat by enormous percentages; and some parts of the world seem to be totally sown with the seed of **the enemy**.

The harvest represents God’s judgment at **the end of the age**, when **the reapers**, who **are angels**, will execute judgment on unbelievers, just as the human reapers in the parable separated out **the tares**, which were then **gathered up and burned with fire**.

So shall it be at the end of the age, Jesus explains. The disciples were doubtlessly ready to put the sickle to the unbelieving tares right away, just as the landowner’s slaves were prepared to do (v. 28). This was revealed as the attitude of James and John toward the unbelieving Samaritans when they said, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (Luke (9:54).

In the parable we are told that “the wheat sprang up and bore grain, [and] the tares became evident also” (v. 26). Jesus does not elaborate on that statement, but in light of His other parable explanations, that aspect of the parable would seem to teach that most true believers can be identified by their spiritual and practical fruit (grain) and unbelievers by their lack of it.

The only reason given in the parable for not having the slaves pull out the obvious tares was that, in doing so, they might “root up the wheat with them” (v. 29). As observed above under the discussion of that verse, damage could be done to some of the good crop either because some

plants matured late and would be mistaken for tares because they did not yet have grain or because the roots were so intermingled that some good plants would be uprooted with the tares.

In addition to the fact that the church age is for evangelism and not judgment, Christians are not qualified to infallibly distinguish between true and false believers. Every time the church has presumed to do that it has produced an ungodly bloodbath. When the fourth-century Roman emperor Constantine required every person to make a profession of faith in Christ on pain of death, he succeeded in killing many true believers who refused to submit to his spurious brand of Christianity. During the Crusades of the Middle Ages, unbelievable brutality was committed against non-Christians, especially Muslims and Jews, in the name of the Prince of Peace. During the inquisitions in reaction to the Protestant Reformation, countless thousands of Christians who did not submit to the dogma and authority of Roman Catholicism were imprisoned, tortured, and executed.

This is not the age of God's judgment, and certainly not of judgment and execution by the church. While on earth, the Lord Himself would not lift a finger against His enemies. To Judas, who betrayed Him to His death, He offered the first sop at the Last Supper as a gesture of love and a final appeal for belief (John 13:26). For those who falsely accused Him and sent Him to the cross, He asked forgiveness (Luke 23:34). How, then, can His followers consider themselves ever justified in taking the role of judge or avenger and executioner? In the present age, believers are not God's instruments of judgment and destruction but of truth and grace. Toward unbelievers we are not to have hearts of condemnation but of compassion.

The church is called to preach and teach against sin and all unrighteousness, but, in doing that, its purpose is not to judge but to win souls, not to punish but to convert sons of the evil one into sons of the kingdom.

In any case, the Lord makes clear that the separation of the wheat and tares, of the sons of the kingdom and the sons of the evil one, would be only **at the end of the age**. In the meanwhile they exist side by side, breathing the same air, enjoying the same sunshine and rain, eating the same food, attending the same schools, working in the same factories and

offices, living in the same neighborhoods, and sometimes attending the same churches.

The **angels** whom **the Son of Man will send forth. . . will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire.** The whole earth is seen here as the Lord's **kingdom**, and truly He is the rightful monarch. Out of His world the **angels** collect **all stumbling blocks**—the devil's sons who work against God and seek to cause many to fall into hell and **those who commit lawlessness** by disobeying God's Word.

When Jesus returns, He will "come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense every man according to his deeds" (Matt. 16:27). The **angels** will deal "out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (2 Thess. 1:8-9).

Fire causes the greatest pain known to man, and **the furnace of fire** into which the sinners are **cast** represents the excruciating torment of hell, which is the destiny of every unbeliever. This **fire** of hell is unquenchable (Mark 9:44), eternal (Matt. 25:41), and is pictured finally as a great "lake of fire which burns with brimstone" (Rev. 19:20). The punishment is so fearsome that **in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**

Hell will not be a place, as some jokingly envision, where the ungodly will continue to do their thing while the godly do theirs in heaven. Hell will have no friendships, no fellowship, no camaraderie, no comfort. It will not even have the debauched pleasures in which the ungodly love to revel on earth. There will be no pleasure in hell of any kind or degree—only torment, "day and night forever and ever" (Rev. 20:10).

Jesus' last word of explanation is positive, beautiful, and hopeful: **Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.** When the Son of Man returns with His angels, they will not only perfectly separate out the wicked for eternal punishment but also the righteous for eternal blessing. The Lord "will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other" (Matt. 24:31). Then comes the long-anticipated and long-postponed kingdom of righteousness, in which there

will be no evil people and no evil deeds or even thoughts. This is the fulfilled, eternal **kingdom of our heavenly Father**, where, with all **the righteous** of all ages, we **will shine forth as the sun**. There we “will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (Dan. 12:3).

Lest anyone fail to take seriously these truths that are both fearsome and wonderful, Jesus added, **He who has ears, let him hear**. Every person who is uncertain about his relationship to God should ask himself if he is wheat or merely a tare that looks like wheat, if he is a child of God or of the evil one. If he does not belong to God, he can come to God, because God is in the business of making wheat out of tares, saints out of sinners.

Those who are sure they are sons of the kingdom should **hear** what Jesus says here in order that their attitude toward the world might be the loving, merciful, compassionate attitude of their Lord—who has called them to witness rather than condemn, to love rather than hate, to show mercy rather than judgment. In that way we prove ourselves “blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom [we will] appear as lights in the world” (Phil 2:15).

Entering the Kingdom (13:44-46)

The Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it. (13:44-46)

In the first four of the eight kingdom parables in Matthew 13, Jesus focuses on men's various responses to God's kingdom, on its present coexistence with Satan's kingdom, and on its power and influence in the world.

A basic question that would naturally have arisen in the minds of Jesus' hearers was, "How does one become a part of God's kingdom?" "Are people simply born into it, like they are born into citizenship of their country?" they wondered. "Or is it like being a Jew? Are we, as Jews, automatically citizens of the kingdom because we are descendants of Abraham, or must we do something else?"

In this third couplet of parables the Lord teaches about appropriating salvation and thereby becoming a citizen of God's kingdom and a member of His family.

THE PARABLE OF THE HIDDEN TREASURE

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field. (13:44)

As He does in the other parables, Jesus builds this simple story around an experience or situation familiar to His hearers. Few, if any, would themselves have found such a treasure; but the practice of hiding valuables in the ground was common. Because there were no banks or other public depositories, most people protected their valuables in a secret spot in the ground. When they needed money or decided to sell or trade a piece of jewelry, for instance, they would go to the place at night, uncover the jar or storage box, take out what was desired, and rebury the rest.

Because Palestine had been a battleground for hundreds of years, families would often even bury food, clothing, and various household objects to protect them from plundering enemy soldiers. The famed Jewish historian Josephus wrote, “The gold and the silver and the rest of that most precious furniture which the Jews had and which the owners treasured underground was done to withstand the fortunes of war.”

Over the years, the ground of Palestine became a veritable treasure house. When the owner of buried treasure died or was forcefully driven from the land—sometimes deported to a foreign land such as Assyria or Babylon—the treasure would be forever lost unless someone accidentally discovered it, as occasionally happened.

No doubt that was the fate of the **treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid** again. The man may have stumbled over part of the **treasure** or seen some of it protruding above ground as he happened to pass through the **field**. Or he may have been a hired hand who inadvertently dug it up while plowing or cultivating. In any case, the **field** did not belong to him, because, **from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field**.

Many Christians are embarrassed by this story, thinking Jesus used an unethical act to illustrate a spiritual truth. It seems to them that the **man** was obligated to tell the owner of the **field** about the **treasure**, since it was on his property and therefore rightfully belonged to him.

The point of the parable does not involve the ethics of what the **man** did, but rather his willingness to sacrifice everything he had in order to possess the **treasure**. But what he did was not unethical or dishonest.

In the first place, it is obvious that the treasure was not hidden by the present owner of the field and was unknown to him. Otherwise, he would have retrieved it before he sold the field. The **man** who bought the

field obviously knew the owner was not aware of the **treasure** or he would not have offered to buy the field, knowing the treasure would not be included in the deal.

In the second place, rabbinic law provided that “if a man finds scattered fruit or money, it belongs to the finder.” If a person came across money or other valuables that were obviously lost and whose owner was dead or unknown, the finder had the right to keep what was found.

In the third place, the basic honesty of the **man** is testified to by the fact that, had he been dishonest, he would simply have taken the **treasure** without any thought of buying the field. But he did not even use part of the **treasure** to buy the field; rather, he **sells all that he has, and buys that field.**

THE PARABLE OF THE PEARL OF GREAT

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it. (13:45-46)

An *emporos* (**merchant**) was a wholesale dealer, whose business was to buy and resell merchandise. He would travel about the country, perhaps to many countries, looking for items to buy and then sell for a profit. This particular **merchant** spent his time **seeking fine pearls.** He probably made regular visits to the various coastal areas where pearls were harvested and haggled with the divers or their employers over prices. Diving for pearls was extremely hazardous, and many divers lost their lives or ruined their health in obtaining the oysters that contained the beautiful gems. That fact, in addition to their scarcity and natural beauty, made **pearls** extremely precious.

Pearls were the most highly valued gems in the ancient world and were often bought as investments, much as diamonds are today. In the form of **pearls**, a great amount of wealth could be kept in a small space—concealed in one’s clothing while traveling or buried in a field for safekeeping, as was the treasure of the previous parable.

The Jewish Talmud spoke of pearls as being beyond price, and some Egyptians and Romans held the pearl in such awe that they worshiped it. Adorning their heads with “gold or pearls” apparently was a common practice among both Jewish and Gentile women (see 1 Tim. 2:9). When Jesus warned against believers’ casting their pearls before swine (Matt. 7:6), He was emphasizing the priceless value of the gospel and its attendant truths, which unbelievers disdain as worthless. In John’s vision of the New Jerusalem, the city had twelve pearl gates, and “each one of the gates was a single pearl” (Rev. 21:21).

It was reported that the wife of the Roman emperor Caligula often wore a vast fortune in pearls in her hair and on her ears, neck, wrists, and fingers. Cleopatra is said to have owned two extremely valuable pearls, each of which would be worth several million dollars in today’s market. When an extravagant ruler wanted to flaunt his wealth, he would sometimes dissolve a pearl in vinegar and drink it in his wine.

When the **merchant** came across **one pearl of great value**, he **went and sold all that he had, and bought it**. Obviously the **merchant** considered that particular **pearl** to have been worth more than all his other pearls together, because they would have been included in the sale of **all that he had**.

Because the emphasis of these parables is personal appropriation of **the kingdom of heaven**, the message is obviously one of salvation. In this context, **the kingdom of heaven** represents the saving knowledge of God through trust in His Son and all the benefits and glory that relationship brings.

LESSONS FROM THE PARABLES

From the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price we can learn at least six valuable lessons about **the kingdom**, and therefore about salvation: it must be personally appropriated, it is priceless, it is not superficially visible, it is the source of true joy, it may be entered from different circumstances, and it is made personal by a transaction.

THE KINGDOM MUST BE PERSONALLY APPROPRIATED

The central truth of these two parables is that the kingdom of heaven must be personally appropriated. It is not obtained by natural inheritance, as one automatically becomes a member of his parents' race or a citizen of their country. Both parables center around a single individual who sacrifices all that he has in order to personally obtain that which has become immeasurably valuable to him.

Every human being is under God's dominion in the sense that he lives on the earth—which is under the Lord's ultimate control, despite Satan's temporary and limited power over it. And an unbeliever who associates with believers can benefit from many blessings of the kingdom because of that association. Nevertheless, although an unbeliever may attend an evangelical church, enjoy biblical preaching, and be a professing and baptized member of a church, he is not a citizen of the kingdom. Such superficial and nongenuine “sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness,” where “there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12).

As Paul reminded his Jewish brethren, “They are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants” (Rom. 9:6-7). Even under the Old Covenant a person could be a Jew racially, nationally, and religiously—fully identified with God's chosen people in those outward ways—and yet have no part in the true, spiritual Israel. In the same way, a person can be born into a family who traces its church membership back for many generations, and yet have no part in Christ's true church. Although it gives many advantages, even being born into a family of godly believers does not make a person a Christian. To be saved, he must make his own decision to receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

THE KINGDOM IS PRICELESS

The parables express the value of salvation through the idea that it is worth selling all one possesses in order to receive it.

A major diamond mining company in South Africa specializes in mining certain coastal areas where the rough gems have been deposited

below some fifty or so feet of stone, gravel, and sand. After giant earth movers remove the cover layers, the diamond-bearing conglomerate is dynamited and then excavated by hydraulic water pressure. Using large nylon brushes, workers sweep out all the crevices and hollows to be sure nothing is lost. The loosened conglomerate is then pounded, crushed, washed, and sifted to discover every possible diamond. It is estimated that some 180 million parts of earth are processed to yield one part diamond.

Though written at least 3,000 years ago, Job's description of man's tireless quest for riches sounds amazingly contemporary:

Surely there is a mine for silver, and a place where they refine gold. . . . Man puts an end to darkness, and to the farthest limit he searches out the rock in gloom and deep shadow. He sinks a shaft far from habitation, forgotten by the foot; they hang and swing to and fro far from men&. Its rocks are the source of sapphires, and its dust contains gold. The path no bird of prey knows, nor has the falcon's eye caught sight of it. & He hews out channels through the rocks; and his eye sees anything precious. He dams up the streams from flowing; and what is hidden he brings out to the light." (Job 28:1, 3-4, 6-7, 10-11)

For all the efforts taken to find, mine, refine, cut, polish, mount, sell, and buy precious stones and metals, none of them offers anything truly worthwhile or lasting. They cannot heal a broken relationship, give peace to a troubled mind, or forgive a sinful heart. They offer little for the present and nothing for the future.

"But where can wisdom be found?" Job asks. "And where is the place of understanding? Man does not know its value, nor is it found in the land of the living. The deep says, 'It is not in me'; and the sea says, 'It is not with me.' Pure gold cannot be given in exchange for it, nor can silver be weighed as its price. . . . Thus it is hidden from the eyes of all living. . . . God understands its way; and He knows its place. . . . And to man He

said, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding’” (Job 28:12-15, 21, 23, 28).

On the immeasurable worth of the kingdom of heaven, the nineteenth-century Scottish preacher Thomas Guthrie wrote, “In the blood of Christ to wash out sin’s darkest stains, in the grace of God to purify the foulest heart, in peace to calm life’s roughest storms, in hopes to cheer guilt’s darkest hour, in a courage that defies death and descends calmly into the tomb, in that which makes the poorest rich and without which the richest are poor indeed, the gospel ‘has treasures greater far than east or west unfold, and its rewards more precious are than all the stores of gold’” (Thomas Guthrie, *The Parables* [London: Alexander Strahan, 1866], p. 213).

The blessing of being a child of God through faith in Christ is utterly priceless, more valuable than all the possessions the richest man could acquire. There is absolutely nothing to compare to it in worth and beauty, because it is “an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away” (1 Pet. 1:4). It is forgiveness, love, peace, happiness, virtue, purity, righteousness, eternal life, glory, and more.

When Robert Herbert Thompson—who owned 180 newspapers, controlled 290 other companies, and was personally worth more than 300 million dollars—was asked how much he would give to buy the *New York Times* newspaper, he is said to have replied, “I’d mortgage my soul.” If they could, many people would do just that in order to achieve the possessions, fame, or power for which they lust.

The value of God’s kingdom far exceeds that of all earthly riches and advantages together—and would still exceed them in worth even if they brought the satisfaction they promise. Yet God offers His priceless kingdom to any person, no matter how poor, how insignificant, how sinful, who trusts in Christ. The price is the same for everyone—all they have. For those whose hearts are genuinely turned to Christ, whatever values they have clung to in the past will be exchanged eagerly for this priceless treasure.

THE KINGDOM IS NOT SUPERFICIALLY VISIBLE

When Jesus was “questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, ‘The kingdom

of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, “Look, here it is!” or “There it is!” (Luke 17:20-21). The kingdom will not be observable until Jesus returns and establishes His millennial rule over the earth. At that time He “is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels,” and men will “see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom” (Matt. 16:27-28). But the present kingdom “is not of this world” (John 18:36).

“A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God,” Paul tells us; “for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor. 2:14). In his next letter to Corinth the apostle further explains that “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). Even when the truth of the gospel is clearly presented to him, the natural man cannot see it. As long as he resists the moving of God’s Spirit on his heart, he cannot see past the spiritual blinders Satan has placed over his eyes. He is completely content to seek his ephemeral pleasures and the things which can never satisfy, considering the trinkets of the world to be of great value and the gospel of salvation to be worthless.

One writer expresses the truth in these words: “Under the form of a man, under the privacy and poverty of a Nazarene, was the fullness of the Godhead hidden that day from the wise and prudent of the world. The light was near them and yet they did not see it. The riches of divine grace were brought to their door and yet they continued poor and miserable.”

The treasure of salvation is not obvious to men, and it is therefore not something they naturally seek. They do not understand why it is so prized by Christians and why some people give up so much—their self-dependency, sinful pleasures, and sometimes even their social, political, and economic freedom and welfare—to gain what seems to be so little. They cannot understand why believers willingly live by standards of ethics and morality that go against man’s deepest drives and lusts. The way of the kingdom is narrow and unattractive to the natural man, and that is why so few find it or desire to walk in it once it is found (Matt. 7:14).

The full value of a pearl may not be evident to the average person, who may admire its beauty yet be unaware of its priceless nature. Many people have passing admiration for Jesus and the gospel but are totally unaware of the supreme and priceless gift that could be theirs in belonging

to Him. They see the pearl in plain view, but to their worldly eyes it has little worth. Jesus “was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:9-11).

THE KINGDOM IS THE SOURCE OF TRUE JOY

It was from joy that the man sold all he had in order to buy the field that held the priceless treasure. Joy is a basic desire in every human being and is the desire that all the others either directly or indirectly serve. We like to eat because food brings joy and satisfaction to our palate and a good feeling and health to our bodies. The desire for money is primarily based in the joy we hope to find in the things money can buy. Fame, power, knowledge, and all other things we long after are desired for the joy it is hoped they will bring. Even the miser, who seems to love money for its own sake, hordes his possessions for the joy the hoarding brings. Some people thrive on misery, because they find joy in feeling sorry for themselves.

Yet all of those joys are temporary and disappointing. The only true and eternal joy is the joy found in Christ and His kingdom, because man was made by God for Himself. Human satisfaction can be found only in God’s divine provision.

After Jesus exhorted the twelve to abide in Him and to have His words abide in them, to prove their true discipleship by bearing much fruit, and to keep His commandments and so abide in His love, He said, “These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (John 15:1-11). A short while later in the same discourse He said, “Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be made full” (16:24).

The apostle John declares in the opening of his first letter, “These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete” (1 John 1:4). Paul tells us that “the kingdom of God is . . . peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17); and in the beautiful benediction of that letter he prays for his readers, “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”

(15:13). True joy comes only in the discovery and appropriation of Christ and His kingdom through trust in Him.

THE KINGDOM MAY BE ENTERED FROM DIFFERENT CIRCUMSTANCES

A fifth principle found in these two parables is that a person may come into the kingdom out of different circumstances. There is no precondition for turning from sin and turning to Christ in faith. A person does not have to become anything else before he becomes a Christian, and he can come from wherever he may be.

The two parables are much alike in that the main character in each is a man who discovers something of extreme value and sacrifices everything he owns to buy it. But the ways in which they come across their precious treasures are vastly different, almost opposite. In the first parable the man comes upon the treasure completely by accident. As far as we are told, he was not looking for anything and certainly not a priceless treasure. In the second parable, however, the man was diligently looking for the very thing he eventually found and bought.

In the course of going about his normal business of earning a living, the first man was working in the field or perhaps passing through it on a journey. Finding a treasure was the last thing on his mind.

In a similar way, many people come across the gospel while pursuing the activities of their daily life, with no expectation or concern for salvation or anything else spiritual. While busily occupied with earning a living, caring for a family, getting an education, or building a career, they hear a sermon, read a book, listen to a tape, or have a conversation that presents the gracious claims and promises of Christ. By the Spirit's gracious power they recognize the priceless value of the message, and they believe, are saved, and inherit the kingdom.

That is what happened to Paul. His experience was unique in that it was a dramatic, awesome, and audible encounter with the risen Christ and in that he was called to be an apostle. But it was not unique in the fact that trusting Christ as Lord and Savior was not his intention. He was, in fact, in the midst of zealously persecuting those who trusted in Christ. In the nearly two millennia since then, millions of others have been convicted and converted by the power of God while in the midst of a life of denying and opposing Him. Some have come to church or to an evangelistic

meeting to mock the preacher or ridicule the gospel and left a child of the kingdom.

The woman at the well near Sychar had come there simply to draw water and go on about her chores, but she encountered the Source of living water, went home redeemed, and led many others to redemption (John 4:5-42). The blind beggar in Jerusalem whom Jesus healed by applying clay to the man's eyes and having him wash in the Pool of Siloam did not even know who Jesus was—much less ask Him for healing and still less for salvation. But he was healed immediately and eventually received salvation as well (John 9:1-38).

Charles Haddon Spurgeon grew up in a Christian home, but as a boy he attended church only because it was the proper thing to do. He was not immoral or rebellious but was basically satisfied with his life and was not seeking any more religion than he had. One New Year's morning, when he was fifteen years old, he decided he ought to attend the service at his church. When the snow and cold wind became too fierce for him, he ducked into a little storefront type of church, as much to get out of the cold as anything.

“When I could go no further,” he writes of the event, “I turned down a court and came to a little Primitive Methodist church. The preacher who was to have conducted the service never got there because he was held up by the weather, and quickly one of the officers had to be brought forward to conduct the service with the congregation of perhaps fifteen people. The man was really stupid. His text was, ‘Look unto Me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.’ And he just kept repeating it because he had nothing else to say.” But something about Spurgeon caught the man's eye, and he said, “Young man, you look very miserable. And miserable in life and miserable in death you will be if you don't obey my text.” He then shouted, “Young man, look to Jesus! Look, look, look!” “I looked,” said Spurgeon; “and then and there the cloud was gone and the darkness rolled away and that moment I saw the Son.”

Like Paul, the woman of Sychar, the beggar in Jerusalem, and countless others, Spurgeon was looking for nothing but found everything.

The second parable, on the other hand, depicts a man whose life business was searching for the thing he eventually found. He represents the seeker after God who for years looks everywhere for meaning and purpose in life, trying one religion or philosophy and then another. He

finds nothing that satisfies but believes that the true way is out there if he can only find it, and he never stops looking.

That was the experience of the Ethiopian eunuch whom the Holy Spirit led Philip to intercept on the road to Gaza. The man was a Gentile proselyte who had come to Jerusalem to worship, and as he returned home he was reading from Isaiah but understanding nothing of what he read. After all his seeking and study, he was still confused and unsatisfied. But when Philip explained that Isaiah was writing about Christ, the Savior, the Ethiopian immediately believed. His long quest was ended, and he “went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:26-39).

Another Gentile, Cornelius, was also a God-fearing proselyte, who “gave many alms to the Jewish people, and prayed to God continually.” God honored his sincere seeking by sending Peter to explain the gospel and lead him and his household to salvation (Acts 10). In similar ways, the Gentile Lydia (Acts 16:14-15) and both Jewish and Greek worshipers in the synagogue at Berea (17:10-12) sought and found the Lord.

Several years ago I met a couple attending our church who were celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary. The husband had been blind for a number of years, and they were visiting from a distant state. They told me they had sought God all of their married lives, trying one religion after another and finally ending up in the Unity cult. They soon came to realize that that religion was just as empty as their lives, and they went home from a service one day in utter despair. They turned on the radio and came across one of my broadcasts. After listening intently during the first half of the message, they both broke down in tears and said to each other, “This is the truth for which we’ve been searching for fifty years. At last we’ve found it!”

All of those men and women were looking for spiritual pearls and found the one that was priceless beyond their greatest hopes.

THE KINGDOM IS MADE PERSONAL BY A TRANSACTION

In both parables the priceless object was bought at the expense of every possession the finder owned. For that reason some Christians feel uncomfortable about these parables, because they seem to teach that salvation can be bought. But from beginning to end, Scripture makes abundantly clear that salvation is totally the free gift of God. Yet

interpreted in the right way, salvation is bought in the sense that the person who accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior surrenders everything he has to Him.

In all parables, the physical and earthly is used to illustrate the spiritual and heavenly. In these two parables the economic transaction of buying represents the spiritual transaction of surrender. There *is* an exchange in salvation. The old is exchanged for the new.

A familiar Old Testament passage that speaks of salvation as the free gift of God uses the expression “come, buy” twice in one verse. “Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters,” Isaiah wrote, “and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost” (Isa. 55:1). The buying is not with money or any other possessions, material or otherwise. But in this passage, just as in the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price, a transaction is clear. The sinner gives up all the worthless things he has while freely receiving all the priceless things God has to give in Christ. What we give up in no way pays for salvation. To the contrary, what we give up not only is worthless but worse than worthless. Even the “righteous deeds” of an unbeliever “are like a filthy garment” (Isa. 64:6).

In eagerness to defend one truth of the gospel, it is possible to contradict or compromise another. In order to defend the freeness of the gospel, some interpreters deny or underplay the cost of salvation to believers as well as to Christ. Only Christ’s payment *purchases* salvation, but the true believer will also be willing to pay whatever cost salvation involves. Apart from the willingness to yield all he has, a person’s profession of faith is hollow and worthless. The rich young ruler of Matthew 19:16-22 is the classic example of one who saw the value of the pearl but refused to submit all he was and had to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

It must be noted that such surrender is not a human work to gain salvation but a part of the saving work of God wrought in the soul by the Holy Spirit.

Several other men who declared their intention to follow Jesus made various excuses for not doing so, proving their insincerity by their unwillingness to do what Jesus required. Of one man He demanded the sacrifice of comfort by joining “the Son of Man [who] has nowhere to lay His head” (Matt. 8:20); and of another He demanded the sacrifice of an

inheritance the man wanted to receive when his father died (v. 21). Of another He demanded the sacrifice of family ties (Luke 9:61-62), and of still another He demanded surrender of wealth already possessed (Luke 18:22).

Surrender of possessions, whether great or small, present or prospective, cannot buy salvation. They have no spiritual merit and are of no value to God. Surrender is necessary not because it can buy anything but because it is inevitable when salvation is truly sought. Salvation that is not desired above everything else is not truly desired. Salvation costs nothing in the sense of payment but everything in the sense of surrender. "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me," Jesus said, "and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life shall lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake shall find it" (Matt. 10:37-39). On another occasion the Lord said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Matt. 16:24). To take up the cross is to forfeit everything, including physical life.

Speaking of coming to Him for salvation, Jesus said,

For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost, to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying, "This man began to build and was not able to finish." Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and take counsel whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks terms of peace. So therefore, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions. (Luke 14:28-33)

Jesus could not have made clearer the truth that the person who will not surrender his old life will never have the new.

Most people who consider receiving Christ as Savior and Lord do not consciously inventory all their material, social, and other possessions to see if He is worth sacrificing those things for. When they discover the infinite value of salvation, they simply yield to Christ. Their focus is not on what they give up but on what they receive. But if their redemption is genuine, their lives will evidence a willingness to surrender whatever stands between them and faithfulness to their Lord.

Some of men's most cherished possessions are their sins; and these must certainly be surrendered, because it is from sin that Christ saves us. No one can come to Christ by stopping his stealing, cursing, immorality, lying, or a dozen such sins. But the one who truly belongs to Him will long to give up those sins and every other. This is the attitude taught by Jesus in the Beatitudes—poverty of spirit that recognizes the bankruptcy of all human resources, mourning over sin, meekness in the presence of God, and hunger and thirst for righteousness in exchange for sin and guilt. God's sovereign, saving work incorporates that response.

In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul recounts his many personal advantages and achievements before he was saved. I was "circumcised the eighth day," he says, "of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me," he continues to explain, "I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ" (Phil. 3:5-7). No New Testament writer more staunchly defends the freeness of salvation than does Paul. Yet he testifies that, in coming to Christ, he counted as loss—that is, he willingly surrendered as worthless—everything he was and had. Like the men who bought the treasure in the field and the pearl of great value, he liquidated everything he had for the priceless Treasure he had discovered.

Judgment and Proclamation

(13:47-52)

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down, and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away. So it will be at the end of the age; the angels shall come forth, and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

“Have you understood all these things?” They said to Him, “Yes.” And He said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings forth out of his treasure things new and old.” (13:47-52)

The last two of the eight parables on the kingdom found in Matthew 13 illustrate the separation and judgment of unbelievers and the preaching and teaching of God’s ministers. The first gives a warning, and the second gives a call to proclaim that warning to a condemned world.

THE PARABLE OF THE DRAGNET—JUDGMENT

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down, and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away. So it will be at the end of the age; the angels shall come forth, and take out the wicked from among

the righteous, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (13:47-50)

In the previous parables Jesus illustrated the nature of the kingdom, the power and influence of the kingdom, and the personal appropriation of the kingdom. Now He focuses again (see v. 42) on the judgment connected with the kingdom.

The parable of the dragnet is a frightening warning about what happens to the wicked when they are separated from the righteous in the last days. Here Jesus gives a vivid picture of judgment, a brief explanation of the principle of judgment, and a sobering warning about the peril of judgment.

THE PICTURE

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down, and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away.” (13:47-48)

The activity Jesus uses to illustrate God’s judgment on unbelievers was a common one to His hearers. It was especially familiar to those who lived near the Sea of Galilee, and most especially to those, including several of the disciples, who were fisherman.

On the Sea of Galilee three basic methods of fishing were employed, all of which are still used there today. The first was with a line and hook, which was used to catch one fish at a time. That was the type of fishing the Lord instructed Peter to do when they needed money to pay the two-drachma tax (Matt. 17:24-27).

The other two types of fishing involved nets. One net was a small, one-man casting net called an *amphiblēstron*. Peter and his brother Andrew were taking turns casting an *amphiblēstron* when Jesus called them to become “fishers of men” (Matt. 4:18-19). The folded net was carried over the fisherman’s shoulder as he waded in shallow water looking for a school of fish. When the fish were near enough, he would hold the center cord in one hand and with the other hand throw the net so

that it opened into a large circle and came down over the fish. Weights around the perimeter of the net caused it to sink and trap the fish. The fisherman then pulled on the cord, which was attached to the center of the net and drew it around the fish like a sack. When the net had been pulled closed, the fisherman would haul his catch to shore.

A second type of net was the *sagēnē*, a very large **dragnet**, or seine, that required a team of fishermen to operate and sometimes covered as much as a half square mile. It was pulled into a giant circle around the fish, between two boats out in deep water or by one boat when working from the shore. In the latter case, one end of *Judgment and Proclamation* (13:47-52) 13:49

the net would be firmly moored on shore while the other was attached to the boat, which would make a large circle out into the water and come back to the starting place. Floats were attached to the top of the net and weights to the bottom, forming a wall of net from the surface to the bottom of the lake.

Because the net permitted nothing to escape, all sorts of things besides the desirable fish were caught. It swept everything in its path— weeds, objects dropped overboard from boats, all manner of sea life, and **fish of every kind**.

When the net was filled, it would take a large number of men several hours just to drag **it up on the beach**. Then **they sat down, and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away**. The **fish** to be carried to a distant market would be put in **containers** with water to keep the fish alive, and those that were to be sold nearby were placed in dry **containers**, usually baskets.

THE PRINCIPLE

So it will be at the end of the age; the angels shall come forth, and take out the wicked from among the righteous, (13:49)

Jesus begins His interpretation of the parable by explaining that the separation of the good and bad fish represents God's judgment **at the end of the age**. The parable of the wheat and tares illustrates the coexistence of

believers and unbelievers in the present form of the kingdom, and this parable illustrates their separation as the form of the kingdom changes.

In His interpretation of the parable of the wheat and tares Jesus stated the same truth He gives here: **At the end of the age [His] angels shall come forth, and take out the wicked from among the righteous** (cf. vv. 39-41). During the present era, which is the church age, God permits unbelief and unrighteousness. But the time is coming when His toleration will end and His judgment begins. The first phase of judgment will be the separation of **the wicked from among the righteous**, the tares from among the wheat. The dragnet of God's judgment moves silently through the sea of mankind and draws all men to the shores of eternity for final separation to their ultimate destiny—believers to eternal life and unbelievers to eternal damnation.

Men move about within that net as if they were forever free. It may touch them from time to time, as it were, startling them. But they quickly swim away, thinking they have escaped, not realizing they are completely and inescapably encompassed in God's sovereign plan. The invisible web of God's judgment encroaches on every human being just as that of the dragnet encroaches on the fish. Most men do not perceive the kingdom, and they do not see God working in the world. They may be briefly moved by the grace of the gospel or frightened by the threat of judgment; but they soon return to their old ways of thinking and living, oblivious to the things of eternity. But when man's day is over and Christ returns to set up His glorious kingdom, then judgment will come.

Jesus is not giving a full description of the last days, but is concentrating on the judgment of unbelievers. He is speaking of judgment in general, with special focus on what is referred to as the final judgment at the great white throne (Rev. 20:11-15). There "the dead, the great and the small" will be "judged, everyone of them" (vv. 12-13).

As already mentioned in the interpretation of the wheat and tares parable (v. 41) and declared in many other New Testament passages (e.g., Matt. 24:31; 25:31-32; Rev. 14:19; 15:5-16:21), **angels** are the Lord's instruments of separation and execution of sentence. The separation will include all persons who are then living and all who have died—"those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment" (John 5:29).

Some people wonder why Jesus repeated the teaching about the angelic separation in this parable, when it is almost word for word what He had just said at the end of His explanation of the wheat and tares (Matt. 13:41). For one thing, the emphasis here is exclusively on the aspect of separation of believers from unbelievers, whereas in the other parable the major emphasis is on their coexistence. For another, it is such a vitally important truth that it bears frequent repetition.

Over and over Jesus warns about the horrors of hell and pleads with men to avoid it by coming to Him for salvation. He warned that, just as in the days of Noah before the flood, people will be “eating and drinking, . . . marrying and giving in marriage&. Then there shall be two men in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left” (Matt. 24:38, 40-41).

God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 18:23) and does not desire that anyone perish (2 Pet. 3:9). The Lord wept over Jerusalem because the people would not come to Him and be saved (Luke 19:41). He warned about hell not to put people in agony but to save them from it. Hell was not even created for men but for the devil and his fallen angels (Matt. 25:41).

THE PERIL

and will cast them into the furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (13:50)

Perhaps no doctrine is harder to accept emotionally than the doctrine of hell. Yet it is too clear and too often mentioned in Scripture either to deny or to ignore. Jesus spoke more of hell than any of the prophets or apostles did—perhaps for the reason that its horrible truth would be all but impossible to accept had not the Son of God Himself absolutely affirmed it. It had special emphasis in Jesus’ teaching from the beginning to the end of His earthly ministry. He said more about hell than about love. More than all other teachers in the Bible combined, He warned men of hell, promising no escape for those who refused His gracious, loving offer of salvation.

In the Sermon on the Mount alone, the Lord gives several specific and direct warnings about hell: “Whoever shall say, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell” (Matt. 5:22), and, “It is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell” (v. 29; cf. v. 30; 18:8-9; Mark 9:43).

Jesus declares that the wicked “sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12) and that unbelieving Capernaum would “descend to Hades” (11:23; cf. Luke 10:15). He asked the evil and hypocritical scribes and Pharisees, “How shall you escape the sentence of hell?” (Matt. 23:33). On many other occasions Jesus alludes to hell and warns about damnation (5:20; 7:13,19, 23, 27; 10:28; 12:36; 16:18; 18:8-9; 21:43-44; 23:14-15; 24:40-41, 51; 25:30, 46; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:9-10, 46; 16:23; John 5:29; 15:6).

Hell is not merely the fate of forever reliving bad memories or of going out into nothingness, as many people believe and teach. Nor is it a place where sinners will continue their sinning, unrestrained and unrebuked. There will be no pleasure at all in hell, not even the perverted pleasure of sin—only its punishment.

When an interviewer asked a young punk rock singer what she was looking forward to at the end of her career, she replied, “Death. I’m looking forward to death.” When asked why, she said, “I want to go to hell, because hell will be fun.”

Such deception is tragic beyond words. Nothing could less describe hell than fun. The human mind cannot begin to conceive of the eternal horror that is hell. Even the biblical figures related to hell are only suggestive, because the finite mind cannot comprehend infinite pain and torment any more than it can comprehend infinite joy and bliss. But from God’s Word we learn four basic truths about **the furnace of fire** that will help us to partially grasp its terror.

First, hell is a place of constant torment, misery, pain. The torment is often described as darkness (Matt. 22:13), where no light can penetrate, and nothing can be seen. Throughout the numberless eons of eternity the damned will never again see light or anything that light illumines. Hell’s torment is also described as fire that will never go out and cannot be extinguished (Mark 9:43) and from which the damned will never find

relief. Hell could not be other than a place where **there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**

Second, hell will involve the torment of both body and soul. Neither the soul nor the body is annihilated at death; nor will they ever be. When an unsaved person dies, his soul goes out from the presence of God into everlasting torment. At the resurrection of all the dead, the bodies of the unsaved will be raised, and those resurrected bodies will join the soul in hell's torment (Matt. 10:28; cf. John 5:29; Acts 24:15; Rev. 20:11-15). Just as believers will be fitted with resurrected bodies so they can enjoy the glories of heaven forever, unbelievers will be fitted with resurrected bodies so they can endure the torments of hell without being destroyed.

Jesus spoke of hell as a place "where their worm does not die" (Mark 9:44). When physical bodies are buried and begin to decay, the worms can attack them only as long as the flesh lasts. Once consumed, the body can experience no more harm. But the resurrected bodies of unbelievers will never be consumed, and the hellish "worms" that feed on them will themselves never die.

Third, the torments of hell will be experienced in varying degrees. For everyone in hell the suffering will be intense and permanent, but some will experience greater torment than others. "Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses," says the writer of Hebrews. "How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?" (Heb. 10:28-29). Those who willfully reject Jesus Christ and trample, as it were, on the sacrifice He made for them with His own blood will receive much greater punishment than those who had only the light of the Old Covenant. And on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the pagan cities of Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom than for the Jewish cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum—who not only had the light of the Old Covenant but the opportunity to see and hear the Son of God in person and to witness His miraculous works (Matt. 11:22-23).

In the parable of the slaves who awaited their master's return from the wedding feast, Jesus explains that "that slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, shall receive many

lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of flogging, will receive but few” (Luke 12:47-48).

“Hell will have such severe degrees,” writes John Gerstner, “that a sinner, were he able, would give the whole world if his sins could be one less.”

Fourth, the torment of hell will be everlasting. Nothing will be so horrible about hell as its endlessness. Jesus uses the same word to describe the duration of hell as the duration of heaven: “These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt. 25:46). People in hell will experience the total absence of hope.

Although God originally designed hell for the devil and his fallen angels, men who choose to follow Satan’s way instead of God’s will also suffer Satan’s fate.

The great Puritan writer and preacher John Bunyan describes hell with his customary vivid imagery:

[In hell] thou shalt have none but a company of damned souls with an innumerable company of devils to keep company with thee. While thou art in this world, the very thought of the devil’s appearing to thee makes thy flesh to tremble and thine hair ready to stand upright on thy head. But oh, what wilt thou do when not only the supposition of the devil’s appearing but the real society of all the devils of hell will be with thee—howling, roaring and screeching in such a hideous manner that thou wilt be even at thy wit’s end and ready to run stark mad again for anguish and torment. If after ten thousand years, an end should come, there would be comfort. But here is thy misery: here thou must be forever. When thou seest what an innumerable company of howling devils thou art amongst, thou shalt think this again—this is my portion forever. When thou hast been in hell so many thousand years as there are stars in the firmament or drops in the sea or sands on the seashore, yet thou hast to lie there forever. Oh, this one word—ever—how will it

torment thy soul. (*New Cyclopaedia of Prose Illustrations*, ed. Elon Foster [New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1877], p. 450)

THE PARABLE OF THE HOUSEHOLDER: PROCLAMATION

“Have you understood all these things?” They said to Him, “Yes.” And He said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings forth out of his treasure things new and old.” (13:51-52)

Understood comes from *sunīemi*, which has the literal meaning of bringing or putting together. “Have you rightly put **all these things** together?” Jesus was asking. “**Have you understood** what I have been saying about the kingdom in these parables? Do you comprehend the truth that the present form of the kingdom will continue to have good and evil in it? Do you realize that believers will continue to grow in numbers and to permeate and influence the world? Do you know that entering the kingdom involves the recognition of the worthlessness of everything a person has apart from salvation in Jesus Christ? Do you see that the final separation of the righteous and wicked is inexorable and inescapable, and that the fate of both is eternal—the righteous to everlasting life and the wicked to everlasting punishment?”

In answer, the disciples **said to Him, “Yes.”** But from what they later said and did, we know their understanding was far from perfect. But Jesus accepted their response as genuine; otherwise He would not have said to them the words of verse 52. On the level at which they were able to understand at that time, they **understood**.

Jesus had instructed the disciples to “beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest” (Matt. 9:38)—to proclaim the coming harvest of judgment and to warn men of it and tell them how to escape it while they could. In the following four chapters we see Him

specifically call them to this ministry and begin teaching, training, and in every way preparing them for it.

Based on their affirmative response, Jesus then **said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household.** A *grammateus* (scribe) literally referred to one who wrote. But among Jews the term had long carried the distinctive connotation of a man who was a learner, interpreter, and teacher of the law, God’s revealed Word that we now call the Old Testament. Although the scribes and rabbis had added so much tradition that it subordinated and often contradicted God’s true Word (Matt. 15:6), their purported task was to study and interpret Scripture. They were the theologians of Judaism, and many were members of the high Jewish council, the Sanhedrin.

Under Jesus’ instruction, each of the twelve was becoming a genuinely learned **scribe** and a true **disciple of the kingdom of heaven**. They had become **like a head of a household, who brings forth out of his treasure things new and old**. The **head of a household** was responsible for the entire welfare of the family, and a major part of his duty was to maintain ample supplies of food, clothing, and all other **things** the members of the **household** might need. He kept these supplies in a storehouse, or **treasure**, from which he would dispense items as they were needed.

The wise householder was frugal and was careful not to waste the supplies. When they were reusable, food that was uneaten and clothing that was no longer worn were returned to the **treasure** to be used again. When further need arose, economy demanded that these **old** supplies would be dispensed first, before any **things new** were issued.

The twelve disciples (learners) would become the twelve apostles (sent ones), Judas being replaced by Matthias (Acts 1:23). Through these twelve, along with Paul, the apostle appointed “last of all” (1 Cor. 15:8), the Lord entrusted the continued revelation of His Word and the founding of His church. They knew the **old** truths of His previous revelation and were being given additional truths that were **new**. They would proclaim the significance of both.

Brings forth is from *ekballō* and carries the idea of casting out, scattering, or distributing widely. In this context it also connotes

generosity, giving out the truth of God both wisely and liberally. Apart from the Lord Himself, the apostles were the supreme Bible scholars, preachers, teachers, and theologians of all time—scribes and disciples without equal (cf. Matt. 11:11).

As is clear from the parables of the sower, the wheat and tares, and the dragnet, the message of the gospel is not simply the offer of heaven but a warning about hell. What makes the gospel such *good* news is its power to save men from the indescribably *bad* destiny toward which every person without Christ is headed. A person does not have to choose hell to go there. He only has to refuse the claims of Jesus Christ—or do nothing at all.

Though not with the same degree of authority, Jesus' charge to the twelve is given to every believer, and in particular to those He has called to teach and preach His Word. It is an awesome responsibility to warn the unsaved about hell and to offer them the way of escape through our precious Lord. "Therefore knowing the fear [or terror] of the Lord," Paul says, "we persuade men" (2 Cor. 5:11). The Christian's heart is cold indeed who is not deeply concerned and exercised about those around him who are destined for the eternity of hell. To have the gift of eternal life but not to share it with those who now have only the prospect of eternal death is the epitome of selfishness and lovelessness.

Yet some who call themselves Christian refuse, in the name of love, to proclaim anything that is fearful or uncomfortable. I recently read that the purpose of a certain "Christian" broadcasting organization is "to be a good neighbor to a variety of listeners." The policy statement given to prospective broadcasters includes the instruction: "When you are preparing your program for these stations, please avoid using the following: criticism of other religions and references to conversion, missionaries, believers, unbelievers, old covenant, new covenant, church, the cross, crucifixion, Calvary, Christ, the blood of Christ, salvation through Christ, redemption through Christ, the Son of God, Jehovah or the Christian life. These people listening are hungering for words of comfort," the statement continues. "We ask you to adhere to these restrictions so that God's Word can continue to go forth. Please help us maintain our position of bringing comfort to suffering people."

How tragic that an organization dedicated to bringing comfort refuses to so much as mention the elements essential to the only message

that can bring true peace and comfort to a troubled soul! Whatever message of comfort would be left after complying with the restrictions of that network would be the false comfort that damns people by leaving them content in their sins. Whatever the foolish motivation for such thinking, it could not be the love of Christ—who loved the world and its people too much not to warn of the imminent and eternal danger that faces every person apart from Him.

The Power of **Unbelief** (13:53-58)

And it came about that when Jesus had finished these parables, He departed from there. And coming to His home town He began teaching them in their synagogue, so that they became astonished, and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom, and these miraculous powers? Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” And they took offense at Him. But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his home town, and in his own household.” And He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief. (13:53-58)

Although Jesus continued to teach many additional truths and to reinforce and illustrate those already taught, the eight parables of Matthew 13 mark the end of the disciples’ basic instruction. As noted earlier, Jesus’ use of parables was primarily in response to His rejection by the Jews. The same stories that clarified truth for His true followers obscured truth for those who refused to trust in Him. “All these things Jesus spoke to the multitudes in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable” (Matt. 13:34), because, as He had earlier explained to the disciples, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. . . . Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (vv. 11, 13).

As far as preparation of the disciples was concerned, the two most important parables of Matthew 13 were those of the sower and of the wheat and tares. The story of the sower made clear that some people would believe the gospel but many would not; and it prepared them to anticipate

the four basic responses men would make to the gospel. The vivid story of the wheat and tares made clear that, for the present period of Christ's kingdom, the saved and the unsaved would coexist side by side. The twelve—and all succeeding witnesses of Christ—would carry on their ministry in a time of both belief and unbelief and of both good and evil.

Beginning with 13:53 and continuing through the first part of chapter 16, Matthew records eight incidents in the life of the Lord that correspond to and demonstrate the truths presented in the two parables just mentioned.

The first incident involved the offense taken against Jesus by His hometown of Nazareth (13:54-58). To them Jesus was a stumbling block, and the soil of their hearts was obviously hard.

The second incident involved Herod (14:1-12), whose heart was also hard but who rejected the Lord more out of indifference than hatred.

The third incident had two parts and centered first on the large multitude whom Jesus miraculously fed and then around the people of Gennesaret (14:13-21, 34-36). In both instances, the initial fascination with Jesus was positive but superficial. The first group followed Him because they were fed and the second because they were healed. Their interest eventually withered, just like plants in shallow soil do when the sun comes out.

The fourth incident occurred between the two parts of the third and involved the twelve disciples, whose "good soil" was evidenced by their worshiping Jesus after He walked on the water and calmed the storm (14:22-33).

The fifth incident involved the scribes and Pharisees who tried to find an excuse to condemn Jesus (15:1-20), and it illustrates again the hard and stony ground of unbelieving rejection.

The sixth incident centered on the Canaanite woman who immediately confessed Jesus as Lord and begged Him to deliver her demon-possessed daughter (15:21-28). The soil of her heart was soft and fertile, and the seed of the Word took firm root.

The seventh incident involved the Galileans who brought their sick and afflicted to Jesus for healing but made no genuine commitment (Luke 15:29-39). Here was a mixture of shallow and thorny soils, in which the gospel was partially but not permanently received.

The eighth and last incident involved the Pharisees and Sadducees who sought to test and entrap Jesus by asking for a special sign (16:1-4). The soil of their hearts was obviously hard.

In these eight accounts there is exactly the ratio of belief to unbelief (one out of four) found in the parable of the sower. By the marvelous wisdom and provision of the Lord, the twelve, through these incidents, witnessed living demonstrations of the principles He had just taught them about men's response to the gospel in the present age. In these situations both the power of belief and the power of unbelief are revealed.

The power of belief is attested throughout Scripture. Abraham believed God and became the father of a great nation and of God's chosen people. Israel believed God and walked through the Red Sea on dry land. David believed God and was enabled to slay Goliath. Naaman believed God and was healed of his leprosy. Daniel believed God, and the lions could not harm him. A Roman centurion believed God, and his servant was healed. Two blind men believed God and received their sight and their salvation. Jairus believed God, and his daughter was brought back to life. The Philippian jailer and his household believed God and received eternal life. The list could go on and on.

But the list of accounts showing the power of unbelief is also long. Adam and Eve failed to believe God, and the whole world was cursed. The world itself refused to believe God's warning preached through Noah, and it was destroyed in the Flood, except for eight people. Pharaoh refused to believe God, and he lost his firstborn son, his entire army, and his own life. Israel refused to believe God and wandered forty years in the wilderness; and as a kingdom the people again refused to believe and were scattered for centuries among foreign nations. Aaron refused to believe God's command about worship and led the people into idolatry, resulting in the loss of 3,000 lives. Moses refused to believe God, and it cost him the privilege of entering the Promised Land. Nebuchadnezzar refused to believe God and became a senseless beast. Many would-be disciples refused to believe God because they were offended by Christ's teaching, and they entered into eternity without hope. The rich young ruler refused to believe God and forfeited eternal life. Most of the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees refused to believe God and were condemned to the eternal torment of hell. Although he lived for three years with Jesus, in the presence of the living Truth and Light, Judas refused to believe God and

was condemned to hell, which Jesus said was Judas's own place. Felix, Festus, and Agrippa refused to believe God through the witness of Paul, and they were lost forever.

Just as faith has the power to bring forgiveness of sins and eternal life, unbelief has the power to hold a person in his sins and under the condemnation of eternal hell. Just as belief has the power to bring eternal happiness, joy, peace, and glory in God's presence, unbelief has the power to bring eternal sorrow, pain, and anguish in God's absence.

As the parable of the sower illustrates, most of the response Jesus faced and the disciples would face was that of unbelief. Whether unbelief comes from the heart beaten hard by sin, from the rocky heart covered by a shallow layer of superficial belief, or from the thorny heart whose worldliness chokes out the truth of the gospel—all unbelief is a matter of will. Unbelief is a choice; it is saying no to God in spite of the evidence.

Matthew's account of the first incident illustrating the parable of the sower is preceded by the brief mention of Jesus' departure from Capernaum.

LEAVING CAPERNAUM

And it came about that when Jesus had finished these parables, He departed from there. (13:53)

Jesus had been ministering in and around Capernaum for about a year, using it as His home base (see 4:13; 8:5). But the majority of the people who saw and heard Him in that region eventually fell away, manifesting their rejection either by blasé indifference or direct opposition. Because of that rejection, His last teaching there was done entirely in **parables**, in order that, “while seeing they [would] not see, and while hearing they [would] not hear, nor . . . understand” (13:13). After Jesus finished the **parables** on the kingdom, **He departed from there.**

Because the Lord had spent more time there than anywhere else thus far in His ministry, Capernaum was especially guilty for rejecting Him. Earlier, Jesus had scorchingly rebuked them, saying, “And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You shall descend to

Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day” (11:23).

Jesus had, in effect, pronounced a curse on Capernaum, and when **He departed from there**, that city’s doom was imminent. Jesus never went there again except as He passed through to minister elsewhere. He had come into the city and demonstrated power that could only have been from God. Yet the people would not have Him as Lord. Many marveled and some criticized, but few believed. Now Capernaum’s opportunity was passed, and she entered a decline into oblivion from which she never recovered. Today the city is in virtually the same state of ruin—without houses or people—that it was a few centuries after Jesus was there. Apparently the town and the synagogue enjoyed a period of worldly prosperity for a while, but archaeological excavations show increasing pagan influence on the Jews there. The last synagogue built in Capernaum, erected over the floor of the one where Jesus taught, was decorated with various animals and mythological figures. Having rejected the true God, the people were at the mercy of false ones.

RETURNING TO NAZARETH

And coming to His home town He began teaching them in their synagogue, so that they became astonished, and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom, and these miraculous powers? Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” And they took offense at Him. But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his home town, and in his own household.” And He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief. (13:54-58)

Jesus’ **home town** was Nazareth, where Joseph and Mary went to live after returning from Egypt with their infant Son (2:23). It was to Nazareth that Jesus returned after His baptism and temptations (4:12-13); and we learn from Luke that the response to Him then was the same as it was on this occasion.

Luke reports that, after the wilderness temptations, “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit; & And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read” (Luke 4:14a, 16).

Jesus had been away only a short while and was still a familiar figure in the synagogue, where it was “His custom” to be every Sabbath. The crowd assembled on this particular Sabbath was essentially the same as it had been for many years; but Jesus was not the same. During the intervening time He had begun His ministry and suddenly become famous, because from the onset of His work the “news about Him spread through all the surrounding district, & and [He] was praised by all” (vv. 14b, 15b).

After Jesus stood and read the familiar messianic text of Isaiah 61:1-2, He handed the scroll to the synagogue attendant and sat down to comment on the reading. (The reader always stood to read the Scripture and then sat down as he gave an interpretation, lest he give the impression that his comments were equal in authority to God’s Word.) As He began to interpret, Jesus said, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”; and He probably made other comments as well. At first the people did not understand that Jesus was referring to Himself, because their initial response was quite favorable: “All were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips; and they were saying, ‘Is this not Joseph’s son?’” (Luke 4:17-22).

Knowing that the people’s praise was based merely on faithless recognition of His popularity and power, Jesus began to expose their real motives. He knew they wanted Him to duplicate in Nazareth the miracles He had performed in Capernaum. And He knew that if He complied with their demand they still would not accept Him as the Messiah, because “no prophet is welcome in his home town.” In further rebuke of their hypocrisy and faithlessness, He reminded them that in the days of Elijah God had shut up the rain in Israel for three-and-a-half years and caused a great famine. During that time the Lord showed mercy on none of the many suffering widows in Israel but showed great mercy on a Gentile widow of Zarephath. He also reminded them that during the time of Elisha, God cleansed no lepers in Israel but did cleanse the leprosy of the Gentile Naaman of Syria (vv. 23-27). They could not have missed Jesus’ powerful, rebuking point that a believing Gentile is dearer to God than an unbelieving Jew.

When Jesus made clear that He understood their wicked motives and would not bend to their hardhearted provincial desire to have their own display of miracles, “all in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things”; and they rose up and cast Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff” (vv. 28-29). In their attempt to kill Jesus, their evil character and unbelief became apparent. They wanted entertainment by Jesus and benefit for themselves from the miracle worker, not conviction of sin and a message of salvation by Jesus the Messiah.

From Jesus’ second, and similar, encounter with His former neighbors in Nazareth we can learn four important truths about unbelief: it blurs the obvious, builds up the irrelevant, blinds to the truth, and blocks the supernatural.

UNBELIEF BLURS THE OBVIOUS

And coming to His home town He began teaching them in their synagogue, so that they became astonished, and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom, and these miraculous powers?” (13:54)

The people at the **synagogue** in Jesus’ **home town** of Nazareth immediately recognized Him as the person they had known as a boy and young man. They also remembered that less than a year earlier He had worked miracles in other parts of Galilee, had impressed them with His great wisdom, and had so angered them by exposing their hypocrisy and unbelief that they tried to throw Him over the cliff to His death. It soon became evident on this trip to Nazareth that their basic attitude about Him had not changed. They were still **astonished** at His **wisdom** and His **miraculous powers**, and they still refused to recognize the obvious, asking again, **Where then did this man get all these things?**

How could the people for the second time reject Jesus as the Messiah, when it was so obvious that **these things**, at which they marveled, could only have come by God’s power? In less than a year He had demonstrated profound wisdom and authority beyond anything the people had ever witnessed, or even heard of. He taught profoundly on

virtually every subject related to life and death, time and eternity, truth and falsehood, righteousness and sin, God and man, heaven and hell. He taught about regeneration, worship, evangelism, sin, salvation, morality, divorce, murder, service, servanthood, pride, hate, love, anger, jealousy, hypocrisy, prayer, fasting, true and false doctrine, true and false teachers, the Sabbath, the law, discipleship, grace, blasphemy, signs and wonders, repentance, humility, dying to self, obedience to God, and countless other subjects. He taught the truth about everything that pertained to spiritual life and godliness (cf. 2 Pet. 1:3).

Jesus had not studied in any of the famous rabbinical schools and had no more formal training in the Scriptures than the average Jewish man. Consequently, when He taught in the Temple during the feast of booths, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem marveled at Him, “saying, ‘How has this man become learned, having never been educated?’” (John 7:15). Despite the absence of traditional credentials, His spiritual and moral wisdom was so true and profound that it could not be refuted even by His severest critics.

In addition to teaching with great wisdom, Jesus had displayed supernatural power that all but banished sickness and disease from Palestine and had performed miracles of nature that astonished the most hardened skeptics. At the very least, it should have been clear that Jesus was a prophet of God unequalled by any of the Old Testament era. How could the people not believe Jesus was from God, when only divine power and wisdom could explain the greatness of what He said and did?

When Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, he immediately acknowledged that Jesus had “come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him” (John 3:2). Even the antagonistic Jewish leaders recognized His power was real, although they illogically and blasphemously attributed it to Satan. One of the greatest apologetics for Jesus’ divinity is the clear testimony even of His enemies that He had miraculous powers that no other man had ever had. As Jesus reminded the unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem, “The works which the Father has given Me to accomplish, the very works that I do, bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me” (John 5:36). Later in Jerusalem He told another group of Jews who wanted to stone Him, “If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the

Father is in Me, and I in the Father” (John 10:37-38). At the end of his gospel John declares, “And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose even the world itself would not contain the books which were written” (21:25).

Like the scribes and Pharisees, the people of Jesus’ hometown synagogue refused to make the logical and obvious connection between His power and His divinity because they were willfully unbelieving. The seed of the gospel fell on the hard-packed soil of sin-loving hearts into which God’s truth could not make the slightest penetration. As Jesus explained to Nicodemus, “He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed” (John 3:18-20).

Those who heard and saw Jesus did not reject Him for lack of evidence but in spite of overwhelming evidence. They did not reject Him because they lacked the truth but because they rejected the truth. They refused forgiveness because they wanted to keep their sins. They denied the light because they preferred darkness. The reason for rejecting the Lord has always been that men prefer their own way to His.

The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem marveled at the obvious wisdom and power of Peter and John, knowing “that they were uneducated and untrained men” (Acts 4:13). But just as they had done with Peter’s and John’s Master, they did not judge the message on its scriptural merits but on its relation to their human traditions—which derived from and appealed to their works-oriented self-righteousness.

When a person willfully rejects the Lord, even the most compelling evidence will not convince Him of divine truth. Cultists and liberal theologians who refuse to acknowledge Jesus as the divine Son of God can find countless ways to discount or explain away the most obvious truths of Scripture. They then congratulate themselves for their intellectualism in explaining Scripture without accepting its truths, for seeming to honor Christ without believing in Him or in what He taught, and for calling themselves by His name while denying His divine nature and power. To such false disciples Jesus continues to say, “Not everyone who says to Me,

‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21; Luke 6:46).

The person who has heard many clear presentations of the gospel but continually asks for more evidence of its truth simply reveals the obstinacy of his unbelief. As Jesus explained in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31). The person who does not accept the light from God he already has will not believe no matter how much more light he is given.

UNBELIEF BUILDS UP THE IRRELEVANT

“Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” (13:55-56)

Instead of accepting the obvious and overwhelming evidence that Jesus was the Messiah, the people of Nazareth focused their attention on the irrelevant. It was indeed surprising to see someone they had watched grow up and with whom they had gone to synagogue all His life suddenly come on the scene as a great leader—with no formal training and no recognition by the accepted religious hierarchy.

The facts that Jesus was **the carpenter’s son** and the Son of **Mary**, that He had **brothers** named **James and Joseph and Simon and Judas** who everyone in Nazareth knew, and that He had **sisters** who still lived there were irrelevant to the issues of His being the Messiah or not. Although the Jews had many incomplete and false notions about the Messiah, they knew He was to come to earth as a man and that He would have to be born into *some* family and live in *some* community. But instead of feeling highly honored that God chose to place His Son in Nazareth to grow up into manhood—as **Mary** felt highly honored to be His mother (Luke 1:48)—the people were skeptical, jealous, and resentful.

From this text and numerous others (see, e. g., Matt. 12:46-47; Luke 2:7; John 7:10; Acts 1:14), it is clear that **Mary** did not live in perpetual virginity, as Roman Catholic heresy claims. After Jesus’ birth,

Joseph began normal marital relations with his wife, and she bore at least four sons and two daughters by him. **Mary** was a woman of extraordinary godliness, but she was no more divine than any other woman ever born, and certainly was not the mother of God, as Catholic dogma maintains. She even referred to the Lord as “God my Savior” (Luke 1:47), affirming her own sinfulness and need of salvation.

Joseph had been a *tektōn* (**carpenter**), which was the general term for a craftsman who worked with hard material, including wood. He may also have worked with bricks and stones. In any case, he had surely built many houses, windows, doors, yokes, and other things for his neighbors in Nazareth; and many products of his workmanship were probably still being used in the village. Joseph was an ordinary laborer like most other men of the village, and Jesus learned carpentry under him and no doubt took over the business after Joseph died (see Mark 6:3).

The fact that the citizens of Nazareth did not regard Jesus and His family as being out of the ordinary completely undercuts myths that attribute bizarre miracles to Him when He was a child. One story maintains that whenever He found a bird with a broken wing, He would stroke it gently and send it flying on its way healed and healthy. This text completely mitigates against such fabrications.

When He came to earth, Jesus emptied Himself of certain divine prerogatives, “taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:7). And although He was sinless and morally perfect during every minute of His life, His perfection was clearly not of the sort that called attention to itself or set Him apart as strange or peculiar. To those who knew Him as a child and young man, Jesus was simply a carpenter and a **carpenter’s son**. It was partly over the commonness of Jesus and His family that the people of Nazareth stumbled. They found it impossible to accept Him even as a great human teacher, much less as the divine Messiah.

It is tragic that small issues can be used as great excuses for not believing. The people of Nazareth were like people throughout the history of the church who can find every foolish reason to justify their rejection of the gospel. They don’t like the attitude of the one who witnesses to them; they think most church people are hypocrites; they think the preacher is too loud or too soft, too stuffy or too overbearing; and the services are too formal or too informal. They are offended at the slightest things Christians

do and construe the insignificant as being all important. They put up one smoke screen after another to excuse their unwillingness to believe the clear and demanding claims and promises of Christ.

As a means of escape or self-justification, unbelief diverts attention away from the truth. The genuine seeker may have many questions about the gospel before he is ready to commit himself to Christ. But his sincerity is proven by his willingness to accept the truth once it is explained. Each new ray of light leads him closer to belief. For the confirmed unbeliever, on the other hand, each new truth prompts him to raise another objection, and his argument against that truth pushes him still further from salvation.

It is characteristic of unbelief to disguise itself, and in order to hide their self-satisfaction and refusal to accept the clear evidence about Jesus, the people of Nazareth dismissed Him on the basis of having known Him since He was a child and of knowing His family as ordinary citizens of the community. They allowed pride, jealousy, resentment, embarrassment, and a host of other wicked and petty feelings to fill their hearts and become barriers to salvation.

UNBELIEF BLINDS TO THE TRUTH

And they took offense at Him. But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his home town, and in his own household.” (13:57)

Took offense is from *skandalizō*, which has the basic idea of causing to stumble or trip up and is the term from which our English scandalize is derived. Jesus’ friends and former neighbors were offended by His claims. They were offended by His ordinary background, by the commonness of His family, the limits of His formal training, His lack of official religious status, and many other irrelevant or secondary issues.

We have no full account of what Jesus taught on either occasion in that Nazareth synagogue; but both times He offended the people by what He said. He unmasked their hypocrisy by exposing their wicked desire to see Him perform miracles for miracles’ sake (Luke 4:23); and He probably talked to them about their sinfulness and need to repent. In any case, they became antagonistic and **took offense at Him**, because their

unbelief blinded them to the truth He taught. “While seeing they [did] not see, and while hearing they [did] not hear, nor [did] they understand” (Matt. 13:13). As Paul declared to the Corinthian believers, Christ is “to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness” (1 Cor. 1:23).

Until a person is willing to have the hard ground of his heart plowed up by God’s truth and to confess and forsake his sin, he will be offended by the gospel. Until a person faces his sin in penitence, the truth of the gospel is hidden from him, and the blessing of the gospel is lost to him.

Again (see Luke 4:24) Jesus reminded the people of Nazareth of the well-known proverb that **a prophet is not without honor except in his home town, and in his own household**. It is often difficult for those who have watched a child grow up as a neighborhood kid to later accept him as a community leader, government official, pastor, or such—to say nothing of accepting him as the divine Son of God! Even when the man is personally liked, it is not easy for him to gain the respect that an outsider of the same capabilities would enjoy. Jesus’ brothers eventually came to believe in Him as their Savior (Acts 1:14), but for several years after He began His ministry they did not (John 7:5).

UNBELIEF BLOCKS THE SUPERNATURAL

And He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief.
(13:58)

Some of Jesus’ miracles were done in direct response to personal faith; but many others, perhaps most of them, were done regardless of any specific expression of an individual’s faith. All of the miracles were done to strengthen the faith of those who believed in Him; but although God can perform miracles where there is no belief, He chose not to perform them where there was hard and willful unbelief. Unbelief, then, became a barrier to divine blessing, and because of the **unbelief** of the people of Nazareth, Jesus **did not do many miracles there**. Mark reports that “He could do no miracles there except that He laid His hands upon a few sick people and healed them” (Mark 6:5). It was not that Jesus lacked supernatural power while He was in Nazareth but that He chose to operate only in response to

faith, with the result that the people's unbelief prevented Him from fully exercising that power.

Just as believing saves the soul and enables the power of God to work in its fullness, so unbelief blocked the release of His power and dammed up the flood of His blessing.

Jesus warned, "Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces" (Matt. 7:6). The hardened unbeliever despises the precious truths and blessings of God and will even use them against the Lord and His people if he can. Jesus refused to bend to the request of the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees who wanted to see a sign from Him (Matt. 12:38). "He answered and said to them, 'An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet'" (v. 39). Jesus' miracles were of spiritual benefit only as they led to faith in Him or strengthened those who already believed. For those who refused to believe, His miracles had no spiritual value at all, and He would not perform them in order to entertain or to satisfy ungodly curiosity.

When Jesus and His disciples came upon the man in Jerusalem who had been blind from birth, the "disciples asked Him, saying, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?' Jesus answered, 'It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him'" (John 9:2-3). The man was born blind, Jesus explained, so that his healing could glorify God.

After the man's sight was restored while he was washing in the pool of Siloam as Jesus had commanded, his neighbors could hardly believe he was the same person whom they had known from infancy as totally blind and helpless. He was brought before the Pharisees, who took the occasion to express various opinions about the godliness of Jesus. Because He dared to "work" on the Sabbath by performing a miracle, some of them were certain Jesus could not be from God. Others argued that a person who was not from God could never do such things.

Some of the leaders did not even believe the man had ever been blind, and they called in his parents to testify. When asked to explain what happened to their son, the parents said, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but how he now sees, we do not know." When the

man was called back the second time, the leaders said to him, “Give glory to God; we know that this man is a sinner,” referring to Jesus. The man responded that, although he could not be certain about Jesus’ sin, he was certain that it was Jesus who had healed him. And he did not believe a sinful man could do such marvelous things as Jesus had undeniably done for him. “If this man were not from God,” he insisted, “He could do nothing.”

But as the man’s testimony became more and more favorable to Jesus, the Pharisees’ unbelief only became more and more hardened. They finally said to the man, “‘You were born entirely in sins, and are you teaching us?’ And they put him out.”

After they dismissed the man, Jesus came to him and asked, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” When he discovered that Jesus was Himself the Son of Man, the former blind man confessed, “‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshiped Him.” Then Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see; and that those who see may become blind.” In reply to some of the Pharisees who asked Him, “‘We are not blind too, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, “We see,” your sin remains’” (see John 9:6-41).

As those Pharisees perfectly illustrate, when unbelief investigates the supernatural work of God, it comes up empty. It meets a dead end when it tries to probe divine things. It cannot recognize the works of God because it will not recognize the truth of God.

Fear That Forfeits

Christ (14:1-13)

At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the news about Jesus, and said to his servants, “This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead; and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him.” For when Herod had John arrested, he bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. For John had been saying to him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” And although he wanted to put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they regarded him as a prophet. But when Herod’s birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod. Thereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. And having been prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.” And although he was grieved, the king commanded it to be given because of his oaths, and because of his dinner guests. And he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl; and she brought it to her mother. And his disciples came and took away the body and buried it; and they went and reported to Jesus.

Now when Jesus heard it, He withdrew from there in a boat, and to a lonely place by Himself; and when the multitudes heard of this, they followed Him on foot from the cities. (14:1-13)

C. I. Scofield appropriately referred to the events of Matthew 14-23 as “The Ministry of the Rejected King.” Christ the King had been rejected by His own people; but, with His disciples, He continued to preach the kingdom. During the early part of this period the disciples witnessed remarkable incidents that illustrated the four basic responses to the gospel portrayed in the parable of the sower.

In this account of John the Baptist's murder we see the second of the eight incidents Matthew records. The first portrayed Jesus' rejection by the resentful people of His hometown of Nazareth, who were deeply offended that a man they had known as merely a carpenter's son would presume to confront them and even to proclaim Himself the Messiah (Matt. 13:53-58).

The second incident, recorded in this text, links Herod the tetrarch's rejection of Jesus with the execution of John the Baptist. Like the first incident, this one illustrates the gospel's falling on hard and stony soil that God's saving truth cannot penetrate. The first story deals with a town that rejected Christ; this one deals with a man who rejects Him. The first deals with the common people; this one deals with an earthly king who opposes the divine King. The first deals with the treatment of the Messiah Himself; this one deals with the treatment of the Messiah's forerunner. The first deals with rejection based on jealous resentment; this one deals with rejection based on fear. Behind both rejections was the common selfish pride of the unbelieving human heart.

This true account is more incredible than the most bizarre soap opera. It is a story of infidelity, divorce, remarriage, incest, political intrigue, jealousy, spite, revenge, lewdness, lust, cold-heartedness, cruelty, brutality, violence, ungodly remorse, and godly mourning. But above all, it is the story of godless fear and the power of such fear to confuse, deceive, corrupt, destroy, and damn. Nowhere in Scripture is the truth "The fear of man brings a snare" (Prov. 29:25) more vividly illustrated than here. It is one of the most tragic yet triumphant texts in the Word of God.

The focal point of this brief episode is Herod's reaction to Jesus. Then, in a flashback to previous events, the reason for Herod's reaction is given and is followed by Jesus' response to the atrocity behind that reason.

HEROD'S REACTION

At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the news about Jesus, and said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead; and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him." (14:1-2)

Kairos (**time**) refers to a special season or period of time and in this context indicates the general season when Jesus was facing increasing hostility and rejection. He had been ministering for about a year, teaching, preaching, and performing many signs and wonders—healing every kind of disease, raising the dead, and casting out demons. The exact chronology is difficult to determine, but **that time** likely covered the year and a half to two years directly after Jesus' baptism.

Although **Herod the tetrarch** was not a Jew and had little interest in them or their religion, he eventually **heard the news about Jesus**. The term **tetrarch** technically referred to a “ruler of a fourth part,” but it came to be used as a general title for any subordinate ruler of a Roman province or region. He was not a true king in the sense that his father, Herod the Great, was; but he coveted the title and was often called by it (cf. v. 9). He would later ask the emperor Caligula to proclaim him king, but was refused. He was a relatively minor potentate in Palestine who had little power or influence outside his own jurisdiction.

Herod the tetrarch was a son of Herod the Great by his fourth wife, Malthake, a Samaritan, and was a half brother of Herod Philip, the son of his father's third wife, Mariamne the Boethusian. Herod the Great was an Idumean; and because he not only was a Gentile but was a descendant of Esau and had married a Samaritan, he had been especially despised by the Jews. His cold-blooded atrocities—such as his having all the members of the Sanhedrin put to death for daring to challenge his authority, his having at least one of his wives and two of his sons executed, and his slaying all the male babies of Bethlehem in an unsuccessful attempt to try to destroy the Messiah—made him more hated still.

In secular history **Herod the tetrarch** was known as Herod Antipas, and after the death of his father, Herod the Great, the Romans divided the kingdom (which comprised most of Palestine) among three of his many sons. The two besides Antipas were his brother Archelaus (see Matt. 2:22) and his half brother Philip (see 14:3). Archelaus was given the southern provinces of Judea and Samaria, Philip was given the northern provinces of Trachonitis and Iturea, and **Herod** Antipas was given the area in between, which included Galilee and Perea.

At the time **Herod the tetrarch heard the news about Jesus**, Herod the Great had long been dead, and this **Herod** was in his thirty-second year of rule. He spent most of the year at his palace in Tiberias, on

the southwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. But he also spent considerable time at the massive fortress palace his father had built at Machaerus, seven miles east of the northern tip of the Dead Sea.

It is interesting that, although Jesus ministered in Galilee more than in any other region, there is no evidence that He visited or even passed through Tiberias. It was within walking distance of Capernaum, Nazareth, Cana, and many other places Jesus went, but, as far as we know, He never set foot in that city. The Lord may have avoided Tiberias in order not to prematurely arouse Herod's attention. And it may have been for that reason, along with the pagan king's general disdain for the Jews and his preoccupation with luxurious living, that **Herod** seemed to be so long in hearing **the news about Jesus**.

When he finally heard **about Jesus**, Herod was greatly distressed. As he explained **to his servants**, he thought **Jesus** was **John the Baptist**, who had **risen from the dead**. Because of haunting guilt for having murdered John, Herod was afraid he had come back **from the dead** to seek revenge.

We learn from Luke that this notion did not originate with Herod but that he had "heard of all that was happening; and he was greatly perplexed, because it was said by some that John had risen from the dead, and by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others, that one of the prophets of old had risen again" (Luke 9:7-8; cf. Matt. 16:14). Herod confessed, "I myself had John beheaded"; and out of morbid curiosity "he kept trying to see Him" (Luke 9:9). In his guilt-ridden mind he had decided that this **Jesus** was none other than **John the Baptist. . . risen from the dead**.

The angel of the Lord told John's father, Zacharias, that his son would "go as a forerunner before [Jesus] in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). Elijah had been endowed with great miraculous powers, and it may be that John the Baptist performed miracles of which we are not told. In any case, Herod obviously believed John had such gifts and was convinced that the **miraculous powers** that were **at work in Jesus** proved He was John returned from the dead.

HEROD'S REASON

For when Herod had John arrested, he bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. For John had been saying to him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” And although he wanted to put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they regarded him as a prophet. But when Herod’s birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod. Thereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. And having been prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.” And although he was grieved, the king commanded it to be given because of his oaths, and because of his dinner guests. And he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl; and she brought it to her mother. (14:3-11)

These verses are a flashback to events that began a year or more earlier, just before Jesus started His ministry—to the time **when Herod had John arrested,.. . bound him, and put him in prison** (see Matt. 4:12).

Before John’s birth, the angel declared that he would “be great in the sight of the Lord, and & be filled with the Holy Spirit, while yet in his mother’s womb” (Luke 1:15). Jesus testified that “among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (Matt. 11:11). The forerunner of the Messiah was a remarkable man, single-mindedly dedicated to fulfilling his divine mission of paving the way for his Lord and Master. In genuine humility he was happy to have his own fame and influence decrease as that of Jesus increased (John 3:30).

The almost single theme of John’s preaching was, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2). As hundreds came and confessed their sins in preparation for the Messiah, John would baptize them as a symbol of their desire for a cleansed heart. He confronted sin and called for holiness; yet despite his somber message and ascetic life-style, he was amazingly popular and respected by the people. “Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan” (Matt. 3:5).

By extreme contrast, **Herod** Antipas was evil, debauched, shameless, henpecked, lustful, and given to every kind of sinful excess. He

had more of a conscience than his bestial father, but he did not have the courage to follow it. It could be said that to the extent John was admired and honored, Herod was despised and feared.

Instead of putting John to death, as he wanted to do (v. 5), **Herod had John arrested, . . . bound and put in prison**, probably in the dungeon at his palace at Machaerus. The palace was located on a mountain higher even than the city of Jerusalem and offered a beautiful and dramatic view. But the dungeon was dug deep into the earth beneath, and archaeologists have discovered the many places where prisoners were chained to the walls. There was no natural light and only dank, foul air to breathe. Here John the Baptist was incarcerated for about a year until his execution.

Herod had imprisoned John . . . on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. For John had been saying to him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” The tetrarch had taken **Herodias** as his own wife after seducing her away from his half **brother Philip** while on a visit to Rome. In order to marry her, he had to divorce his present wife, the daughter of king Aretas, with whom the marriage of his daughter had sealed a political and military alliance. Aretas ruled Nabatean Arabia, whose capital was the famed fortress city of Petra, located about fifty miles southeast of the Dead Sea. Aretas was so angered by the treatment of his daughter that he destroyed most of Herod’s army and would have slain the tetrarch as well, had not the Roman army intervened.

Herodias is one of the most wicked and perverse women mentioned in Scripture, perhaps second only to Jezebel. Although she was at first beguiled by **Herod**, it was not long until he was being manipulated by her. Because both **Herod** and **Herodias** were already married, their marriage to each other was doubly **not lawful**. The Holy Spirit refused to recognize her as Herod’s wife and directed Matthew to refer to her as **the wife of his brother Philip**, although she had been divorced from **Philip** for a number of years. The new marriage not only was unlawful but incestuous, because **Herodias** was the daughter of Aristobulus, another half brother of **Herod**, making her Herod’s niece.

It is not known exactly where and how **John** the Baptist first confronted **Herod** about his unlawful marriage. It is possible the tetrarch had summoned **John** to his palace, hoping to have some astounding miracle performed on his behalf, just as He later expected of Jesus (Luke

23:8). But regardless of who initiated the meeting, John presented the king with a scathing rebuke rather than a miraculous sign. From the wording, **John had been saying to him** (cf. Mark 6:18), it seems that **John** had rebuked the king and his wife on more than one occasion.

Both **Herod** and **Herodias** were incensed at the prophet's presumption, and she, more than he, **wanted to put him to death**. Had it not been that Herod **feared the multitude, because they regarded him as a prophet**, John would have been executed immediately.

John was neither a compromiser nor a diplomat. His only fear was of the Lord, and he no more hesitated confronting Herod and Herodias with their wickedness than he had hesitated confronting the unrepentant Pharisees and Sadducees whom he called a brood of vipers (Matt. 3:7).

Such godly boldness, which does not consider the consequences, is the hallmark of prophetic greatness. The faithful man of God confronts sin wherever it is and by whomever it is committed, regardless of the power they might have over him—including power over his life. That holy boldness was the mark of Stephen, of Paul, of Peter, and of innumerable other saints of God who, throughout the nineteen centuries of the church, have forfeited their lives rather than their message. The great New Testament scholar A. T. Robertson wrote, "It cost him his head; but it is better to have a head like John the Baptist and lose it than to have an ordinary head and keep it."

Josephus said of John: "Now when many others came in crowds about him, for they were greatly moved by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, thought it best by putting him to death to prevent any mischief he might cause."

Just as John was fearful of nothing and no one except God, Herod feared almost everything and everyone but God. He not only **feared the multitude**, but also feared John the Baptist, his wife, and his peers (v. 9). He feared another attack by Aretas, and, as Josephus reported, he feared a rebellion by his own people—inspired by, and perhaps even led by, John the Baptist. And Herod feared the emperor might replace him with someone more in favor with Rome. That fear was well grounded, because some years after this, his jealous and scheming nephew, Agrippa (the brother of Herodias), convinced the emperor Caligula that Herod was planning a rebellion. Perhaps because Caligula did not fully trust

Agrippa's word, Herod and Herodias suffered exile to Gaul (modern France) rather than execution, which was the normal penalty for treason.

Herod's feelings about John were ambivalent; he was both fearful and fascinated. Mark reports that "Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. And when he heard him, he was very perplexed; but he used to enjoy listening to him" (Mark 6:20). The king enjoyed listening to the man he wanted to put to death! These audiences with Herod no doubt were John's only respite from the torments of prison; but to John they were not an escape but opportunities to witness for his Lord and to try to bring his persecutor to repentance and salvation.

From the passage in Mark 6, as well as from the fact that Herod was grieved at Herodias's request for the head of John (Matt. 14:9), it seems that the king had developed a certain fondness for John, or at least a more respectful fear. But his feelings for John were no match for his fear of his wife and his friends.

Herodias had few equals in immorality, evil cunning, or vindictiveness. From the time of John's first rebuke she had been scheming to rid herself of this meddlesome prophet who rankled her own feelings and also fueled the loathing her Jewish subjects already had for her. She was biding her time, waiting for the right opportunity - which presented itself **when Herod's birthday came and the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod.**

From Josephus we learn that the name of this **daughter** was Salome, whose father was Philip, her mother's first husband and Herod's half brother. **Herodias** was so hate-filled, vengeful, and immoral that she had no compunction about involving her **daughter** both in a lewd dance before her stepfather and his guests and in the ploy to have John murdered.

In the ancient world, **birthday** celebrations were entirely Gentile and pagan, and the Jews, with good reason, considered them shameful. Roman nobles frequently held stag birthday parties in which gluttony, excessive drinking, erotic dancing, and sexual indulgence were common. The phrase *Herodes dies* (Latin for "Herod's birthday") became an epithet for such orgiastic festivals.

Pleased was a euphemism for "sexually aroused," and the drunken king was so enamored of his stepdaughter that he rashly **promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked**, even up to half his kingdom (Mark

6:23). This was the chance Herodias had been waiting for, and, **prompted by her mother**, Salome asked Herod, **“Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.”** It is obvious that the provocative dance was planned by Herodias for the purpose of evoking just such a promise from her drunken, leering, lecherous husband. And lest Herod change his mind after sobering up, Herodias told her daughter to ask for John’s head **here on a platter** “right away” (Mark 6:25).

In his gluttonous, lustful stupor the king had been easily taken in by his scheming wife and her seductive daughter. He had lost all dignity, all sensibility, and what little desire for the right that he may have had. Wanting to appear the magnanimous benefactor before his guests, he had boxed himself in and was now completely vulnerable to his conniving wife.

And although he was grieved, the king commanded it to be given because of his oaths, and because of his dinner guests. It was not that the word of **the king** was respected and that to break **his oaths** would tarnish his reputation, because he was noted for his dishonor and duplicity. But in the ancient Near East a promise made with an oath was considered sacred and inviolable (cf. Matt. 5:33), especially when made by a ruler. And although Herod had no concern for principle, he had great concern for appearance. By breaking his word so soon after giving it, he would have been embarrassed in front of **his dinner guests**, who doubtlessly included many political and military dignitaries.

Herod **was grieved**, but his grief had nothing to do with remorse for sin or with genuine repentance. Like Pilate—who knew Jesus was innocent and would have freed Him except for continued pressure by the Jewish leaders (Luke 23:4,14-16, 20, 22-25; cf. John 19:12)—Herod cowardly capitulated to what he knew was unjust and vindictive. Even drunk, he knew he had been tricked; but his pride would not let him do what was right. Instead of admitting the foolish excess of his promise, the king allowed himself to be used to commit an enormous crime—all to save a reputation he did not have. With the help of his wicked wife and unprincipled stepdaughter, his cup of iniquity was filled.

Quickly and coldly John was decapitated in his cell **and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl; and she brought it to her mother.** Gruesome and ghoulish as that act was, such things were not uncommon in those days. Potentates had life and death power over their

subjects and prisoners, and that power was frequently exercised and seldom questioned. Herodias had an ancestor named Alexander Junius, who held a feast at which he had eight hundred rebels crucified before the assembled guests. While the men were hanging on their crosses, their wives and children were slain in front of their eyes.

One writer comments, “When the dish was brought in with the bleeding head on it, no doubt [Salome] took it daintily in her hands lest a drop of it should stain her, and she tripped away to her mother as if bearing her some choice dish of food from the king’s table. It was not uncommon to bring the head of one who had been slain to the person who ordered it, as a sure proof that the command had been obeyed.” It is reported that when the head of Cicero was brought to Fulvia, the wife of Antony, that she spat on it, pulled its tongue out and drove her hairpin through it. The early church Father Jerome believed that is what Herodias did with the head of John. That particular barbarism cannot be verified, but it would not have been the least out of character for Herodias to have done such a ghastly thing.

Herod’s morbid fascination with John and with the miraculous and supernatural had nothing to do with genuine seeking after the truth and certainly nothing to do with seeking salvation. It was the religious curiosity of unbelief that is impregnable to God’s truth, love, or grace.

After Herod had John beheaded, he inquired about Jesus and “kept trying to see Him” (Luke 9:9). But Jesus made no effort to see Herod and would not allow Herod to see Him until it was His Father’s time. Jesus once sent a message to the king when it was reported that Herod wanted to kill Him, saying, “Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I reach My goal’” (Luke 13:32). Jesus went about His mission and left the king to his unresolved fear, to his unrelenting sin, and to his doom of damnation. After His appearance before the Sanhedrin and Pilate, Jesus was sent to Herod and they saw each other for the first time. “Now Herod was very glad when he saw Jesus; for he had wanted to see Him for a long time, because he had been hearing about Him and was hoping to see some sign performed by Him. And he questioned Him at some length; but He answered him nothing. . . . And Herod with his soldiers, after treating Him with contempt and mocking Him, dressed Him in a gorgeous robe and sent Him back to Pilate” (Luke 23:8-9, 11).

In the greatest of irony, “Herod and Pilate became friends with one another that very day; for before they had been at enmity with each other” (23:12). Two ruthless men and former enemies now built a friendship around the common bond of crucifying the Son of God!

Herod rejected Christ, and Christ rejected Herod. For fear of a woman, for fear of his reputation, for fear of his peers, for fear of his throne—and for *lack* of fear for God—he damned his soul forever.

JESUS’ RESPONSE

And his disciples came and took away the body and buried it; and they went and reported to Jesus.

Now when Jesus heard it, He withdrew from there in a boat, and to a lonely place by Himself; and when the multitudes heard of this, they followed Him on foot from the cities. (14:12-13)

In a beautiful ending to an ugly scene, John’s **disciples came and took away the body and buried it**. It is hard to imagine the pain they must have experienced in carrying the decapitated **body** of the one they dearly loved and had faithfully followed. He was a great and godly man, who had been their friend and teacher, the one under whose fiery preaching they had confessed and forsaken their own sins and under whose inspiration and direction they had perhaps led others to repentance.

Possibly following John’s previous instruction, the **disciples** then **went and reported to Jesus** what had happened. John was deeply loved by **Jesus**, and **when Jesus heard it, He withdrew from there in a boat, to a lonely place by Himself**. As Mark explains in more detail, Jesus was **by Himself** with His disciples, whom he asked to go with Him “‘to a lonely place and rest a while’ (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat)” (Mark 6:31).

Some commentators suggest that Jesus left the area for fear of meeting the same fate as John; but if John was not afraid of Herod, surely Jesus was not. And why would Jesus have wanted to escape a threat that was only potential, when He knew that, not many months later, He would walk willingly to certain death? If Jesus left to escape possible arrest by

Herod, it was only because that was not in the Father's plan or timetable for the Son.

John the Baptist was the first martyr to die for Christ, and it seems certain that Jesus took this opportunity to further prepare His disciples for what lay ahead for them. Christ Himself would be the next to die; and all the other twelve (including Matthias, Judas's replacement) apparently suffered martyrdom, except for John, who died in exile.

Although Christians in most parts of the world today have relative freedom to practice and propagate their faith, many believers are suffering a fate like John's. When they convert to Christianity, their families disown them, declare them to be dead, and sometimes even murder them. Countless thousands forfeit their jobs, their freedom to worship, and even the right to teach their faith to their own children. Many are imprisoned, tortured, exiled, and publicly maligned. But like John the Baptist, they will not deny their Lord to save their rights, their freedom, or their lives.

The Miraculous **Feeding** (14:14-21)

And when He went ashore, He saw a great multitude, and felt compassion for them, and healed their sick. And when it was evening, the disciples came to Him, saying, “The place is desolate, and the time is already past; so send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” But Jesus said to them, “They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat!” And they said to Him, “We have here only five loaves and two fish.” And He said, “Bring them here to Me.” And ordering the multitudes to recline on the grass, He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed the food, and breaking the loaves He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave to the multitudes, and they all ate, and were satisfied. And they picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve full baskets. And there were about five thousand men who ate, aside from women and children. (14:14-21)

The fact that the feeding of the five thousand is the only one of Jesus’ many miracles recorded in all four gospels, testifies to its unique importance. In each gospel account this miracle is placed at the climax of the Lord’s ministry.

When Jesus began His extensive Galilean ministry, it was almost completely public. The Lord sought out the crowds, going from town to town and city to city, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom to all who would listen. The King openly manifested Himself before the people of Israel and offered them the opportunity to receive Him as their Lord.

But from the earliest days, the religious leaders were skeptical; and soon they became unfriendly and ultimately hostile. The clearer Jesus’ message became, the higher the flames of their opposition flared. With the death of John the Baptist and Herod’s fear that Jesus was John returned

from the dead, the political antagonism was also becoming manifest. Herod felt threatened by Jesus just as he had been by John the Baptist; and he would not have hesitated doing to Jesus what he had done to John.

The reaction of the people was mixed and fickle. Although the citizens of Nazareth had twice rejected Jesus because of their familiarity with Him as a boy and young man, most of the people were still fascinated by His miracles. With the miracle of creating food for feeding the crowd of five thousand, Jesus' popularity reached its pinnacle as the people tried to take Him by force to be their king and deliverer (John 6:15).

As the religious and political opposition became more intense and the allegiance of the crowds more vacillating, Jesus began to spend less time in public and more time in private with His disciples. During the last year of His life, He devoted the majority of His attention to the twelve, preparing them for what was soon to happen to Him in the crucifixion and for what would soon after that happen to them as they embarked on their task of laying the foundation for His church.

When the disciples of John the Baptist brought the news of John's death to Jesus, He withdrew from the area of Capernaum so that He could be alone with His own disciples (Matt. 14:13a; cf. Mark 6:31). Jesus was not afraid for His life, because He knew no one could take it from Him unless He permitted it (John 10:18). He withdrew to avoid premature confrontation with Herod, to be alone with His Father, and to explain the significance of John's death to His disciples.

Jesus also needed refreshment. Even if all the reaction to Him had been positive, He would have been physically drained after such a rigorous schedule of teaching and healing. The growing opposition of His enemies, the fickleness of the multitudes, and the continued misunderstanding and immaturity of His disciples made the drain immeasurably worse.

But when the multitudes heard that Jesus had gone to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, "they followed Him on foot from the cities" (Matt. 14:13b). Some of the people even arrived before Jesus and the disciples did (Mark 6:33), while the lame and sick obviously took much longer. But almost all of them came out of selfish motives, "because they were seeing the signs which He was performing on those who were sick" (John 6:2). They came to be healed or to watch the healings. Few came for what Jesus could do for them spiritually.

The majority of the multitude were thrill seekers, whose ranks at this time were probably swelled by Jews passing through Galilee on their way to the annual Passover celebration in Jerusalem (John 6:4). Their perspective was self-centered and self-indulgent. In addition to wanting to be healed or entertained, many no doubt hoped this great miracle worker would prove Himself to be the political Messiah who would use His power to overthrow the hated Roman oppressors and their puppet Herod.

But the expectations of the people neither determined nor undermined the importance of the occasion. As He often does, God chose to accomplish His purposes in the very face of ungodly human motives and desires. In Matthew 14:14-21 the Lord's plan continues to unfold flawlessly according to His perfect divine will.

THE DEEDS OF PIETY

And when He went ashore, He saw a great multitude, and felt compassion for them, and healed their sick. (14:14)

As Jesus **went ashore, He saw a great multitude**, whose men alone numbered five thousand, "aside from women and children" (v. 21). Because women seemed especially drawn to Jesus, it is likely many of them came together in groups or with their fathers or brothers—in addition to those who came with their husbands and children. Children were considered a great blessing from the Lord, and most families in those days were large. It is therefore not unreasonable to estimate that the total crowd exceeded twenty-five thousand.

The normal inclination would have been to ignore the people and keep going or to have dismissed the **multitude**, telling them that no healings or other signs would be performed. It would have been easy to go so far into the hills that most of the people could not have followed or to go back into the boat and head for a location where they would not be discovered.

But Jesus did not follow the usual human inclinations and, although He was exhausted and in great need of rest, He was drawn to them because He **felt compassion for them**. *Splanchnizomai* (to have

compassion) means literally to be moved in one's bowels, or viscera, where the ancients considered the emotions and feelings to reside. The Son of God was not remote or coldly calculating and analytical concerning men's needs but was deeply moved by the suffering, confusion, despair, and spiritual lostness of those around Him. Jesus felt pain, experiencing genuine anguish for the suffering of others, whether they were believer or unbeliever, Jew or Gentile, man or woman, young or old, wealthy or poor. He must have felt much as He did when He approached Lazarus's grave and wept (John 11:35) and when He looked out over Jerusalem through tears and said, "If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes" (Luke 19:42). He represented the compassionate heart of God even more fully than had Jeremiah, who declared to rebellious Judah, "But if you will not listen to [God's warning], my soul will sob in secret for such pride; and my eyes will bitterly weep and flow down with tears" (Jer. 13:17).

In His great mercy, Christ extended His **compassion** even to the shallow, self-centered thrill seekers. He again revealed the loving heart of God toward those who would not understand or believe and who He knew would ultimately reject Him. The Lord likewise empowered the apostles to cure disease, cast out demons, and heal the crippled and afflicted—with no restrictions or qualifications (Matt. 10:1)—rather than to demonstrate God's power by moving buildings from one place to another or by doing other such dazzling but impersonal wonders. That kind of miracle would have demonstrated the Lord's power, but it would have shown nothing of His compassion and mercy.

Jesus also **felt compassion** because of His perfect perception of hell and the torment those would face who did not receive Him. Even as He lovingly healed their bodies, He had infinitely greater concern to heal their souls. Even after *Jesus* healed a body, it could become sick or crippled again. But when He heals a sin-diseased soul, it is forever freed from sin's dominion and penalty.

Arrhōstos (**sick**) means to be weak, without strength. These afflicted ones whom Jesus **healed** obviously made a special effort to follow Him around the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. Most of them probably had to be carried or helped along by relatives or friends, and they arrived many hours after the rest of the crowd. Above all else they wanted to be healed by this Man who had such compassionate power.

Jesus postponed His rest, His privacy, His time alone with the disciples, and even His time with His Father in order to meet the needs of those helpless people who suffered.

THE DULLNESS OF PERSPECTIVE

And when it was evening, the disciples came to Him, saying, “The place is desolate, and the time is already past; so send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” But Jesus said to them, “They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat!” And they said to Him, “We have here only five loaves and two fish.” (14:15-17)

The Jews had two periods of **evening**, one from three to six and the other from six to nine. This was the first **evening**, which was just prior to sunset. Because of the lateness in the day, **the disciples** were concerned about what the crowd would have to eat. **The place was desolate**, many miles from the nearest town, which, in any case, could not have provided food for such a vast horde of people. Not only was it near the end of the day, but the long trip had doubtlessly made the people hungrier than usual.

From John’s account we learn that Jesus had brought up the matter of feeding the multitude much earlier in the day. Even while the “great multitude was coming to Him,” Jesus had said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, that these may eat?” (John 6:5). Jesus did not ask Philip the question in order to get advice but “to test him; for He Himself knew what He was intending to do” (v. 6). Philip was from that area and would most likely have known what food would have been available; but Jesus was hoping Philip would look to Him rather than to human and earthly resources. Unfortunately, Philip was more awed at the magnitude of the crowd than the magnitude of Jesus’ power, and he responded incredulously, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little” (v. 7). A denarius was the normal day’s wage for a common laborer, but it was obvious that nearly six month’s of such wages would not be enough to feed the thousands of people that were assembled. Philip knew they did not have a fraction of

the money needed to buy enough food, even if they bought the cheapest bread available.

Either at this point or later in the day, Andrew discovered a small boy who had “five barley loaves and two fish”; but, like Philip, he was quick to express his despair: “but what are these for so many people?” (John 6:8-9). Apparently the Lord let Philip and Andrew continue to think about His request during the rest of the day, while He was healing the multitudes and also “speaking to them about the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:11). He provided a day-long test of the disciples’ faith.

As we look back on the scene from our two-thousand-year vantage point, it seems impossible that even when **Jesus said to them, “They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat!”** the idea of His feeding the people miraculously did not enter the disciples’ minds. Seeing no further than their own resources, they replied, **We have here only five loaves and two fish.** It would seem to have required so little faith and to have been so natural for the disciples to expect Jesus to feed the crowd. But they were like a person who stands in front of Niagara Falls and asks where he can find a drink. They were face to face with the supreme power in the universe and yet were spiritually blind. They knew it, but they did not know it. Had anyone asked them if Jesus could do such a thing, their answer would have been an unhesitating and unanimous, “Of course He can!” But even when prompted by Jesus’ suggestion, they saw their own lack instead of His sufficiency.

We are tempted to think that, had we been there, our first thought would have been to ask Jesus to feed the multitudes, as He had proved Himself capable of doing hundreds of times. What could have been a more obvious solution than to have the Son of God create food to feed this crowd, just as He had created wine for the wedding guests at Cana? That would hardly have been an impossible challenge to the One who healed every sort of disease, raised the dead, cast out demons, walked on water, and instantaneously calmed a fierce storm. Yet, how many times has every believer faced a crisis that seemed overwhelming and insurmountable and failed to consider the Lord’s power?

Despite two years of walking with the Lord, hearing Him teach God’s truth and seeing Him demonstrate miraculous power, the twelve were too spiritually dull to see the obvious. They were looking only with their human eyes and only at human resources.

THE DISPLAY OF POWER

And He said, “Bring them here to Me.” And ordering the multitudes to recline on the grass, He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed the food, and breaking the loaves He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave to the multitudes, and they all ate, and were satisfied. And they picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve **full baskets**. **And there were about five thousand men who ate, aside from women and children.** (14:18-21)

Here is the primary focus of the story, in which the disciples’ dullness of perspective is overruled by Jesus’ display of power.

No doubt with sadness in His eyes, Jesus **said, “Bring them here to Me,”** referring to the loaves and fish. He had to tell the disciples to do what, by this time, should have been second nature to them. He was saying, in effect, “I knew that you did not have sufficient food or money to feed the people, and I knew that you had no way of getting it. I never expected you to feed them from your own resources or by your own power. In asking you to feed them I was asking you to trust Me. Without having to tell you, I was giving you the opportunity to bring to Me what little you had and trust Me for the rest.”

The northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee is often beautiful and green with grass in the spring of the year. But instead of sitting, the people had been standing up in order to see and hear and Jesus better. He therefore ordered **the multitudes to recline on the grass**, to make themselves more comfortable and to make distribution of the food easier. He sat them *prasiai prasiai* (which literally means “garden bed by garden bed”), in groups of hundreds and fifties (Mark 6:40), allowing paths between the groups for the disciples to walk while serving. In their brightly-colored garments the crowd must have resembled an enormous mosaic of flower beds or a gigantic quilt spread across the hillside.

The people probably had little if any idea why they were so carefully seated in groups. The disciples may have guessed why, but they still did not know how. When the people were seated, Jesus **took the five loaves and the two fish**; but before He performed the miracle He had

planned all along, **looking up toward heaven, He blessed the food,** giving thanks to His heavenly Father (John 6:6, 11; cf. 1 Tim. 4:3-5).

Then the Lord broke **the loaves** and **gave them to the disciples,** who, in turn, **gave to the multitudes, and they all ate.** We are not told exactly at what moment the miracle took place. Apparently it was a continuous multiplication that occurred as the disciples walked among the groups distributing the food. The men could not possibly have carried containers large enough to hold all the food, even with it divided into twelve parts. There was no fanfare and no dramatic change from little to much. The miracle was all but invisible, its magnitude being evident only as the thousands of people **all ate.**

Chortazō (to be **satisfied**) was used of animals who stayed at the feed trough until they wanted nothing more to eat. Jesus uses the same term in the Beatitudes when He promises that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness “shall be satisfied” (Matt. 5:6). Because the multiplied barley **loaves** and **fish** were divinely created, the satisfaction the people experienced must have been like no other in their lives. This food was perfect, not tainted by the Fall and its consequent corruption of all the earth through sin.

There was more than enough food to satisfy the multitudes, and a considerable amount **was left over of the broken pieces, twelve full baskets.** After the food had been distributed among the groups, each disciple had a basket of food left for himself, out of which he could share with Jesus! In the great economy of God, there was neither too little nor too much.

As already noted, the fact that **there were about five thousand men who ate, aside from women and children,** indicates the total crowd could have been as large as twenty-five thousand.

Although Matthew does not mention it, at this point the people were so awed at Jesus’ power that they tried “to come and take Him by force, to make Him king” (John 6:15). Here was a Man who not only could heal all their diseases but could deliver them from the constant work and preparation needed to put food in all their stomachs—all with but a word, and sometimes even without a word. They were convinced beyond doubt that Jesus was their kind of Messiah, and they were determined to crown Him king. They were right that He was the Messiah; but they were wrong about the kind of Messiah He was. He was not the political deliver or food

supplier they were expecting, and His coronation was not in their power to perform. During the present age, as Jesus later declared, His “kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36).

The great multitude that day was composed of three groups: the twelve disciples, the believing remnant among the multitudes, and the vast majority of unbelievers. In regard to each group we can discern many spiritual lessons.

The twelve were established. The twelve disciples were the constant object of Jesus’ concern, instruction, and training. It was upon their shoulders that the establishing of His church would soon fall, and He knew the time of their training for this task was short. From this one incident alone, He taught them a number of important principles and truths.

First, He gave them the example of withdrawing from needless danger. Martyrdom or any other type of suffering that is sought as a form of self-glory is not endured for the sake of the Lord. The disciples also learned the importance of rest and solitude, even when in the midst of serving the Lord. Sometimes, as here, rest cannot be attained in the way or at the time we prefer; but even the Lord in His humanity did not escape the need for rest, solace, and refreshment. The twelve learned the importance of spending time away from work with those with whom one labors. Coworkers need special time together to support one another and to share needs and feelings.

Jesus also confirmed the disciples’ need to show compassion for those in need, even when the needy are fickle and undeserving. The Son of God selflessly met the needs of the multitude that day, although He knew that most of them would soon lose interest in Him and fall away. He taught them that, as important as rest and leisure are, these must sometimes be sacrificed to meet the even more important needs of others. The believer has no inalienable rights to personal freedom and benefits. Everything we have, including our own needs and rights, should be expendable in serving others in Christ’s name (see 1 Cor. 9).

Jesus taught the disciples that, in meeting the physical needs of others, they were also to minister the truth of the kingdom. A “social gospel” that does not witness to men’s need for spiritual salvation through Christ is no gospel at all (see Gal. 1:6-9).

Jesus taught the disciples to do things in an orderly and careful manner, just as God does (1 Cor. 14:33,40). Along with the lesson of orderliness was the even more important lesson of obeying the Lord even when the reason cannot be seen. The twelve were told to divide the multitude into groups of fifties and hundreds (Mark 6:40) before they knew the purpose for doing it. And after Jesus blessed the loaves and fish and handed them to the disciples, the food probably did not begin to multiply until it was distributed. The miracle became effective only as the disciples obeyed Jesus' command.

Jesus also demonstrated God's great generosity in providing enough food for every person to be fully satisfied, yet with an economy of stewardship that allowed no waste. Ours is a God of abundant providence, who does not give stingily. The ministry of God's servants should also be characterized by giving without reserve or measure, considering the needs of others before our own. Before the disciples knew that food would be left for them, they obediently gave all they had to the multitudes. Just as the food did not begin to multiply until after the disciples started to distribute it, their own needs were not met until they had met the needs of others. The little bit of food Jesus handed to the disciples was far short of enough to feed even twelve men. It was one little boy's lunch. But in obedience to Jesus, they gave away even what little they had.

The supreme lesson for the disciples was to learn to trust God to supply what seems impossible. Even after pondering all day over Jesus' instruction for them to feed the crowd themselves, the thought of turning to Him did not enter their heads. Like most of us, they were still inclined to look everywhere but to Him, even after having experienced so many previous miracles. And within that lesson was the lesson that, although God is perfectly able to do His work without us and without what we have, He chooses to use us and our meager resources to magnify His goodness and His power.

God's plan of redemption involves the witness, the work, and the means of those who belong to Him. In His infinite wisdom, the Lord most fully manifests His power through our weakness and His abundance through our poverty (1 Cor. 1:26-29). God often uses the small things to greater effectiveness than the things that are thought to be the greatest and most promising.

As the song goes, “Little becomes much in the Master’s hand.” God used a baby’s cry to move the heart of Pharaoh’s daughter and a shepherd’s crook to work mighty miracles in Egypt. He used a boy and his slingshot to slay Goliath and rout the Philistine army. He used a poverty-stricken widow to sustain Elijah and a young girl to lead the leprous Naaman to Elisha. He used Balaam’s donkey to teach His truth and the jawbone of another donkey to slay a thousand men. He used a little child to teach His disciples humility, and He used one boy’s lunch to feed twenty-five thousand people.

The faithful remnant was confirmed. Among the huge multitude were a few who had already trusted in Christ for salvation and who followed Him to the other side of the lake not to be healed or entertained but to be spiritually blessed. There were also those who sought and received salvation. The next day some of them asked Jesus, “What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?” and begged, “Lord, evermore give us this bread” (John 6:28,34). That elect remnant saw God’s divine power at work in Jesus and glorified Him. With their spiritual eyes they not only saw the crowds being fed but the Lord’s compassion being manifested. They saw Jesus’ great integrity and stewardship. He did not resort to spectacular demonstrations that mesmerized His audience, like so many charlatans and false healers have done and continue to do. They also saw a manifestation of the kingdom of God, because they saw the King Himself at work. They saw the King graciously minister to His subjects and even to those who would not have Him as their sovereign.

The unbelieving rejecters were revealed. By far the greatest amount of soil on which the gospel of the kingdom fell that day was hard and thorny. Most of the people saw nothing more than what seemed an amazing feat of magic. They saw the human Jesus plainly, but they could not see the divine Son of God at all. They had their stomachs filled to a satisfaction they had never before experienced; but they did not have so much as a taste of the Bread of Life. They left physically filled but spiritually empty. Because they had received great light from God but preferred darkness, they went home further from Him and in greater sin than when they came. They came there for what Jesus could give them; but their self-indulgent, unbelieving hearts prevented them from receiving His greatest gift of all.

Worshiping the Son **Of God** (14:22-33)

And immediately He made the disciples get into the boat, and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away. And after He had sent the multitudes away, He went up to the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. But the boat was already many stadia away from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were frightened, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." And He said, "Come!" And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But seeing the wind, he became afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind stopped. And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "You are certainly God's Son!" (14:22-33)

The pinnacle of this passage is the disciples' worship of Jesus as they confessed, "You are certainly God's Son" (v. 33). Though the Father had said this of Jesus at His baptism (3:17) and even the demons at Gadara addressed Him as the Son of God (8:29), but this was the first time the twelve unequivocally declared their Master to be God's Son.

Within the events of Matthew 14:22-33 are five demonstrations, or proofs, of Jesus' deity that led to the disciples' confession. Within the period of but a few hours they received unmistakable verifications of

Jesus' divine authority, divine knowledge, divine protection, divine love, and divine power.

PROOF OF HIS DIVINE AUTHORITY

And immediately He made the disciples get into the boat, and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away. And after He had sent the multitudes away, He went up to the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. (14:22-23)

The first affirmation of Jesus' deity on this occasion was His demonstration of divine authority. The fact that Jesus **made the disciples get into the boat** strongly suggests they were reluctant to leave Him and perhaps had argued with Him about it. As soon as the five thousand men, along with the women and children, had been fed and the twelve baskets of leftovers picked up, the multitude said, "This is of a truth the Prophet who is to come into the world" and "they were intending to come and take Him by force, to make Him king" (John 6:14-15a). To prevent that from happening, Jesus "withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone" (v. 15b). He was indeed the predicted King, but He would not establish His earthly kingdom at that time. In any case, it was not the crowd's prerogative to crown Him.

The disciples no doubt thought the recognition of the crowd was long overdue and rejoiced that Jesus was at last being acknowledged as the Messiah, the coming King who would overthrow the Herods and Rome and establish Israel in her rightful place of world leadership. Jesus Himself had taught them to pray for the kingdom to come (Matt. 6:10), and this seemed an opportune time for Him to begin making the answer to that prayer a reality.

The disciples were also probably thinking of the high positions they would have as Jesus' chief administrators in the kingdom and of the prestige and power those offices would bring. They had suffered indifference and indignities with the Lord for some two years, while living from hand to mouth. Now that the crowd was at fever pitch in support of

Jesus, what better time could there be to make His first public move toward the throne? It seems certain that the worldly, self-centered, and ambitious Judas, in particular, would have strongly fostered such thinking among his fellow disciples.

Knowing their thoughts and the growing influence of the crowd on them, Jesus removed them from the evil solicitation by commanding them to **get into the boat, and go ahead of Him to the other side**. At least in part because of their susceptibility to the political plans of the people, He **made** the disciples leave.

John identifies the specific destination on **the other side** as Capernaum (6:24) and Mark as Gennesaret (6:53), a small, fertile plain on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee between Capernaum and Magdala. It was a short trip across the northern tip of the sea, one that most of the disciples had made many times. But they resisted leaving now, not only because of the enthusiasm of the crowd to make Jesus king but also because they did not want to be separated from Jesus. Although they were weak in faith and easily influenced, they nevertheless were deeply devoted to the Lord and felt incomplete and vulnerable when He was not with them. They may also have not wanted to leave then because they could feel the wind starting to blow and were cautious about making even that short trip after dark in bad weather.

But regardless of the reasons for their reluctance, the disciples got **into the boat** and departed. They were under the Lord's authority, but He did not have to use supernatural force to make them leave. His firm word was enough, and it is to their credit that they obeyed. When He told them to cross over **ahead of Him to the other side**, that is what they did.

Jesus also demonstrated His divine authority over the multitudes, who, despite their great numbers (probably twenty-five thousand or more), could not make Jesus do anything contrary to His Father's plan and will. After He sent the disciples on their way to Capernaum, He **sent the multitudes away** as well. They were determined to make Him king in their own way and for their own purposes, but they could not. Without argument or fanfare, He simply dispersed **the multitudes**, and they bedded down for the night wherever they could near Bethsaida Julias, a few miles inland from the northeast shore of the lake.

Jesus has authority over the destinies of all men, including their final judgment (John 5:22). He has authority over all the supernatural

world, including the evil world of Satan and his demonic fallen angels (Mark 1:27). He has authority over the holy angels, whom He could at any time have summoned to His aid (Matt. 26:53). The crowds who heard Him deliver the Sermon on the Mount recognized that “He was teaching them as one having authority” (Matt. 7:29). When He sent the twelve out on their first mission, He delegated to them part of His own “authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness” (Matt. 10:1). And in His Great Commission He declared to the eleven who remained, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18).

Jesus has sovereign control over everything in heaven and on earth. He commands and controls men; He commands and controls angels, fallen and holy; and He commands and controls nature.

And after He had sent the multitudes away, He went up to the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening He was there alone. Jesus had little time to rest or to spend unhurried hours with the disciples. He only had time **to pray**, after which He would miraculously encounter the disciples in the middle of the furious wind at sea.

Jesus’ temptations neither began nor ended with the three in the wilderness immediately after His baptism. At the end of that session, the devil only “departed from Him until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13). The enthusiasm of the crowds and the disciples to make Him king was very much like the third temptation in the wilderness, in which Satan offered Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory” (Matt. 4:8-9). “What better time to establish your kingdom than the Passover season, and in what better way than by marching triumphantly into Jerusalem at the head of thousands of faithful, enthusiastic supporters?” the devil may have asked. Jesus would surely gather many more thousands on the way to the Holy City, and His supernatural power would guarantee victory against any opposition. He could easily conquer the Herods, and even mighty Rome would be no match for the Son of God. He could bypass the cross and avoid the agony of having to take the sin of the world upon Himself.

Whatever thoughts Satan may have tried to put into His mind, Jesus turned His back on that evil just as He did on all other. He then came before His heavenly Father **to pray**. In a sense He did celebrate a victory, but it was over temptation, not Rome; and He turned His attention to His heavenly Father, whom He joined in intimate, refreshing communion. As

in the Garden, He doubtlessly longed to be restored to the glorious fellowship He had had with His Father before the world even came into existence (John 17:5). But He had other things yet to do.

At the close of His earthly ministry, Jesus told Peter, “Behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail” (Luke 22:32). Many times before He did it in His high priestly prayer (John 17:6-26), Jesus prayed for His disciples, and it is likely that He prayed for them on this occasion.

By this time it was the second **evening** of the day, which lasted from six to nine o’clock. The multitudes had been fed during the earlier evening (Matt. 14:15), which was from three to six. And as it became dark, Jesus was **there alone** in the mountain.

PROOF OF HIS DIVINE KNOWLEDGE

But the boat was already many stadia away from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. (14:24-25)

The second proof of Jesus’ deity was His demonstration of divine knowledge. In obedience to His command the disciples had entered the boat and headed for the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Soon after they left, however, a violent wind erupted, and they were caught **many stadia away from the land**. A **stadia** was about an eighth of a mile, and John informs us that the **many stadia** amounted to twenty-five or thirty (in the Greek text), or “about three or four miles” (John 6:19).

Because in a normal trip across the northern end of the Sea of Galilee **the boat** would not have traveled more than a mile or two from shore at any point, the storm had obviously carried it several miles south, out into the middle of the lake. The disciples and their little craft were being **battered by the waves**, and **the wind was contrary**, pushing them farther and farther away from their destination and closer and closer to disaster. Whether or not the boat had a sail, it would have been useless in the high winds and tossing waves. The only means of movement was

rowing, and they were desperately “straining at the oars” (Mark 6:48) for their very lives.

The disciples were already confused, frustrated, disillusioned, and disappointed that Jesus had sent them away. Though they must have wondered why He sent them to certain death, the twelve are to be admired for their obedience and perseverance. Although the night was dark, the sea stormy, and the situation apparently hopeless, they were doing their best to do what the Lord commanded. The worst part was that Jesus was not with them. During a similar storm, they had awakened Him and He “rebuked the winds and the sea; and it became perfectly calm” (Matt. 8:26). But now He was miles away. He probably heard the storm and was aware of their plight; but there seemed no way He could get to them. If all the disciples together could not row against the wind and waves, one man could never do it.

Jesus knew of their situation long before it happened, and He did not have to rush away from prayer in order to be on time to help. The storm and the disciples were equally in His hands, and He knew in advance exactly what He would do with both.

The night was divided into four watches, or shifts. The first was from six to nine, the second from nine to twelve, the third from twelve to three, and the fourth from three to six. **The fourth watch of the night** therefore included the time just before dawn, indicating the disciples had been at sea for at least nine hours, most of the time battling the wind storm.

Jesus waited a long time before **He came to them**, just as He waited until Lazarus had been dead for several days before He came to Bethany. In both instances, He could have come much sooner than He did and in both instances He could have performed the ensuing miracle without being present—just as He had done in healing the centurion’s servant (Matt. 8:13). He could, of course, have prevented the death of Lazarus and the rising of the wind in the first place. But in His infinite wisdom Jesus purposely allowed Mary and Martha and the disciples to reach the extremity of need before He intervened. He knew everything about all of them, and had known it since before they were born. And He knew infinitely better than they did what was best for their welfare and for God’s glory.

The disciples should have been rejoicing with David that, “If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, Thou art there. If I take the wings of the dawn, if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, even there Thy hand will lead Me, and Thy right hand will lay hold of me” (Ps. 139:8-10). The twelve should have remembered that “the Lord also will be a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble” (Ps. 9:9), that the Lord was their fortress and deliverer and their rock of refuge (Ps. 18:2), and that He would keep them safe even as they walked “through the valley of the shadow of death” (Ps. 23:4). They should have remembered God’s word to Moses out of the burning bush: “I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings” (Ex. 3:7). They should have remembered that, just before Abraham would have plunged the knife into Isaac’s heart, the Lord provided a ram to take Isaac’s place (Gen. 22:13).

But in the exigencies of the night, the twelve had forgotten those psalms and the Lord’s power in which they exult. They had little confidence that the Lord, who had known all about the suffering of His people in Egypt and did not forsake them, was relevant in that storm. They saw no relation between their plight and the fact that God had provided a substitute for Isaac when he faced death.

The disciples had even forgotten Jesus’ own assurance that their heavenly Father knew all their needs before they asked Him (Matt. 6:32) and that not even a single sparrow “will fall to the ground apart from your Father” and that “the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (10:29-30). All they could think of was their danger and all they could feel was fear.

But Jesus had not forgotten the disciples, and He came to them through the very danger that threatened to destroy them, **walking on the sea**. He used the trial as His footpath. He could not physically see them from the mountain or through the stormy darkness, but He knew exactly where they were. God’s vision is not like ours, because “The eyes of the Lord are in every place, watching the evil and the good” (Prov. 15:3). “There is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do” (Heb. 4:13).

PROOF OF HIS DIVINE PROTECTION

And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were frightened, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out for fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.” (14:26-27)

The third proof of Jesus’ deity was manifested in His protection of the disciples. As He first approached them, they thought they were getting anything but help, because, **when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were frightened, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out for fear.** *Theōreō* (from which **saw** is derived) means to look intently, indicating that the disciples’ gaze was transfixed on the apparition before them. At first Jesus did not walk directly toward the boat but appeared to be passing by (Mark 6:48); but that made little difference to the disciples. For **a ghost** to be anywhere near them was enough to make them **frightened** almost out of their senses. The term **ghost** is the Greek *phantasma*, which refers to an apparition, a creature of the imagination, and is the word from which come the English *phantom* and *phantasm*.

Many liberal interpreters insist that the disciples only *thought* they saw Jesus walking across the water as their tired and frightened minds played tricks on them. But it would have been quite impossible for all twelve of them to simultaneously experience the same imagined apparition. And such an explanation hardly accounts for the fact that Jesus somehow got into the boat with them, and that as soon as He did the storm instantly ceased. The writers make a point of the fact that the boat was a great distance from the shore. Neither, as some suggest, could the disciples have seen Jesus walking along the beach while appearing to be walking on the water—even in broad daylight. Either they lied in reporting the event or it occurred as they say it did.

Because of the darkness, the mist from the wind and waves, the fatigue from rowing, and the fear that already gripped them because of the storm, they did not recognize Jesus when He appeared to them. Mark reports that “they all saw Him” (Mark 6:50), but none of them suspected it was Jesus. And their fear instantly turned into abject terror as they beheld the form they thought was **a ghost** come to add to their torment. In the

dark before the dawn, hopelessness turned to utter horror and despair. In their panic they could not help but **cry out for fear**.

Although Jesus was testing the disciples' faith, He understood their frailty. He calmed their fear by saying simply, **Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid**. In spite of the raging winds, the waves battering against the boat, and their fear-stricken minds, they immediately recognized their Master's voice.

It was not the time for an explanation of why He was there, of what He planned to do next, or of why He had not come sooner. It was time to give **courage**, to still the storm that raged within the disciples, even before stilling the one that raged without.

Jesus did not walk on the water to teach the disciples how to do it. Peter tried and failed; and there is no record of any of the others ever doing it at all. The Lord's purpose was to demonstrate His loving willingness to do whatever is necessary to rescue His children. He did not have to walk on the water to save them, but His doing so gave them an unforgettable reminder of the power and extent of His divine protection. It was not to teach them to walk on water but to teach them that God can and will act on behalf of His own.

We will never find ourselves in a place where Christ cannot find us; and no storm is too severe for Him to save us from it. He protects His own, whom He will never fail or forsake (Josh. 1:5; Heb. 13:5). The lesson for the disciples is the lesson for us: There is no reason for God's people to fear. There is no reason for anxiety, no matter how hopeless and threatening our problems seem to be. Life is often stormy and painful, often threatening and frightening. Some believers suffer more than others, but all suffer at some time and in some way. In spite of that, the storm is never so severe, the night never so black, and the boat never so frail that we risk danger beyond our Father's care.

When Paul was on the ship taking him to Rome to appear before Caesar, it encountered an exceptionally violent storm in the Mediterranean Sea near the island of Crete. After the crew had thrown all the cargo, tackle, supplies, and food overboard, the ship was still in danger of foundering on the rocks. Paul had warned they should remain in the safety of the port at Fair Havens through the winter, but his advice was not heeded by the centurion or the pilot of the ship. When everyone else on board had despaired of reaching land alive, an angel appeared to Paul

assuring him that, although the ship would be lost, no lives would be. Yet even before the angel's message, Paul, unlike the fearful disciples, was at perfect peace and offered encouragement to those on the ship with him, saying, "Keep up your courage, men, for I believe God, that it will turn out exactly as I have been told" (Acts 27:25).

So the disciples who were reluctant to leave Jesus and go to Capernaum obeyed by rowing out into the storm they knew was coming, and Jesus honored their faithfulness. When believers are in the place of obedience they are in the place of safety, no matter what the circumstances. The place of security is not the place of favorable circumstance but the place of obedience to God's will.

PROOF OF HIS DIVINE LOVE

And Peter answered Him and said, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." And He said, "Come!" And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But seeing the wind, he became afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" (14:28-31)

The fourth proof of Jesus' deity was His demonstration of divine love. Although Mark and John report Jesus' walking on the water, only Matthew tells of this incident concerning Peter.

Peter's **if** did not reflect doubt that it was actually his Lord, because going out onto the water to join an unidentified ghost was the last thing Peter would have done. He was naturally impetuous and brash, and more than once his overconfidence got him into trouble—including trouble with the Lord. But it would have taken more than brashness for this life-long fisherman to have ventured out on the water without benefit of a boat, because no one on board better knew the dangers of Galilee storms than Peter. He had probably been thrown into the water at times by high winds or waves and had seen others experience the same trauma. He

was no fool, and it is highly unlikely that impetuosity would have so easily overridden his reason and instinctive caution.

It seems much more probable that Peter was overjoyed to see Jesus and that his supreme concern was to be safely with Him. Mere impetuosity might have caused him to jump out of the boat, expecting Jesus somehow to come to his rescue. But he knew better, and he therefore asked the Lord, **Command me to come to You on the water.** He knew Jesus had the power to enable him to walk **on the water**, but he did not presume to attempt the feat without His express instruction. Peter's request was an act of affection built on confident faith. He did not ask to walk on water for the sake of doing something spectacular, but because it was the way to get to Jesus.

Peter did many things for which he can be faulted. But he is sometimes faulted for things that reflect love, courage, and faith as much as brashness or cowardice. For instance, although he denied the Lord while in the courtyard during Jesus' trial, he was nevertheless there, as close to Him as he could get. The rest of the disciples were nowhere to be found. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter's suggestion was unwise but it was prompted by sincere devotion: "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (Matt. 17:4). He genuinely loved Jesus and sincerely wanted to serve and please Him. Peter did not resist Jesus' washing his feet because of pride, but because, in his deep humility, he could not conceive of His Lord washing the feet of anyone so unworthy. And when Jesus explained the significance of what He was doing, Peter said, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head" (John 13:9).

Peter was continually in the Lord's shadow and footsteps. By reading between the lines of the gospel accounts it is not difficult to imagine that Peter sometimes followed so closely behind Jesus that he bumped into Him when He stopped. Peter sensed in Jesus' presence a wonderful safety and comfort, and that is where Peter now wanted to be. It was safer to be with Jesus **on the water** than to be without Him in the boat.

Peter's love for Jesus was imperfect and weak, but it was real. Three times Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him, and each time Peter responded affirmatively. Jesus did not contradict Peter's answer but reminded him of his obligation to care for his Master's sheep and warned

him of the great cost his love would demand (John 21:15-18). Tradition has it that when Peter was about to be crucified, he requested being put on the cross upside down, not feeling worthy to die in the same way as his Lord.

Jesus' telling Peter to **come** confirms the disciple's right motive. Jesus never invites, much less commands, a person to do anything sinful. Nor is He ever a party to pride or presumption. With the greatest of compassion, Jesus told Peter to **come**, highly pleased that he wanted to be with his Lord.

As much as anything else, it was Peter's great love for Christ that made him the leader of the disciples. He appears to have been the closest to Christ, and is always named first in lists of the twelve. Just as the Lord never rejects weak faith, but accepts it and builds on it, He also never rejects weak and imperfect love. With great patience and care He takes the love of His children and, through trials and hardships as well as successes and victories, builds that love into greater conformity to His own love.

Jesus' telling Peter, "**Come!**" was an act of love. John declared, "We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us." In fact, he goes on to say, "God is love" (1 John 4:16; cf. v. 8). It is God's nature to be loving, just as it is water's nature to be wet and the sun's to be bright and hot. He loves his own with an infinite, uninfluenced, unqualified, unchanging, unending, and perfect love.

Christians most perfectly reflect their heavenly Father when they are loving, especially to each other. "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar," John continues to explain; "for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20).

Although Peter was sincere, he did not comprehend the reality or the extremity of what he was asking to do. From the relative safety of the boat the feat did not seem so terrifying; but once **Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus**, the situation appeared radically different. Peter temporarily took His eyes off the Lord and, **seeing the wind, he became afraid, and beginning to sink, he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!"** His faith was enough to get him out of the boat, but it was not enough to carry him across the water.

Faith is strengthened by its being taken to extremities it has never faced before. Such strengthening is basic to Christian growth and maturity.

“Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial,” James says; “for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him” (James 1:12). The Lord takes us as far as our faith will go, and when it ends we begin to sink. It is then that we call out to Him and He again demonstrates His faithfulness and His power, and our faith learns to extend that much further. As we trust God in the faith we have, we discover its limitations; but we also discover what it can yet become.

When Peter was **beginning to sink**, he was probably fully clothed and would have had great difficulty swimming through the high waves. And in his fright he could think of nothing but drowning. But as soon as he cried out & “Lord, **save me**,” he was safe, because **immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him**.

When Jesus rebuked him, saying, **O you of little faith, why did you doubt?** Peter must have wondered at the question. The reason for his doubt seemed obvious. He was bone weary from rowing most of the night, scared to death by the storm and then by what he thought was a ghost, and now it seemed he was about to drown before he could reach the Lord. He had never been in such a situation before, and it may be that his actually walking a few feet on the water added to his shock.

But Peter’s weak faith was better than no faith; and, as in the courtyard when he denied the Lord, at least he was there and not holding back like the rest. He at least started toward Jesus, and when he faltered, the Lord took him the rest of the way.

Jesus had been interceding for Peter and the others while He was on the mountain, and now He came directly to their aid in the midst of the storm. The Lord goes before us and He goes with us. When we get frustrated, anxious, bewildered, and frightened, Satan tempts us to wonder why God allows such things to happen to his children. And if we keep our attention on those things we will begin to sink just as surely as Peter did. But if we cry out to the Lord for help, He will come to our rescue just as surely as He did to Peter’s.

Peter would one day write, “In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:6-7).

PROOF OF HIS DIVINE POWER

And when they got into the boat, the wind stopped. (14:32)

The most spectacular miracle was accomplished without Jesus saying a word or raising a hand. The moment He and Peter **got into the boat** with the other disciples, **the wind stopped. It** was as if **the wind** was simply waiting for the miracle to be finished; and when it had served its purpose, it **stopped**.

Just as instantaneously, “the boat was at the land to which they were going” (John 6:21). They had been three or four miles out to sea and the storm was still raging as fiercely as ever; but in an instant it stopped and the boat was at its destination. On the basis of normal human experience it is hardly surprising that the disciples “were greatly astonished” (Mark 6:51). But the disciples had been having astounding displays of Jesus’ miraculous power for two years, and for them these remarkable events should not have been astonishing. We learn from Mark that their amazement resulted from their not having “gained any insight from the incident of the loaves”—or from Jesus’ earlier stilling of the storm or from any other great work He had done—because “their heart was hardened” (Mark 6:52).

Yet in that moment those same hearts were softened and those eyes opened as they had never been before; **and those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, “You are certainly God’s Son!”** They were now more than simply amazed, as the crowds and they themselves had always been. They were taken past amazement to worship, which is what Jesus’ signs and miracles were intended to produce. At last they were beginning to see Jesus as the One whom God highly exalted and on whom He bestowed the name which is above every name, and at whose name “every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11).

Empty Worship:
Confusing the
Traditions of Men with
the Doctrine of
God (14:34-15:20)

And when they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. And when the men of that place recognized Him, they sent into all that surrounding district and brought to Him all who were sick; and they began to entreat Him that they might just touch the fringe of His cloak; and as many as touched it were cured.

Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem, saying, “Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.” And He answered and said to them, “And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death.’ But you say, ‘Whoever shall say to his father or mother, “Anything of mine you might have been helped by has been given to God,” he is not to honor his father or his mother.’ And thus you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’” And after He called the multitude to Him, He said to them, “Hear, and understand. Not what enters into the mouth defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.” Then the disciples came and said to Him, “Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?” But He answered and said, “Every plant which My

heavenly Father did not plant shall be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit.” And Peter answered and said to Him, “Explain the parable to us.” And He said, “Are you still lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.” (14:34-15:20)

One of God’s supreme commands is: “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain” (Ex. 20:7). That command obviously prohibits profanity or vulgarity in which the Lord’s name is used. It also obviously prohibits flippant, irreverent use of His name. But more than those obvious things, it also forbids any use of God’s name that is superficial, indifferent, insincere, or hypocritical.

It has been said that God’s name is taken in vain more often inside the church than outside. His name is taken in vain whenever it is mechanically used in repetitious prayers and liturgies, in singing His praise while having no thought of Him, and in praying thoughtlessly and without genuine devotion. His name is taken in vain through empty worship perhaps more than in any other way.

Hypocritical worship was among the worst offenses of ancient Israel. The Lord declared through Isaiah, “Bring your worthless offerings no longer, incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me. I am weary of bearing them. So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you, yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood” (Isa. 1:13-15).

Even the ceremonies and observances God Himself had ordained became unacceptable, because they were offered hypocritically and without meaning. Isaiah continued: “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn

to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless; defend the orphan, plead for the widow Come now, and let us reason together,' says the Lord, Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool'" (vv. 16-17).

Unless the heart of the worshiper is cleansed and purified, he cannot worship God acceptably, because he cannot worship God honestly and sincerely. The person with a sinful heart is opposed to God and it is not possible for him to worship rightly. Isaiah ends his prophecy with much the same warning as he begins it: "To this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word. But he who kills an ox is like one who slays a man; he who sacrifices a lamb is like the one who breaks a dog's neck; he who offers a grain offering is like one who offers swine's blood; he who burns incense is like the one who blesses an idol" (Isa. 66:2-3; cf. Prov 21:27). As they went through the pretensions of offering sacrifices, the people were no better than criminals and pagans, because their hearts were not humble and contrite, but proud and rebellious.

Through Amos, the Lord proclaimed the same message: "I hate, I reject your festivals, nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; and I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fadings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21-24). Malachi declared that to offer blemished and unworthy sacrifices was to despise God's name (Mal. 1:6-7).

In Matthew 14:34-15:20 Jesus preaches the same message as those prophets: Hearts that are not right with God cannot worship Him. Jesus was still popular with the multitudes of common people, but it was not because they trusted in Him as their Messiah-Savior but because He fed and healed them. Their interest in Him was selfish and their devotion to Him was superficial. They had no desire to follow Him as Lord but only to get from Him what they wanted. They did not want to serve Him but rather wanted Him to serve their every whim.

Most of the religious leaders were already openly hostile to Jesus and had been plotting for some time how to kill Him (12:14). But to keep

from antagonizing the common people who still followed Jesus, the leaders tried first to discredit Him before they openly attacked Him.

In the present passage Jesus confronts the Jewish religious system of His day head on, showing, above all, the emptiness and worthlessness of its worship. In doing so, He further crystallizes the irreconcilable conflict between His gospel and that system. As the conflict unfolds, Jesus is first seen as the compassionate Healer (14:34-36), then as the condemning Judge (15:1-9), and finally as the correcting Teacher (vv. 10-20).

THE COMPASSIONATE HEALER

And when they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret. And when the men of that place recognized Him, they sent into all that surrounding district and brought to Him all who were sick; and they began to entreat Him that they might just touch the fringe of His cloak; and as many as touched it were cured. (14:34-36)

After Jesus stepped into the boat with Peter, the storm immediately stopped (Matt. 14:32) and the boat immediately arrived “at the land to which they were going” (John 6:21). The land was **Gennesaret**, a small but very beautiful plain located between Capernaum and Magdala. According to Josephus it was a lush and extremely fertile area that produced a wide variety of crops. The fields and vineyards were irrigated from no less than four large springs, enabling farmers to produce three crops a year. Because the soil was so rich, it was all devoted to farming, and the area contained no towns or villages. It was therefore a quiet, peaceful region, inhabited by many kinds of birds and offering a good place for retreat and rest.

Jesus probably intended to spend some time there alone with His disciples; but again His plans were interrupted, because **when the men of that place recognized Him, they sent into all that surrounding district and brought to Him all who were sick.** Although Jesus had previously healed thousands of people in that general area, there were obviously still many others who were **sick** with various afflictions.

The people's confidence in Jesus' miraculous powers was now so firmly established that **they began to entreat Him that they might just touch the fringe of His cloak.** They may have heard of the woman with the hemorrhage who had been healed by that act (Matt. 9:20) and assumed that anyone could be healed in the same way. Whatever their thinking and motives may have been, Jesus had compassion on them and honored their expression of faith, because **as many as touched it were cured.**

But Jesus wanted to do much more for them. Above all, He wanted to heal their sin-diseased hearts. That same day He offered Himself to them as the Bread of life which came down from heaven, which to eat would cause them never to hunger or thirst again and would give them eternal life (John 6:33-35, 48-51). But when they realized what it meant to eat that heavenly food and drink that heavenly drink, many of the shallow followers were offended and left Him (vv. 52-60, 66). Like so many people today who look to God only for what they want and care nothing for what He wants, most of the multitude had little to do with Jesus after He healed them.

Although He did not withhold it from them, Jesus was grieved that the people sought no more from Him than physical healing. Because they did not ask for a full meal, He did not refuse them a piece of bread. Because they did not ask for spiritual help, He did not refuse them physical. In spite of their superficiality, ingratitude, and self-centeredness, He mercifully healed them in order to reveal the compassionate heart of God.

THE CONDEMNING JUDGE

Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem, saying, "Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." And He answered and said to them, "And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death.' But you say, 'Whoever shall say to his father or mother, "Anything of mine you might have been helped by

has been given to God,” he is not to honor his father or his mother.’ And thus you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’” (15:1-9)

Just as Jesus offered compassion for the fickle crowds who wanted only food and healing from Him, He offered condemnation for the self-righteous, hypocritical religious leaders who wanted *nothing* from Him. They wanted nothing at all to do with Him, except what was necessary to discredit and destroy Him.

In this crucial passage we see the antithetical nature of the gospel message in Jesus’ teaching: The God of compassion is also the God of condemnation. Just as He heals those who come to Him, He condemns those who reject Him. In these nine verses we first see Jesus’ confrontation and then His condemnation of the unbelieving and rebellious scribes and Pharisees.

THE CONFRONTATION

Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem, saying, “Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.” (15:1-2)

Then is indefinite and does not precisely indicate the time sequence between the healings and the approach of the **Pharisees and scribes**. It is possible that this confrontation occurred several days after the healings. From John 6:4 we know it was the Passover season and that many Jews were traveling through Galilee on their way to Jerusalem for the feast. It was the third Passover of Jesus’ ministry, a year before His final celebration of it with the disciples in the upper room.

Since **Pharisees and scribes** from **Jerusalem** would not normally carry on their work in Galilee, it is likely their fellow religionists there had requested help in confronting Jesus, possibly channeling their request through the Sanhedrin, the high Jewish council. **Jerusalem** was the

location of the Temple and of the most eminent schools of Judaism; and therefore this delegation doubtlessly carried heavy ecclesiastical weight. And because these **Pharisees and scribes** had prestige and learning superior to that of their counterparts in Galilee, Jesus treated them with greater severity.

These men were familiar with Jesus' teaching and ministry and came to Him with the specific purpose of proving Him to be an offender against their tradition. As soon as Jesus had begun to preach and teach, the leaders of the religious establishment realized He posed a severe threat to their legalistic system. Their religion was intentionally external and superficial, because it could be outwardly practiced with great zeal and diligence no matter what the condition of the heart or soul. It was a religion of ceremony and tradition that the most hardened unbeliever could follow. It was concerned with covering up sin, not exposing and cleansing it, with appearing righteous, not being righteous. Even before Jesus unequivocally proclaimed the truth in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:20), the Jewish leaders sensed that His kind of righteousness and theirs were diametrically opposed. The conflict ultimately resulted in the crucifixion—which they considered to be the victory of their way, whereas it was really its death knell.

The visiting leaders first asked Jesus, **Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.** They did not try to hide the fact that Jesus' offense was against **the tradition of the elders** rather than God's law. In their minds **the tradition of the elders** was superior to Scripture, in the sense that it was the only reliable interpretation of God's Word. Just as Roman Catholics look to church dogma to discover what Scripture "really means," most Jews of Jesus' day looked to **the tradition of the elders**. In much the same way, many Protestants give more authority to the pronouncements of their denomination than to the Bible.

The Talmud, which is the repository of Jewish tradition, teaches that God gave the oral law to Moses and then told Moses to pass it on to great men of Israel. These men were then to do three things with the law they had received. First, they were to deliberate on it and properly apply it. Second, they were to train disciples in order that the next generation would have teachers of the law. Third, they were to build a wall around the law in order to protect it.

Because their hearts were not right with God, the rabbis' wall-building "protection" of His law actually undermined and contradicted it. Their purpose was not to lead the people to worship and serve God from pure hearts made clean by Him, but to worship and serve Him by human means and from unchanged hearts. To provide the means for superficially keeping God's commandments, regulation after regulation and ceremony after ceremony were added, until God's own Word was utterly hidden behind the wall of tradition. Instead of protecting God's Word, **the tradition** obscured and perverted it.

When the northern kingdom of Israel and then the southern kingdom of Judah were taken into captivity, the Jewish people felt as if God had abandoned them. The real reason for their captivity, of course, was that they had abandoned Him. They were suffering God's judgment, just as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other prophets had repeatedly and vividly warned they would.

While the Jews were in exile, scribes (the first of whom was Ezra) began to assemble and copy the various books of Scripture written to that time. They also began to make comments on various passages that seemed unclear; and gradually a larger and larger accumulation of interpretations was developed until there was more interpretation than Scripture. The distinction between Scripture and the traditions based on interpretations of Scripture gradually became less and less distinct, and before long **tradition** was more familiar and more revered than God's own Word.

By Jesus' day, **the tradition of the elders** had for many years supplanted Scripture as the supreme religious authority in the minds of Jewish leaders and of most of the people. The traditions even affirmed that "the words of scribes are more lovely than the words of the law," and it became a greater offense in Judaism to transgress the teaching of some rabbi such as the revered Hillel than to transgress the teaching of Scripture.

In the thinking of the Pharisees and scribes who approached Jesus on this occasion, it was therefore an extremely serious matter that His **disciples** would **transgress the tradition of the elders**. Jesus and His disciples disregarded all the rabbinical traditions, and the particular infraction cited here was simply representative of many others that could have been mentioned. But the disciples' failing to **wash their hands when they** ate was considered to be an especially serious offense.

Wash had nothing to do with physical hygiene but referred to ceremonial rinsing. The purpose was to remove the ritual defilement caused by having touched something unclean, such as a dead body or a Gentile. Some of the rabbis even taught that a certain demon named Shibtah attached itself to people's hands while they slept and that, if he were not ceremonially washed away, he would actually enter the body through the food handled by defiled hands.

The value of ceremonial rinsing was held so high that one rabbi insisted that "whosoever has his abode in the land of Israel and eats his common food with rinsed hands may rest assured that he shall obtain eternal life." Another rabbi taught that it would be better to walk four miles out of the way to get water than to eat with unwashed hands. A certain rabbi who was imprisoned and given a small ration of water used it to wash his hands before eating rather than to drink, claiming he would rather die than transgress the tradition.

God had instituted certain prescribed ceremonial washings as part of the covenant given through Moses, but those were never more than outward symbols or pictures of spiritual truths. The Old Testament nowhere holds them up as having any merit, value, or blessing in themselves.

Water jars were kept ready to be used before every meal. The minimum amount of water to be used was a quarter of a log, enough to fill one and a half egg shells. The water was first poured on both hands, held with the fingers pointed upward; and it must run down the arm as far as the wrist and drop off from the wrist, for the water was now itself unclean, having touched the unclean hands. And if it ran down the fingers again it would render them unclean. The process was repeated with hands held in the downward direction, the fingers pointing down. And finally each hand was cleansed by being rubbed with the fist of the other. A strict Jew would do this before every meal and between every course in every meal. (For a fuller discussion read Alfred Edersheim's *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol. 2, pp. 10-13.)

Throughout history, man-made religion has attached great significance and benefit to ceremonies and ritualistic acts. Commenting on this universal tendency of man, Charles Spurgeon is reported to have facetiously asked his congregation, "If there were no Sunday morning service at eleven, how many of you would be Christians?"

THE CONDEMNATION

And He answered and said to them, “And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death.’ But you say, ‘Whoever shall say to his father or mother, “Anything of mine you might have been helped by has been given to God,” he is not to honor his father or his mother.’ And thus you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’” (15:3-9)

Before answering the Pharisees’ charge, Jesus gave a counter charge. He did not deny that His disciples disregarded the rabbinical traditions; and He later explained to the multitudes (v. 11) and then to the disciples (vv. 17-18) why this particular tradition was worthless and meaningless. But He gave no answer or explanation to the accusing Pharisees and scribes, dismissing their question as irrelevant. Instead, He asked them the immeasurably more important question, **Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?**

Just as the Pharisees mentioned failure to wash their hands ceremonially before eating as an example of the disciples’ breaking **tradition**, Jesus mentioned the Pharisees’ overturning the fifth commandment, **honor your father and mother** (see Ex. 20:12), as an example of their breaking **the commandment of God**. He also reminded them of God’s penalty for breaking that command: **He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death** (see Ex. 21:17).

Bound up in honoring **father and mother** is the responsibility to show them respect and love and to help meet their needs. One tradition taught that “a son is bound to support his father even if he has to beg for him.” But another tradition had come to supersede that one as well as the fifth commandment. It taught that **whoever shall say to his father or**

mother, “Anything of mine you might have been helped by has been given to God,” he is not to honor his father or his mother.

The scribes and Pharisees knew the Ten Commandments well and could recite them easily from memory. They were the most educated of all Jewish men and were considered the supreme authorities on Scripture as well as tradition. They could not possibly have failed to see that this tradition directly violated God’s commandment **to honor one’s father and mother**. They knowingly replaced God’s specific command with their own contradicting tradition.

Anything of mine translates *dōron*, which means gift. Mark uses the more technical term *korban* (7:11), which refers to a gift or sacrifice specifically offered to God. Sometime in the past, a tradition had developed that allowed a person to call all his possessions *korban*, thereby dedicating them to God. And because Scripture taught that a vow to God must not be violated (Num. 30:2), those possessions could not be used for anything but service to God. Therefore, if a man’s **father or mother** asked for financial assistance, he could tell them, **Anything of mine you might have been helped by has been given to God**. The Greek text of the next phrase is more emphatic than the English suggests. **He is not to honor** might better be rendered, “He *must not* honor.” The vow did not simply allow withholding help from **father or . . . mother** but actually forbade it.

Except for what may have been actually given to the Temple or synagogue, however, the *korban* possessions remained in the person’s hands. And when he decided to use them for his *own* purposes, tradition permitted him to do so simply by saying *korban* over them again. In other words, the tradition was not designed to serve either God or the family but the selfish interests of the person making the hypocritical vow. To avoid giving up his possessions in order to support his parents, he could declare those possessions sacred and unusable; but as soon as he wanted to use them for himself he could just as easily reverse the vow. The covert purpose of that tradition was to invalidate **the word of God** by circumventing the fifth commandment.

Angered by the callous selfishness of that tradition, Jesus said, **You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me”** (see

Isa. 29:13). What Isaiah said of the **people** of his own day applied to the **hypocrites** of Jesus' day as well, and to those of our own.

An ancient rabbi said, "There are ten parts of hypocrisy in the world, nine at Jerusalem and one everywhere else." The same might be said of much of the church. Satan has no greater allies than **hypocrites** who go under the guise of God's people. And hypocrites have no greater ally than tradition, because tradition can be followed mechanically and thoughtlessly, without conviction, sincerity, or purity of heart. Because traditions are made by men, they can be accomplished by men. They require no faith, no trust, no dependence on God. Not only that, but they appeal to the flesh by feeding pride and self-righteousness. Often, as in this case, they also serve self-interest.

Because traditions require no integrity of heart, they are easily substituted for true worship and obedience. That is why it is easy for people to honor God with **their lips** while **their heart is far away from Him**. And that is why ritual, ceremony, and other religious traditions are more likely to take worshipers further from God than bring them closer. And the further a person is from God, the more **vain** his **worship** becomes.

The only heart that can worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24) is the heart that belongs to Him; and the only heart that belongs to Him is the heart cleansed from sin and made righteous by Him. It is this divine cleansing that God has always offered to those who trust in Him. "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you," He said through Ezekiel, "and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances" (Ezek. 36:26-27). Unless that transformation happens within a person, his righteousness cannot exceed the hypocritical and superficial righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees—in which case he can never enter the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:20).

Jesus was condemned and crucified because He exposed the vileness of religious hypocrites who rejected God's holy **doctrines** of grace in favor of their own sinful **precepts** of self-righteous works.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with tradition as such. Many traditions help us to remember, cherish, and honor things that are noble and beautiful. But when traditions are substituted for, or in any way distort or distract from God's Word, they are an offense against God and a barrier

to right worship and living. When **the precepts of men** are taught as **doctrines**, man's wisdom is elevated above God's—which is the very root of all sin. It was Satan's inducing Eve to trust her own wisdom above God's that led to the Fall and to every subsequent sin and evil in the world.

THE CORRECTING TEACHER

And after He called the multitude to Him, He said to them, “Hear, and understand. Not what enters into the mouth denies the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.” Then the disciples came and said to Him, “Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?” But He answered and said, “Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit.” And Peter answered and said to Him, “Explain the parable to us.” And He said, “Are you still lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.” (15:10-20)

Pollution has become a major problem in the modern world, and we read and hear much about it. The air, the soil, the rivers and lakes, and even the oceans have become polluted to a degree thought impossible a generation ago.

The Bible also has much to say about pollution, but this pollution has plagued mankind from its beginning. It is a pollution that cannot be seen, smelled, tasted, or measured. Yet it is more lethal than anything modern environmentalists oppose. The New Testament uses five different verbs, three nouns, and one adjective to represent the idea of pollution, or defilement, and various forms of those terms are used dozens of times.

The five uses in the present text of **defile** and **defiles** (vv. 11,18, 20) are all from the verb *koinoō*, which means to make common, unclean, or polluted.

God is concerned about the defilement of all of His creation, but especially about the defilement of man, who is made in His image, and most especially about the defilement of His own redeemed children. James admonishes Christians to hold to “pure and undefiled religion” (James 1:27), and Paul warns against consciences that are weak and defiled (1 Cor. 8:7). It is a terribly serious matter for Christians to defile themselves, because their bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16-17). The Lord commends the church at Sardis for not having soiled, or defiled, its garments (Rev. 3:4), and in the eternal heavenly kingdom there will be no object or person who is defiled (Rev. 14:4; 21:27). But even in our present earthly life, we are commanded to grow into the likeness of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:13), who is “holy, innocent, undefiled” (Heb. 7:26). Like His Son, God’s people are to be clean, pure, holy, spotless, unpolluted, and undented (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:27; 2 Pet. 3:14).

In Matthew 15:1-20, Jesus first states the principle of spiritual defilement, then describes the violation of the principle, and finally elucidates the meaning of the principle.

THE PRINCIPLE STATED

And after He called the multitude to Him, He said to them, “Hear, and understand. Not what enters into the mouth defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.” (15:10-11)

Because the time sequence between chapters 14 and 15 is not clear, we cannot be certain about the identity of this **multitude**; but it is probably the group described in 14:34-36 who had come to Jesus for healing.

This period of healing and teaching (see John 6:26-71) apparently lasted for many days, because it carried Jesus to numerous villages, cities, and countrysides (Mark 6:56). Sometime during this period the delegation of scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem had come to Galilee to discredit Jesus and had instead been discredited by Him.

The multitude had been standing on the sidelines, listening to Jesus condemn the religious leaders. Now **He called them to Him** in order to explain what He had just said about unscriptural traditions and empty worship.

Hear, and understand was a common idiom that meant, “Listen carefully and pay close attention,” and was used to precede a message of great importance. It was not that what Jesus said would be hard to understand but that it would be hard to accept. The greatest stumbling block to salvation has always been lack of acceptance and belief of the gospel, not lack of understanding it. It is precisely when the gospel is clearest—as when it was taught by Jesus Himself—that it is also likely to be the most unacceptable.

As usual, Jesus’ illustration was simple and based on the common knowledge and everyday experiences of the people. **Not what enters into the mouth defiles the man, He explained, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.** Spiritual defilement is a matter of the inside, not the outside. No spiritual or moral contamination can result from what we eat. The physical has no way of defiling the spiritual. “Don’t be deceived and misled by the foolish traditions you have been taught,” Jesus was saying. “The practice of washing your hands before you eat has nothing to do with making you undented. What matters is what is in your heart. It is the evil in the heart, which eventually **proceeds out of the mouth, that defiles the man.**”

No Jew *should* have been shocked at what Jesus was saying. Just as in the Sermon on the Mount, He was not teaching new truths but was simply reinforcing truths that God’s Word had always taught. Even the most unlearned among the crowd had doubtlessly heard the story of the Lord’s choosing David to be Israel’s king in place of Saul. When Jesse brought his sons before Samuel, the prophet thought that Eliab, the eldest, was “surely the Lord’s anointed.” & But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart’” (1 Sam. 16:6-7).

Circumcision was the mark of the covenant given to Abraham, and it was looked on with the greatest possible reverence by Jews. But even before Israel entered the Promised Land, God declared through Moses, “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you, but to

fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the Lord's commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good? . . . Circumcise then your heart" (Deut. 10:12-13, 16). The Old Testament repeatedly declares that the only religious ceremony or activity that pleases God is that which comes from a contrite, pure, and loving heart (Josh. 24:23; 1 Kings 8:23; 2 Chron. 11:16; Isa. 51:7; 57:15).

The expression **proceeds out of the mouth** ties in closely with the idea of not eating with unwashed hands. But Jesus was referring not simply to what a person says but also to what he thinks and does. In the parallel passage in Mark's gospel, Jesus says, "The things which proceed out of the *man* are what defile the man" (Mark 7:15, emphasis added). A person's denied heart is expressed both in what he says and in what he does; but the **mouth** is the more dominant revealer of internal pollution, because it is through our words that hatred, deception, cruelty, blasphemy, and most other evils are most clearly manifest.

Mark also tells us that, in overturning this superficial, unscriptural tradition of hand washing, Jesus "declared all foods clean" (Mark 7:19). Jesus' teaching that **not what enters into the mouth defiles the man** may therefore have been the most astounding thing the people had ever heard, because few things were more sacred to the Jews of that day than their dietary laws. Form was everything. Following the teaching and example their religious leaders, orthodox Jews lived entirely by externals—which are the marks of every false religion.

Jewish traditions had multiplied so much by Jesus' time that it became impossible for anyone, even full-time religionists such as the scribes and Pharisees, to keep all of them. The rabbis had therefore developed "the law of intention." If a person arose in the morning and said, "I intend to be pure all day," he could waive the Ceremonies and consider them fulfilled because of his good intention. The intention, of course, was not good at all, because its purpose was to evade rather than fulfill the tradition showing that the Jews were hypocritical even about their own man-made standards:

In fairness to the Jews, many ceremonies and restrictions had been given to them by God as expressions of their covenant relation to Him. The book of Leviticus is filled with prescribed rituals and procedures for

the priesthood in regard to the sacrificial system. God also declared certain animals unclean for any Jew to eat; and even many acceptable foods had to be prepared in carefully prescribed ways before they could be eaten. Many things were forbidden even to be touched; and certain diseases, such as leprosy, and some physical conditions, such as menstruation, were considered ceremonially defiling. But none of those ceremonially or symbolically unclean things or conditions are ever in themselves called sinful. They were to act as vivid pictures representing sin. Under the Old Covenant, being involved in or having contact with a ceremonially unclean thing rendered a person unfit to participate in certain worship ceremonies or certain social activities. But that external unfitness is never called sin. It needed ceremonial cleansing but not divine forgiveness. Yet it illustrated in a practical way the spiritual defilement of sin, as circumcision illustrated the need for a heart to have the sin “cut away.”

If those ceremonial requirements and restrictions were entirely external, we might ask, why did God require them? God gave those outward signs in the early days of the Old Covenant, immediately after His people had spent four hundred years among the pagan, idolatrous, and morally corrupt Egyptians. The Ten Commandments were Israel’s first written communication from God, and before that time they had only limited knowledge of His character and will. After He called Abraham to be the head of His chosen people, the Lord gave specific instructions and directions to select leaders of His people from time to time, but He had not revealed Himself in any detail. And just as parents use pictures to help teach their young children, God used those symbols and pictures to help teach His truth to the children of Israel, who were then young in His ways.

God’s forbidding a person to sacrifice while ceremonially unclean was a picture of not coming to worship Him when not spiritually clean from sin. Outward cleanliness was a picture of inward cleanliness. The Old Testament nowhere teaches that circumcision, ceremonial cleansing, refraining from certain foods, or any such outward act—even though prescribed by God—could save a person and make him right with the Lord. As Paul makes clear, Abraham was counted righteous on the basis of his faith—before the rite of circumcision, or any other rite, was established. Circumcision was but “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:1-12). That is why, even from

the earliest days of the nation Israel, God's command was to "circumcise . . . your heart" (Deut. 10:16; cf. Jer. 4:4).

The book of Hebrews is a commentary on the book of Leviticus, and neither can be properly understood without the other. The writer of Hebrews continually reminds his Jewish readers that the Old Testament sacrifices were but pictures of the real, true, perfect, and complete sacrifice that Christ made on the cross. The Old Testament priests were "a copy and shadow of the heavenly things" (Heb. 8:5). The Tabernacle and its Holy Place were "a symbol for the present time. Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience, since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation" (9:9). The time of reformation was the time of the ministry and sacrifice of the Messiah, God's Son. The Old Testament law—holy, righteous, and good as it was (Rom. 7:12)—nevertheless was "only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things" (Heb. 10:1). It was always God's desire and intention that His people "draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having [their] hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and [their] bodies washed with pure water" (10:22).

Hebrews 5:12 through 6:8 is devoted entirely to appealing to Jews who were considering the gospel, and perhaps had taken some tentative steps toward acceptance, to leave behind their symbolic ceremonies and sacrifices and come all the way to the living Reality to whom those symbols pointed. (See the author's commentary on Hebrews.)

From the time the Old Covenant was first given to them, God's people were more concerned with outside ritual than with inside righteousness. Ritual requires no change of heart, no forsaking of sin, no repentance before God. It allows a person to display symbols of religion while holding on to his sins. It is religion of form rather than faith, and is therefore empty and hypocritical.

The people of Israel not only failed to appreciate the spiritual truths pictured by God's prescribed ceremonies and restrictions but they also added their own pictures to God's. And the more they multiplied the pictures, the more they trusted in the pictures and the less they trusted in God. Instead of pointing them to God, the traditions led them further from Him. Instead of enhancing faith, the traditions stifled faith and enhanced self-reliance and self-righteousness. Therefore, when God's perfect Reality

came to earth, His people were so enmeshed in their traditions and so far from His Word, that they crucified God incarnate.

The matter of externals was so deeply ingrained in Jewish thinking that even Jewish believers in the early church often had great difficulty forsaking them. Several years after Pentecost, Peter still could not accept the idea that all foods were now clean. It required a special vision from God, instruction repeated three times, and a special demonstration of the work of the Holy Spirit to convince Him that both all foods and all people cleansed by God are acceptable to Him (see Acts 10:1-33). Even years after that experience, Peter slipped back into his old mind-set and for a while “began to withdraw and hold himself aloof [from Gentiles], fearing the party of the circumcision” (Gal. 2:12).

Paul warns that

the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods, which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer. (1 Tim. 4:1-5)

THE PRINCIPLE VIOLATED

Then the disciples came and said to Him, “Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?” But He answered and said, “Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the

blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit.”
(15:12-14)

From Mark we learn that Jesus and His disciples “entered the house” (Mark 7:17), probably the home where they had been staying in Capernaum. They were now away from the crowd and the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem, and the disciples said to Jesus, **Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?** Jesus knew very well that His **statement** about ceremonial washings undercut the very foundation of the legalistic system **of the Pharisees** and that they would be greatly **offended** by it. He *meant* to offend them.

Just as their opposition to Jesus would continue to increase until they finally put Him to death, so would His accusations against them. He would accuse them of not entering the kingdom and of preventing others from entering, of devouring widow’s houses while making a pretense of prayer, of making their converts twice as much sons of hell as themselves, of carefully tithing their smallest herbs but of neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness, of appearing clean on the outside but of being full of robbery and self-indulgence, of being whitewashed tombs that contained filthy bones of dead men, of being full of hypocrisy and lawlessness, and of being of the same character as their forefathers who killed God’s prophets (Matt. 23:13-30).

The **Pharisees** so idolized their system of tradition that they actually taught that God spent all day studying His own law and all night studying the Mishna that interpreted the law. Some believed God presided over the heavenly Sanhedrin, that the rabbis sat next to God according to their holiness, and that together they studied the Halakah (the legal part of the Talmud) and made decisions. They taught that, after God had spent such hard work studying the law and the Mishna, He spent three hours each evening playing with leviathan. The Lord was so distraught at the destruction of the Temple, they claimed, that in each of the three watches of the night He roared like a lion; and when He cried, His tears fell into the ocean and caused earthquakes. They even taught that, like themselves, God wore a prayer shawl and phylacteries. Worst of all, they taught that when Moses died, God touched his body and was therefore Himself defiled and had to be cleansed by Aaron, the first high priest. They had carefully

boxed the Creator of the universe within their imaginative, petty, foolish, and wicked system.

The first truth about hypocrites that is evident from this passage is that they are **offended** by the truth. People who live in spiritual and moral darkness cannot stand to be exposed to the light and be shown for what they really are. The truth tears off their masks and reveals the sinful, ugly reality behind it.

Second, hypocrites are destined for judgment, because, Jesus said, **every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be rooted up**. Those plants are the ungodly tares, which God now allows to grow alongside the godly wheat. But at the end of the age, the tares will be “gathered up and burned with fire” as God’s angels “will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire” (Matt. 13:40-42).

Hypocrisy is so reprehensible in God’s eyes that Jesus condemns the sinner along with the sin. Jesus’ most constant and repeated charge against the scribes and Pharisees was their hypocrisy. They were so far from the kingdom and such intransigent enemies of the kingdom that the King said, **Leave them alone**, which could also be translated, “Keep away from them and have nothing to do with them.” In a similar way, when Ephraim had joined itself to idols, God said, “Let him alone” (Hos. 4:17), as if that people were abandoned to judgment.

It is spiritually dangerous to stay around apostates and others who steadfastly reject and oppose the gospel of Christ. If there is opportunity to witness to them, it should be done with the greatest of caution, “snatching them out of the fire,” as it were, and being careful not to get burned ourselves in the process (Jude 23). We should not even listen to “the opposing arguments of what is falsely called knowledge” (1 Tim. 6:20). Exposing ourselves to such people and such teaching risks spiritual disaster (cf. 2 John 8-11).

Even Jesus did not debate the ungodly scribes and Pharisees. When He responded to their questions or accusations, it was always in the form of correcting their doctrinal error and of condemning their spiritual and moral wickedness.

Perhaps the disciples were told to **leave them alone** also in the sense of not trying to judge men in order to weed out those who seem to be tares. Human judgment is imperfect and would inevitably uproot some

good plants with the bad (Matt. 13:29). Concern for the purity of God's church sometimes makes believers want to take judgment into their own hands; but the Lord forbids that. In the first place, believers are not qualified for it; and in the second, it is not yet the time.

Third, hypocrites always lead others to disaster. It is bad enough that they themselves cannot and will not see the truth; it is even worse that they recruit others to their ungodliness. They are not only blind but **blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit.**

The **pit** physically referred to holes that were dug in a field or pasture and filled with water for use as drinking troughs for animals. A **blind man** walking through a field would eventually **fall into a pit**. But the spiritual meaning of **pit** is hell. The **blind guides** are the Pharisees themselves, and the other **blind** are their converts, who become twice the sons of hell as their teachers (Matt. 23:15).

Jesus' calling the Pharisees **blind guides** was a play on their own description of themselves as "leaders of the blind." Jesus was saying, "Yes, you *are* leaders of the blind; but you are in the same condition as those you lead. You yourselves are blind."

THE PRINCIPLE ELUCIDATED

And Peter answered and said to Him, "Explain the parable to us." And He said, "Are you still lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man." (15:15-20)

The **parable** that **Peter** wanted Jesus to **explain** refers to the illustration of verse 11. It was not so much that the disciples did not understand what Jesus meant as that they found it hard to accept—just as had the crowd and the scribes and Pharisees. As already mentioned, even

years after Pentecost, **Peter** was not able to accept fully the idea that all foods were clean (Acts 10:14; Gal. 2:11-12).

In what must have been a tone of grief, Jesus replied, **Are you still lacking in understanding?** “With all I have taught during the last two years,” the Lord was saying, “are you still like the multitudes who do not know what I am talking about? Do you still fail to comprehend the absolute superiority of spirituality over formality, of the internal over the external, of reality over the shadow?”

Continuing with the figure of eating, Jesus said, **Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated?** In Mark’s account, Jesus’ adds, “because it does not go into his heart” (7:19). Because food is only physical, it can only affect the physical. It cannot defile the inner person, represented by the heart, because the physical and the spiritual are of two different orders. Physical pollution, no matter how corrupt, cannot cause spiritual or moral pollution. Ceremonies, rituals, and other external practices cannot cleanse a person spiritually, and failure to observe them cannot defile a person spiritually. Ceremonial cleansing, even under the Old Covenant, never did more than *picture* spiritual cleansing.

Rather, Jesus said, it is **the things that proceed out of the mouth and come from the heart that defile the man.** The **heart** represents the inner person, his thoughts, attitudes, desires, loyalties, and motives. When the **heart** is filled with **evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders,** and other such ungodliness, **these are the things which defile.**

It was the Pharisees’ inner unrighteousness—shown in the extreme by their **evil thoughts** to destroy Jesus—that corrupted them. The central moral thrust of the Sermon on the Mount is that the basis of all sin is the inner thought, not the outward act. A person commits the sin when he *wants* to do it, whether or not he ever carries it out in action. **Murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders,** and all other sins begin in the heart (see Matt. 5:21-37).

The things that **defile the man** come from an unwashed **heart**, not from **unwashed hands.** The need is for God to cleanse men’s hearts, not for men to wash their hands.

Paul warned Titus that “rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, & must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach &. For this cause reprove them severely that they may be sound in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth” (Titus 1:10-11, 13-14). The apostle then goes on to say, “To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled. They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient, and worthless for any good deed” (vv. 15-16).

When a person is defiled on the inside, what he does on the outside is also defiled. But when a person is pure in heart—undefiled on the inside—he will see God (Matt. 5:8).

The Quality of **Great Faith** (15:21-28)

And Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman came out from that region, and began to cry out, saying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.” But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came to Him and kept asking Him, saying, “Send her away, for she is shouting out after us.” But He answered and said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, “Lord, help me!” And He answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But she said, “Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their master’s table.” Then Jesus answered and said to her, “O woman, your faith is great; be it done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed at once. (15:21-28)

The Bible has much to say about faith. It speaks of weak faith, strong faith, bold faith, rich faith, abiding faith, steadfast faith, dead faith, precious faith, common faith, unfeigned faith, working faith, obedient faith, and many other kinds.

It also speaks of little faith and great faith, and this text contains the second reference in Matthew’s gospel in which Jesus speaks of great faith. Of the Roman centurion who asked for his servant to be healed Jesus said, “I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel” (8:10). In both cases the person expressing great faith was a Gentile; and in this second instance the context seems to imply that the woman’s faith not only was for the deliverance of her daughter but was also for personal salvation.

THE SETTING

And Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. (15:21)

Until this time **Jesus** had carried on most of His ministry in Galilee; but now He **went away** because of the rapidly mounting pressures that faced Him **there**.

He was under pressure first of all from the multitudes who followed Him from place to place and were convinced He was the long-predicted Messiah. They were right in recognizing that His miraculous powers marked Him as the true Messiah, but they were wrong about the kind of Messiah He had come to be. They expected Him to deliver them from the oppressive Romans and their Herodian lackeys and to usher in an unending period of political freedom and material prosperity. After His feeding of the five thousand, they even intended “to come and take Him by force, to make Him king” (John 6:15).

Second, Jesus was under the pressure of possible arrest and execution by Herod Antipas, who thought Jesus was John the Baptist come back from the dead (Matt. 14:2). The king’s jealous hatred of anyone who threatened his throne would have led him to murder Jesus just as coldly as he had John.

The greatest pressure, however, was from the Jewish religious leaders. The scribes and Pharisees of Galilee had already determined to destroy Jesus (12:14), and after He rebuked and embarrassed the delegation from Jerusalem by showing the ungodliness of their man-made traditions (15:1-9), the danger from the religious establishment escalated. As Alfred Edersheim commented, Jesus “was saying distinctly un-Jewish things,” and even the enthusiasm of the multitudes cooled rapidly when He began to make clear what allegiance to Him demanded (John 6:60-66).

Besides His need for physical refreshment and time to be alone with the twelve, Jesus therefore had those additional reasons to find a place of temporary retreat. He had moved away by going across the Sea of Galilee to Bethsaida Julias, only to be followed by a massive crowd whom He miraculously fed. And after crossing back over to the Plain of Gennesaret just south of Capernaum, He was immediately recognized and

was again surrounded by the sick, crippled, and diseased who wanted healing.

Jesus therefore **withdrew** from the frenzy of Galilee and traveled northwest **into the district of Tyre and Sidon**, out of the land of Israel and beyond the jurisdiction of both Herod and the Jewish religious leaders. **The district of Tyre and Sidon** was the Gentile territory of ancient Phoenicia, an area now in southern Lebanon, on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It is possible that He and the disciples spent most of their time in the foothills of the mountains, which would have been a refreshing change in climate from the hot and arid region of Galilee.

More importantly, Jesus would gain time to be alone with the disciples and to further prepare them for His coming crucifixion and their apostolic ministry. Palestine afforded no privacy and numerous dangers, but Jesus did not withdraw out of fear. When the time came for Him to face the cross, “He resolutely set His face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51; cf. 19:28).

Some interpreters believe that Jesus’ statement “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 15:24) indicates that He could not have actually gone into a Gentile area and that this woman must have come down into Galilee to see Jesus just as many others had done. But Mark makes clear that Jesus not only went to the “region of Tyre” but that He “came through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee” (7:24,31). It is true, however, that the Lord did not go to this area to minister but to rest, just as centuries earlier the Lord had sent Elijah to that same region to rest at the home of the widow at “Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon” (1 Kings 17:9).

When Jesus went to the house near Tyre, “He wanted no one to know of it; yet He could not escape notice” (Mark 7:24*b*). As Archbishop Trench commented, “Like perfume betrays itself, so He whose name is perfume poured out cannot be hid.” Jesus did not purposely expand His ministry into Gentile territory, but many people of that area had heard of Him and already had gone into Galilee to see and hear Him and to be healed (Matt. 4:24-25; Mark 3:8).

In His omniscience Jesus was not surprised at being discovered or of being drawn into ministry. Many Gentiles, illustrated by the Roman centurion, were more humbly receptive than the Jewish multitudes, who often took Jesus’ healings as a matter of their rightful heritage. In their thinking, the Messiah belonged exclusively to Israel, and He was obligated

to serve, heal, and liberate His fellow Jews. It was that proud and self-righteous attitude that drove the multitude to try to force a crown on Him (John 6:15).

But most of the native Gentiles in and near Palestine were less religiously and intellectually proud than their Jewish neighbors. They had long since lost their military and commercial power as well as much of their religious and cultural heritage. Their pagan religious systems had repeatedly failed them and now had little influence on their living. They were empty, in need, and open to help. Jesus had told the Jews of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum that if Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom had experienced a revelation of God's power such as they had been witnessing, those Gentile cities would have repented and been spared judgment (Matt. 11:21-23).

Jesus' first priority was to minister to God's people Israel, to reveal Himself as their Messiah and to offer them the kingdom; but He always extended Himself to open hearts and never refused a person of any race or culture who came to Him in faith. The Lord's going to the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon must have been refreshing because of the people as well as the climate. They were deep in darkness, but many anxiously sought for light (cf. John 1:9-11).

Whether Jew or Gentile, the person who approached Jesus with true faith and humility was always received. The person who came with an empty but open heart left with a filled heart, while the person who came with a filled and closed heart left with nothing. Jesus declared, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28); and He promised, "The one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37).

The gospel came through the Jews (John 4:22) and first to the Jews, but it was never intended to be only for them. The gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). The Great Commission was to "make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19), beginning with Jerusalem but reaching "even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Israel was the channel through which the gospel would be carried to the entire world.

THE QUALITIES OF GREAT FAITH

And behold, a Canaanite woman came out from that region, and began to cry out, saying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.” But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came to Him and kept asking Him, saying, “Send her away, for she is shouting out after us.” But He answered and said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, “Lord, help me!” And He answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But she said, “Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their master’s table.” (15:22-27)

Jesus’ encounter with the **Canaanite woman** is the story of a faith Jesus called great (v. 28). Great faith is, of course, a relative term. This woman’s faith was not great because it was stronger or more sincere or mature than the faith of many Jews who believed in Christ but because it was based on so little light. When Peter’s faith faltered and he began to sink into the water, Jesus referred to it as “little faith” (Matt. 14:31). In general character it was greater than this woman’s faith and surely greater than the faith of the other eleven disciples, who did not even attempt to walk on the water, but it was not as strong as it should have been for that situation. Peter was a Jew and therefore had the heritage of God’s Word and special blessing. More than that, he had lived for nearly two years in intimate fellowship with the Son of God. He had seen virtually every miracle Jesus performed and heard virtually every word He preached and taught. He had saving faith in Jesus as his Lord and Savior and had left everything to follow Him; but his great privilege and advantage was no guarantee that, under severe testing, his faith might not be reduced to relatively little.

The **Canaanite woman**, on the other hand, had been raised in a pagan culture that had been renowned for its wickedness and vileness. She was a descendant of a people God had commanded Israel to conquer and “utterly destroy” (Deut. 7:2). She had no heritage of God’s Word, God’s blessing, or of His Tabernacle, Temple, priesthood, or sacrifices. Therefore, because she believed so much relative to so little revelation, Jesus called her faith great (Matt. 15:28). And from her story we can

propose five general qualities that mark all great faith: It is repentant, properly directed, reverent, persistent, and humble.

REPENTANT

And behold, a Canaanite woman came out from that region, and began to cry out, saying, “Have mercy on me, (15:22a)

Because this **woman** was a **Canaanite**, “of the Syrophenician race” (Mark 7:26), she was probably a worshiper of Astarte and other pagan deities that were popular in **that region**. The fact that she came to Jesus, a Jewish teacher and healer, indicates she was disillusioned with the idolatry and immoral debauchery that characterized her religion. In turning to Jesus, she turned from the way of Satan and sin to the way of God, and that is the essence of repentance.

The woman’s plea is further proof of her penitence. She knew she did not deserve Jesus’ help, that she was unworthy of Him, and that her only hope for undeserved forgiveness was in His gracious **mercy**. By definition, the person who asks for **mercy** asks for something undeserved. This woman did not come demanding but pleading. She did not ask Jesus’ help on the basis of her own goodness but on the basis of His.

Mercy is integral to God’s redemptive work for man. From the time of the Fall, man has had no way back to God except through His merciful grace. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the New Testament and the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) various forms of the verb *eleeō* (to **have mercy**) are used some five hundred times.

When the Sinai covenant was renewed with the people of Israel, God declared Himself to Moses as “The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin” (Ex. 34:6-7). In his reply Moses said, “If now I have found favor in Thy sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go along in our midst, even though the people are so obstinate; and do Thou pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Thine own possession” (v. 9). In his profound penitential psalm written after he confessed his sin with Bathsheba, David pleaded for nothing but **mercy**:

“Be gracious to me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Thy compassion blot out my transgressions” (Ps. 51:1).

Faith that apprehends the blessings of Christ involves repentance that comes from a deep and sincere sense of unworthiness. In his book *All of Grace* (Chicago: Moody, pp. 97-100) Charles Spurgeon wrote:

Repentance is the inseparable companion of faith. All the while that we walk by faith and not by sight, the tear of repentance glitters in the eye of faith. That is not true repentance which does not come of faith in Jesus, and that is not true faith in Jesus which is not tinctured with repentance. Faith and repentance, like Siamese twins, are vitally joined together. Faith and repentance are but two spokes in the same wheel, two handles of the same plow. Repentance has been well described as a heart broken *for* sin and *from* sin, and it may equally well be spoken of as turning and returning. It is a change of mind of the most thorough and radical sort, and it is attended with sorrow for the past and a resolve of amendment in the future. Repentance of sin and faith in divine pardon are the warp and woof of the fabric of real conversion.

Repentance adds nothing to faith but is rather an integral part of it. Saving faith is repentant faith. “Repentance toward God and faith in [the] Lord Jesus Christ” are inseparable (Acts 20:21). Because they are inseparable, Scripture sometimes refers to salvation as repentance. Paul declares that “the kindness of God leads you to repentance” (Rom. 2:4), and Peter that God does not desire “for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

RIGHTLY DIRECTED AND REVERENT

O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.”
(15:22*b*)

Great faith must, of course, be directed at the right object. Those who believe that somehow, in some way, by some means everything will ultimately work out for the good have faith in an illusion. To declare, “Somewhere there’s somebody who hears every prayer” or “I believe in the darkest night a candle glows,” is to believe in nothing more trustworthy than your own imagination and wishful thinking. It is unbelievably foolish to put ultimate trust in something or someone you know nothing about. When John Greenleaf Whittier wrote, “The steps of faith fall on the seeming void and find the rock beneath,” he proved himself a better poet than theologian.

That sort of faith is essentially faith in faith, which is to say no faith at all. To jump out of an airplane with a parachute is an act of faith. To jump without a parachute while exclaiming, “I believe,” is an act of stupidity. To say no more than, “I believe in love,” “I believe in believing,” or, “I believe it will all work out,” is contentless faith and therefore pointless and powerless. It shows no more sense than to go on vacation and leave your three-year-old child behind with instructions to look after the house and pay all the bills while you are gone.

For faith to make sense and to have power it must be placed in a trustworthy object; and as the Canaanite woman turned her back on her idols she placed her faith in the **Lord, the Son of David**. Despite her pagan background, she had heard of the Jews’ coming Messiah, who was called the **Son of David**; and she reverently addressed Jesus as her sovereign and omnipotent **Lord**. She had heard of the Messiah’s great power and also sensed His great goodness; and she treated Him with both dignity and expectancy. She approached Him in the same reverent, trusting spirit as the leper who met Jesus after the Sermon on the Mount “and bowed down to Him, saying, ‘Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean’” (Matt. 8:2).

After the irreverent treatment of the Lord by the scribes and Pharisees—who had called Him a drunk, a companion of sinners, and demon-controlled—it must have been refreshing for Jesus to hear this Gentile woman come to Him with such respect and submission. Although

she did not yet understand the full meaning of Christ's lordship or messiahship, she came with a sense of awe and wonder.

This woman loved her young **daughter** more than her own life, and she came to the only source of help she knew of. Her faith was great because she turned from faith in false gods, dumb idols, and pagan deities to faith in Jesus Christ. Her trust in Astarte may have seemed satisfactory while things were going well; but when her **daughter** became **cruelly demon-possessed**, the mother discovered she could get no help from a goddess of stone. She therefore left her religious system, left her pagan family and friends, left her false belief that had no answers or power, and came to the only One who could help her. By her appeal to Christ, she publicly affirmed His power over her former gods of wood and stone and metal. Like the Thessalonian believers, she had "turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9).

PERSISTENT

But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came to Him and kept asking Him, saying, "Send her away, for she is shouting out after us." But He answered and said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (15:23-24)

Great faith does not give up; it is not deterred by obstacles, setbacks, or disappointments. Jesus therefore tested the faith of this woman by setting up a series of barriers. Some people have to struggle against strong doubts before they come to fully trust Christ for salvation. Others have to struggle against the objections and arguments of friends and family. Still others struggle to believe because they have never heard the gospel clearly presented or because they see inconsistencies in the lives of Christians they know. This woman, however, had barriers placed in her way by the Savior Himself.

Sometimes the hardest response to accept is no response at all, and that is what this woman received from Jesus as **He did not answer her a word**. The disciples apparently interpreted Jesus' ignoring the woman as a sign of unconcern and wondered why He did not dismiss her. As she continued to plead with Jesus and He continued to ignore her, **His**

disciples became more upset with the woman and more puzzled about the Lord. In frustration they **came to Him and kept asking Him** to do something about this nuisance who not only was getting on their nerves and but was attracting attention at a time when Jesus wanted to get away from the pressures and demands of the crowds. Finally they said, **“Send her away, for she is shouting after us.”**

The disciples response was insensitive and prejudiced. They did not want to be bothered by this Gentile woman who was interfering with their plans and peace of mind. In advising the Lord to **send her away**, they may have had in mind His healing the daughter first, sensing that that would be the only thing that would make the woman leave. And on the surface it seems as if Jesus was equally, if not more, insensitive, because He did not even acknowledge her presence. Commenting on the Lord’s seeming indifference, the early church Father Chrysostom wrote, “The Word has no word. The fountain is sealed. The Physician holds back his remedy.”

But Jesus did nothing unloving and nothing without a divine purpose. He had had enough of superficiality and shallowness, of the pretended faith of those who selfishly got what they wanted from Him and left. But more than that He wanted to test the woman’s faith to bring it to full flower. He put up the barriers not to keep her away but to draw her closer. He also used the occasion to show the disciples the value of persistent faith and to help them distinguish between the genuine and the superficial. He erected barriers that only genuine, persistent faith could hurdle. (Cf. Matt. 19:16-22, where Jesus placed barriers before the young man to test the genuineness of his plea for eternal life.)

Speaking directly to the disciples, but within the hearing of the woman, Jesus said, **I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.** The hardness of heart suggested by His silence now seemed to be confirmed by His words. We do not know what the disciples thought of Jesus’ comment, but they must have wondered why He had so willingly healed the servant of the Roman centurion and offered the water of life to the Samaritan woman at Sychar but now refused to help this woman simply because she was not **of the house of Israel.**

But by those words Jesus assured the disciples that His plan of redemption was still on course. Israel was still the Lord’s chosen people and the kingdom was still offered first to the seed of Abraham. Despite

their hostility, resentment, and rejection, the Lord would continue to call **the house of Israel** to repentance. His primary ministry was still to the children of the covenant. It was not yet time to move to the Gentile nations, because the full opportunity to Israel had not as yet been presented. It is important to note that even after the crucifixion and resurrection, Peter still referred to Israel as “the sons & of the covenant,” to whom Jesus was first sent for blessing and cleansing (Acts 3:25-26).

Whatever effect Jesus’ response had on the disciples, it must have been a painful blow to the woman. Most people would have indignantly said, “So much for your God of love, your message of compassion, and your narrow, bigoted religion. I want nothing to do with a God or religion like that.” But this woman had no resentment or bitterness, only an abiding love for her afflicted little girl and a determination to have her freed from her demonic torture. She also knew that the gods her people worshiped did not care. She knew Jesus was the only hope and that she had nowhere else to turn. She said in effect what Peter had said not long before: “Lord, to whom shall we go?” (John 6:68).

HUMBLE

But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, “Lord, help me!” And He answered and said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” But she said, “Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their master’s table.” (15:25-27)

To bow down is from *proskuneō*, which literally means to prostrate oneself and is frequently translated “to worship.” Whether or not the woman’s bowing down was intended to be worship, it was clearly an act of humility. She threw herself at Jesus’ feet and pleaded with even greater desperation, **Lord, help me!**

But again Jesus put her off, saying to her the same basic truth He had just pointed out to the disciples (v. 24): **It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.**

Two different Greek words are used in the New Testament for **dogs**. One refers to the mangy and often vicious mongrels that ran in packs and

lived largely off garbage and carcasses of dead animals. The **dogs** referred to here, however, were household pets that were sometimes treated almost like family.

Even so, Jesus' remarks were far from a compliment. The woman knew that **children's** referred to Jews and **dogs** referred to Gentiles, because both figures were commonly used by Jews. Jesus' words sounded much like the insults Jews frequently cast at Gentiles and that the woman had probably heard many times before.

But she was undaunted, and in an incredible flash of insight she picked up on Jesus' own illustration, saying, **Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their master's table.** She knew she was sinful and unworthy of anything He had to offer and was willing to concede that she was less deserving than Jews. In doing so she demonstrated a complete absence of the pride, self-reliance, and self-righteousness that characterized most Jews. She was willing to settle for **the crumbs which fall from their master's table**, because that would be enough to meet her needs. A tiny leftover of Jesus' great power could heal her daughter, and that was all she asked.

Although Jesus' priority mission was to the Jews, the crumbs of the gospel did indeed fall from their table and feed humble Gentiles who hungered for the Bread of Life.

THE LORD'S RESPONSE

Then Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, your faith is great; be it done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed at once. (15:28)

After putting up a barrier of silence and then a double barrier of seeming rejection, Jesus heard what He wanted to hear. Her seeking heart would not give up. Like Abraham, she grew strong in faith through God's testing (Rom. 4:20), and like Jacob wrestling with the Lord (Gen. 32:26), she would not let go until He blessed her. She fulfilled the pledge of Jeremiah 29:13-14, "And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search

for Me with all your heart. And I will be found by you,' declares the Lord."

Highly pleased with the woman's response, **Jesus** declared, **O woman, your faith is great.** Without having heard the Sermon on the Mount, she came with the humble, mourning, meek, and seeking heart that God requires for kingdom entrance (Matt. 5:3-6). She exhibited the attitude expressed in Luke 16:16 of vigorously pressing forward (from *biazomai*) into the kingdom and in Luke 13:24 of striving, struggling, straining every nerve (from *agōnizomai*) to enter it.

Because of her great faith, Jesus granted her **wish** that her little child be delivered from the demon, **and her daughter was healed at once.** As Spurgeon observed, "The Lord of glory surrendered to the faith of the woman." She kept asking until she received, seeking until she found, and knocking until it was opened to her (cf. Matt. 7:7).

Compassion for the Outsider (15:29-39)

And departing from there, Jesus went along by the Sea of Galilee, and having gone up to the mountain, He was sitting there. And great multitudes came to Him, bringing with them those who were lame, crippled, blind, dumb, and many others, and they laid them down at His feet; and He healed them, so that the multitude marveled as they saw the dumb speaking, the crippled restored, and the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel.

And Jesus called His disciples to Him, and said, “I feel compassion for the multitude, because they have remained with Me now three days and have nothing to eat; and I do not wish to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.” And the disciples said to Him, “Where would we get so many loaves in a desolate place to satisfy such a great multitude?” And Jesus said to them, “How many loaves do you have?” And they said, “Seven, and a few small fish.” And He directed the multitude to sit down on the ground; and He took the seven loaves and the fish; and giving thanks, He broke them and started giving them to the disciples, and the disciples in turn, to the multitudes. And they all ate, and were satisfied, and they picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, seven large baskets full. And those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. And sending away the multitudes, He got into the boat, and came to the region of Magadan. (15:29-39)

The God of Scripture is a God of compassion. He suffers with people; He feels their pain and their sorrow and seeks to alleviate it, because He deeply cares for their welfare and happiness. John 3:16 could be translated, “God had such compassion on the world, that He gave His

only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” It is God’s compassion for man that, from the time of the Fall, has offered the way back to Him. Jeremiah declared, “The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail” (Lam. 3:22). The Authorized Version of that verse reads, “It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not.” The Lord’s compassion restricts his judgment and extends His mercy, giving fallen mankind opportunity to repent and be saved.

Over and over again God showed compassion on His people when they were in need, despite their sin and rebelliousness against Him. During their time of oppression under Aram, “the Lord was gracious to them and had compassion on them and turned to them because of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them or cast them from His presence until now” (2 Kings 13:23). During the time that Babylon ruled Judah, Zedekiah, the appointed Jewish king at Jerusalem, not only rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar but also against God, Jeremiah, and the other prophets. The priests and the people were also unfaithful and wicked. Yet “the Lord, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people” (2 Chron. 36:13-15).

From the earliest part of His ministry, Jesus felt compassion for the multitudes, “because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36). He had special compassion for the sick and suffering, whom He healed of every sort of affliction (14:14; cf. 4:23; 8:16; 9:35). His compassion was not limited to His own Jewish people; and as He ministered to all men, He found unusual faith among many of the Gentiles, such as the Roman centurion whose servant He healed (Matt. 8:5-13) and the Syrophenician woman whose daughter He had just delivered from demon possession (15:22-28).

After **departing from there**, the region of Tyre and Sidon where that woman lived (v. 21), **Jesus went along by the Sea of Galilee, and having gone up to the mountain, He was sitting there**. We learn from Mark that Jesus went around the Sea of Galilee, apparently on the east side, stopping in “the region of Decapolis” (Mark 7:31), another Gentile area. Although His primary ministry was still to the Jews, the Lord continually reached out beyond the covenant people, giving a preview of

the extension of the kingdom into the whole world (cf. Matt. 28:19; Acts 1:8).

During His three-year ministry, Jesus gave many such previews of the coming kingdom. In the transfiguration He previewed His return in great glory at the second coming to establish the millennial kingdom on earth. His choosing twelve men to be His apostles prefigured the reestablishment of the twelve tribes of Israel, over which those apostles would one day reign (Matt. 19:28). His healing of all who came to Him prefigured His ultimate external “healing of the nations” (Rev. 22:2). His teaching about the kingdom prefigured the fulfilled kingdom when “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:9).

As already mentioned, this ministry of several months in Gentile land prefigured the coming kingdom that would embrace Gentile and Jew alike. On these and other occasions, Peter had therefore been repeatedly and dramatically exposed to the truth that the gospel was for all men—long before his vision of the unclean animals and his encounter with Cornelius, through which He was finally convinced “that God is not one to show partiality” (Acts 10:1-34; cf. vv. 45-47).

The region of Decapolis, where Jesus had just arrived, was on the southeast side of the Sea of Galilee, directly south of the modern Golan Heights. Decapolis means “ten cities” (from the Greek *deka*, “ten,” and *polis*, “city”) and derives its name from the ten city-states located within its boundaries. This somewhat independent territory was wedged between the region to the north ruled by Philip the tetrarch and the regions to the south and west ruled by Herod Antipas. In and around these ten cities archaeologists have discovered the ruins of elegant amphitheaters, forums, and countless pagan statues and monuments honoring the various gods of the Greek pantheon—including Zeus, Aphrodite, Athene, Artemis, Hercules, Dionysus, and Demeter.

From the time that Jesus fed the five thousand until this feeding, some time had elapsed. In the earlier miracle He had commanded that multitude “to recline on the grass” (14:19), whereas He instructed the multitude in Decapolis “to sit down on the ground” (15:35). In that part of Palestine the grass lasts only from early spring until early summer, when most of it withers from the heat. The multitude of Jews near the northeast shore of Galilee had been able to sit on grass, whereas the crowd of

Gentiles in the Decapolis had to sit on bare ground, indicating that as much as several months may have elapsed between the two feedings.

Although Jesus had not gone to the district of Tyre and Sidon for the purpose of ministering, He was immediately recognized there and was eager to help those who came to Him—no doubt including many others besides the Canaanite woman. When He arrived in the region of Decapolis He was also recognized, because from the earliest days of His ministry people from that area had come to hear Him speak and to be healed (Matt. 4:24-25). Therefore, when word spread that Jesus was actually visiting their own territory, **great multitudes came to Him.**

Jesus had gone up to the mountain and was some distance from populated areas. It therefore took several days for word of His presence to spread and for the **multitudes** to get to Him from various parts of the region. Travel was of course especially slow for the ones who were **bringing with them those who were lame, crippled, blind, dumb, and many others.**

Crippled (from *kullos*) refers to any part of the human body that is deformed or unable to be used, and includes mutilation or total loss. Jesus used the term to describe a person who has had a hand or foot cut off (Matt. 18:8). The people seeking help therefore included the most seriously deformed.

When the friends and relatives found Jesus, **they laid** their afflicted loved ones **down at His feet; and He healed them.** **Laid** is from *rhiptō*, which means to cast or throw down in haste but not carelessly. They could not reach Jesus too quickly or get too close. The crowd eventually numbered “four thousand men, besides women and children” (15:38), and therefore could have totaled as many as twenty thousand. We do not know how many of that number had come for healing, but it must have been many hundreds and perhaps several thousand. The people did not all arrive at the same time, and those who were healed moved away to make room for others. But at any given time Jesus would have had hundreds of people crowding around Him.

None of the gospel writers gives details of the healings; we are simply told that **He healed them.** But it is not hard to imagine the cries for help that mingled with shouts of joy, as some came to Jesus diseased and deformed while others were leaving healthy and whole. People who were sick went away cured; people who came with only one functioning

arm or leg went away with two; and people who came blind and deaf went away seeing and hearing. People who had never spoken a word were now shouting praises to Jesus. People who had never walked a step were now jumping and running for joy. It is hardly surprising that **the multitude marveled as they saw the dumb speaking, the crippled restored, and the lame walking, and the blind seeing.**

No doubt many of **the multitude** had seen Jesus heal before, but that made the sight no less amazing. **Marveled** is from *thaumazō*, which means to be struck with awe. The people were seeing something that defied human explanation, and they were dumbfounded at the uninterrupted flow of instantaneous and complete healings. Mark says “they were utterly astonished, saying, ‘He has done all things well’” (7:37). The wonder of these Gentiles was greater than the wonder of the Jews, whose awe was often tempered by spiritual pride and skepticism. When the crowd at Decapolis saw the perfection of the healings, they knew the power behind them was divine—in great contrast to the Pharisees who charged Jesus with casting out demons by Satan’s power (Matt. 12:24).

Knowing that their pagan gods could not perform such marvels, and would not have been inclined to perform them if they could, the people from Decapolis **glorified the God of Israel.** They were not fully aware of who Jesus was, but they knew He was a Jew and that He served **the God of Israel,** and they glorified His **God** in praise and reverent fear. Their excitement and gratitude over being healed or seeing their loved ones and friends healed made them spontaneously praise the Lord.

The multitudes were so large and the needs so great that the healings continued for several days. After that miraculous but exhausting time, **Jesus called His disciples to Him and said, “I feel compassion for the multitude, because they have remained with Me now three days and have nothing to eat.**

I feel compassion is from the verb *splanchnizomai*, which literally means to be moved in one’s inward parts, in the bowels or viscera, which the ancients considered the seat of emotions. The English word **compassion** is taken from the Latin, which means to suffer with, but it has come to mean much more than that. According to one definition, it is “a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the pain and remove its cause.”

Jesus had **compassion** for people's spiritual needs, which were eternal in their consequences. He had **compassion** for their physical afflictions, which were often lifelong in their effect. But He also had **compassion** in regard to their food, which sustained them from day to day. In His model prayer the Lord tells us to ask our heavenly Father to "give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11), because He cares about the practical needs of our daily lives.

Despite the great excitement of the people and the fact that for many of them this was the first time in their lives they had been physically well and whole, **three days** without food was a long time. Jesus therefore **did not wish to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way**. The idea behind **faint** is that of collapsing, as a bowstring goes limp when unstrung. The Lord was determined that the needy multitude would not go home on empty stomachs and become **faint on the way**.

At first glance the disciples' response seems to be essentially the same as it was when He asked them to feed the five thousand near Bethsaida Julias (14:16-17). Because in Decapolis the disciples appeared to act as if this were the first time Jesus had requested such a thing of them, many liberal commentators have maintained that Matthew gives two accounts of the same feeding, with differing and even conflicting details. But as a former tax collector, who was used to keeping accurate records, Matthew was much too astute to have missed the contradictions; and it would make no sense to fabricate them. He was with Jesus throughout His ministry and it is inconceivable that he would be so confused about such a dramatic event that he thought it happened twice instead of only once. Nor would the Holy Spirit, who inspired the gospels, have allowed such misrepresentation. The necessity of food is so basic that it may be assumed there were other such feedings not recorded in the gospels (cf. John 21:5).

Why, then, did the disciples again ask Jesus, **Where would we get so many loaves in a desolate place to satisfy such a great multitude?** Why did they not simply expect Jesus to perform a miracle like the one He had performed only a month or so earlier? They probably did. They could not possibly have forgotten the earlier occasion, especially since they were directly involved in distributing the food to some twenty-five thousand people as Jesus multiplied it. The reason for their question about where to find food seems to be that they were simply acknowledging again their

own lack of resources. They were saying, in effect, “Lord we are no more able to feed this crowd by ourselves than we were able to feed the other one. This group is smaller, but four thousand men and their families are just as impossible for us to feed as five thousand.”

The region of the Decapolis was probably a more **desolate place** than the area near Bethsaida Julias, and if they could not have found food there, they could certainly not find it here. The disciples did not doubt that Jesus could also miraculously feed this group; nor had they forgotten the previous feeding. The first idea is totally improbable and the second is impossible. Rather, their reply to Jesus emphasized that they knew the Lord could **satisfy such a multitude** but that they could not. He had no less power than before, and they had no more.

Jesus then asked them, “**How many loaves do you have?**” **And they said, “Seven, and a few small fish”**; and again (cf. 14:18) they brought what little they had to Him. Also as before, Jesus **directed the multitude to sit down on the ground**. Because this crowd was almost as large as the previous one that was fed, it seems likely that Jesus also had this group sit in groups of hundreds and fifties (see Mark 6:40) in order to simplify the distribution.

Then **He took the seven loaves and the fish; and giving thanks, He broke them and started giving them to the disciples, and the disciples in turn, to the multitudes**. The verb translated **started giving** could also be rendered “kept giving.” In either case the idea is that of repeated **giving** out of the food as it was multiplied. When his basket of food was emptied, a disciple would bring it back to the Lord for refilling, until all **the multitudes** were fed.

The Lord could have miraculously distributed the food as easily as He had miraculously multiplied it. He had provided manna for the children of Israel in the wilderness fresh every morning, distributed across the entire wilderness area in which they were encamped, so that the people needed go only outside their tents and gather what was needed (Ex. 16:14). But Jesus was teaching the disciples as well as feeding the multitudes. He wanted them to learn the practical as well as the theological reality of His compassion. He wanted them to participate first hand in God’s concern for the daily needs of people as well as for their eternal redemption and physical wholeness, because divine compassion embraces every dimension of human need.

No one went away hungry, because **they all ate**; and no one went away half full but completely **satisfied**. After everyone had eaten all he wanted, the disciples **picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, seven large baskets full**.

The **seven large baskets** mentioned here are of a different type than the twelve baskets used in the feeding of the five thousand. The type of basket used at the previous feeding was a small Jewish container called a *kophinos*, used by an individual when traveling to carry food for one or two meals. The **baskets** used in the Decapolis feeding, however, were *spuridas*, which were distinctly Gentile and quite **large**. They could even hold a grown man, and it was in such a basket that Paul was lowered over the wall in Damascus (Acts 9:25). Therefore these **seven large baskets** held considerably more food than the twelve small baskets used in the other feeding (Matt. 14:20). Because this crowd had not eaten for three days, they would have consumed more than the other, which was without food for only one day (14:15).

Alfred Edersheim observed that “the Lord ended each phase of His ministry with a feeding. He ended the ministry in Galilee with the feeding of the five thousand. He ended the ministry in the Gentile area with the feeding of the four thousand. And He ended the Judean ministry before His death on the cross with the feeding of His own in the upper room.”

After the **four thousand men, besides women and children**, had been fed, **sending away the multitudes**, Jesus **got into the boat, and came to the region of Magadan**. The identity of **Magadan** is not certain, because there is no other biblical, historical, or archaeological information about it. Mark reports that they went “to the district of Dalmanutha” (8:10), but that location is also uncertain. Because no land travel is mentioned, the **region** apparently bordered the Sea of Galilee.

From Jesus’ ministry to the Gentile crowd in the Decapolis a number of important lessons can be learned.

First, we see again Jesus’ unrivaled divine power. Because only God can create, only God could have multiplied those seven loaves of bread and a few fish even onefold, not to mention many thousand-fold. He is the God of Abraham, who believed in Him “who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist” (Rom. 4:17). Just as He had created healthy tissues to replace diseased ones, whole limbs to replace

deformed and missing ones, and seeing eyes to replace blinded ones, He also created a superabundance of food to replace a little.

When the apostles were establishing the early church, many miracles were performed through them. But their miracles were performed in the name and by the power of Jesus Christ, for whom they served merely as instruments. Jesus, however, performed miracles in His own name and power, because He was the source of the power. He did not heal, deliver, raise the dead, and multiply food as God's agent but as God.

Second, the fact that He not only cured diseases and restored hearing and sight but restored those who were *kullos* (maimed and sometimes completely without arms, legs, eyes, or other parts of the body), He set Himself totally apart from self-proclaimed divine healers of past years and modern times. You look in vain among those healers for verified accounts of anyone who was given an arm, leg, or eye to replace one that was missing. Their "cures" are at best psychosomatic and are extremely minor compared to those the Lord performed during the three years of His earthly ministry.

God is still capable of sovereignly healing the most hopeless disease and of creating new limbs where there are none. But the only age of healing in the church was the time of authenticating the Messiah Himself and of His Word through the apostles. Once those ends were accomplished, the gift of miracles ceased. (For a more complete discussion of this subject, see the author's book *The Charismatics*, published by Zondervan.)

Third, we learn that the goal of ministry is worship. Although most, if not all, of the multitudes in Decapolis were pagan Gentiles, when they saw the magnitude and perfection of Jesus' healing power, they not only were astonished beyond measure but also "glorified the God of Israel" (v. 31). Witnessing such a divine display demanded much more than awe; it demanded reverential worship, which those Gentiles offered as best they knew how.

Their worship was Jesus' supreme goal. He had unqualified compassion to heal their broken bodies and to fill their empty stomachs. But He was infinitely more concerned that, through their trust in Him as Lord and Savior, He could also save their souls from eternal damnation and make them citizens of His heavenly kingdom.

Christ's followers are likewise called to minister not only to people's physical and temporal needs but to lead them to glorify God, "that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God" (2 Cor. 4:15). The goal of evangelism and of Christian living is to "worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers" (John 4:23). Only when devotion to the Lord is sincere and unqualified, service to others truly selfless, and daily living consistently Christlike, will God be glorified.

That is an especially important lesson for our day, in which self-love and self-satisfaction have become accepted and touted even in much of the church. We are tempted to offer the gospel simply for what it can do for a person, with no suggestion of the need to turn from self to God and from our own priorities to His. We like to make the way of salvation seem wide, although the Lord says it is narrow (Matt. 7:14). We want to make the Christian life appear easy, although Jesus declared that "he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me" and that only "he who has lost his life for My sake shall find it" (10:38-39).

Fourth, this story teaches the necessity of relying on divine resources. Like the disciples, we are most usable to the Lord when we acknowledge our own lack of resources and turn to Him. Whatever we may have in ourselves is never enough to meet the needs of others or to accomplish anything for God. Jesus did not command the apostles to be His "witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" until He had first promised, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (Acts 1:8). "Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights," James says (James 1:17).

I was once asked to visit a elderly lady who was dying and did not know Christ. She was frail and sick, and I did not want to upset her; yet I knew that above everything else she needed Christ. All the way over there I prayed that God would help me know what to say and how to say it; but as I neared her apartment door I became more and more uneasy. When one of her friends let me in and I walked over to her bed, the first thing she said was, "Before you say anything, I just want to tell you that yesterday my sister led me to Christ." After a time of reading some psalms and prayer, I said, "You don't need to fear death any more"; to which she

replied, “Fear death? I don’t fear death. I don’t fear death at all.” By the time our visit was over, I felt she had ministered to me more than I had to her. I had been totally inadequate to meet her needs; but as I went in dependence on our gracious Lord, I found He had already preceded me and made full provision.

Fifth, we learn from this story that God’s resources are never diminished, much less exhausted, because He has an infinite capacity to create. He did not need the seven loaves and few fish in order to feed the multitude. He could just as easily have made the food from nothing, just as He created the world from nothing. He used the loaves and fish in order to involve the disciples and to help teach them to give what they had into His care. “Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return” (Luke 6:38). God’s people would never lack resources to do what He calls them to do if they trusted that promise.

Sixth, we learn about the servant’s usefulness. Although the Lord is able to do His work without us, He chooses to do it through us. He did not need the disciples’ help to distribute the food any more than he needed the seven loaves and the fish to make the food. He could have done in an instant what took them several hours to do. But in His infinite wisdom and mercy God chooses to use human instruments to do His divine work of carrying the gospel to the world and of ministering to its needs. In submissively serving others in our Lord’s name and power, we learn to serve Him—in preparation for serving Him for all eternity in dimensions we cannot now conceive.

Seventh, we learn that God gives liberally, in “good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over” (Luke 6:38), as we have already seen. Everyone on the mountainside ate until he was completely satisfied. There was even more than enough, so that seven large baskets of food were left over.

Eighth is the lesson of spiritual investment. When the disciples gave all they had to Jesus and then helped Him give it away to others, they had seven full baskets remaining for themselves. “He who sows sparingly shall also reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully shall also reap bountifully” (2 Cor. 9:6).

The ninth and overarching lesson is the limitless compassion of Jesus Christ. He has compassion for all our needs—eternal, lifetime, and daily. He has compassion on Jews and on Gentiles, on the severely afflicted and the merely hungry. Following the example of our Lord, we are to “do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith” (Gal. 6:10). Our compassion is not measured by our feelings but by our giving.

John Wanamaker, founder of the famous Philadelphia department store that bears his name, was a devoted Christian. On a trip to China to observe Christian mission work there, he came across a small village where a group of Christians had begun building a church but lacked money to complete it. In a nearby field he noticed the strange sight of a boy yoked together with an ox as they together pulled a plow held by his father. Mr. Wanamaker’s guide explained that the boy had promised his father, “If you will sell one of the oxen and give the money for the building of the church, I will take the oxen’s place pulling the plow” Mr. Wanamaker is said to have fallen to his knees and said, “Lord, let me be hitched to a plow that I may know the joy of sacrificial giving.”

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To Felix Martin del Campo, Jr., who expresses his
friendship to me through loving service

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Preface

It continues to be a rewarding divine communion for me to preach expositionally through the New Testament. My goal is always to have deep fellowship with the Lord in the understanding of His Word, and out of that experience to explain to His people what a passage means. In the words of Nehemiah 8:8, I strive “to give the sense” of it so they may truly hear God speak and, in so doing, may respond to Him.

Obviously, God’s people need to understand Him, which demands knowing His Word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15) and allowing that Word to dwell in us richly (Col. 3:16). The dominant thrust of my ministry, therefore, is to help make God’s living Word alive to His people. It is a refreshing adventure.

This New Testament commentary series reflects this objective of explaining and applying Scripture. Some commentaries are primarily linguistic, others are mostly theological, and some are mainly homiletical. This one is basically explanatory, or expository. It is not linguistically technical, but deals with linguistics when that seems helpful to proper interpretation. It is not theologically expansive, but focuses on the major doctrines in each text and on how they relate to the whole of Scripture. It is not primarily homiletical,

although each unit of thought is generally treated as one chapter, with a clear outline and logical flow of thought. Most truths are illustrated and applied with other Scripture. After establishing the context of a passage, I have tried to follow closely the writer's development and reasoning.

My prayer is that each reader will fully understand what the Holy Spirit is saying through this part of His Word, so that His revelation may lodge in the minds of believers and bring greater obedience and faithfulness—to the glory of our great God.

1
The Blind Who Will
Never See
(16:1-4)

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came up, and testing Him asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. But He answered and said to them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times? An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.” And He left them, and went away. (16:1-4)

Good eyesight is a marvelous blessing, and in order to see better, Americans spend some five billion dollars a year on eye care. About seven percent of the population is considered legally blind. In

many parts of the world, of course, the percentage of blind people is much higher.

It is even more significant that, since the fall of Adam, every person on earth has been born spiritually blind. They fall into two categories: those who will never see and know God and those who, by the grace of God and the illumination of the Holy Spirit, are enabled to see and to have intimate fellowship with Him. The deciding factor is how a person is related to Jesus Christ. The person who rejects the Savior remains forever blind; the person who confesses Him as Lord is given spiritual sight as well as spiritual life. Unfortunately, men do not universally have the desire for spiritual sight that they do for physical. The vast majority do not know they are spiritually blind and do not care. Even when offered sight, many refuse it.

Jesus “was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:9-11). Paul declares that, although “since the creation of the world [God’s] invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made,” rebellious mankind “did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened” (Rom. 1:20-21). Even with evidence of God plainly before them, unregenerate men refuse to see Him. Their eyes reject the evidence because their hearts reject the One who gives it.

“A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God,” Paul explains; “for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor. 2:14). Unredeemed men are “darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart” (Eph. 4:18).

The Old Testament writers also testified to men’s natural spiritual blindness. The wicked “do not know nor do they understand,” wrote the psalmist; “they walk about in darkness” (Ps. 82:5). The same writer confessed that before he came to know God he “was senseless and ignorant, . . . like a beast before Thee” (Ps. 73:22). We learn from Proverbs that “the way of the wicked is like darkness;

they do not know over what they stumble” (Prov. 4:19). Because of their sin and rebelliousness, Jeremiah described God’s chosen nation of Israel as “foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but see not; who have ears, but hear not” (Jer. 5:21). Micah described Israel’s pagan enemies as those who “do not know the thoughts of the Lord, and they do not understand His purpose” (Mic. 4:12).

Three things contribute to man’s spiritual blindness. The first is sin. When God’s own Son came to earth as the light of the world, “men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). The second contributor to spiritual blindness is Satan. As “the god of this world [he] has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). The third contributor is God’s sovereign judgment. When, because of their sin and their allegiance to Satan, men persistently reject God’s light, He judicially confirms them in their self-chosen darkness. Of those in Jerusalem who rejected Him, Jesus declared, “If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes” (Luke 19:42).

Through the seven parables of Matthew 13 Jesus describes the characteristics of the age between His rejection and His coming again to establish His millennial kingdom. Those parables present “the mysteries of the kingdom,” truths not revealed in the Old Testament but given only to those who during this age trust in Jesus Christ for salvation (13:11). The singular purpose of those particular parables was to teach that the mystery time, which has now lasted some 2,000 years, is a time of both belief and of unbelief, of receiving and of rejecting.

Following the seven parables, Jesus presented eight illustrations (Matt. 13:53—16:12), six of which focus on His rejection and two on His acceptance. History verifies that rejection of Jesus has been vastly greater than reception of Him, just as those parables and illustrations indicate.

The gospel accounts make clear that, beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist, the most vocal and determined rejection of Christ and His gospel was by the Jewish religious leaders, especially the influential and powerful **Pharisees and Sadducees**.

The events of Matthew 16 began just after the Lord crossed the Sea of Galilee from the Gentile area of Decapolis, where He had miraculously fed “four thousand men, besides women and children,” and came to the Jewish “region of Magadan,” on the western shore (Matt. 15:32-39). The exact location of Magadan, which Mark refers to as Dalmanutha (8:10), is unknown, but Jesus’ opponents came there as soon as they heard He had arrived.

In 16:1-4, Matthew records Jesus’ final invitation to those religious leaders; and by their persistent rejection of Him they confirmed themselves as among the spiritually blind who steadfastly refuse to see. In this brief passage we see four characteristics of those whose spiritual blindness will never end: they seek darkness, they curse the light, they regress still deeper into darkness, and finally they are abandoned by God.

THEY SEEK DARKNESS

The first characteristic is seen in the fact that **the Pharisees and Sadducees came up** to Jesus together. Although they ordinarily criticized and despised each other, the two religious groups found common cause in their opposition to Jesus. They were bound together by their love of spiritual darkness.

For the most part, the **Sadducees** were aristocratic, and they traditionally boasted the high priests and chief priests among their numbers. Many of them made fortunes operating the lucrative Temple concessions of money changing and selling of sacrificial animals. **The Pharisees**, on the other hand, were generally from the working class, and many of them, like Paul (Acts 18:3), made their living from a trade. Scribes and priests were found in both parties (see Matt. 3:7; 15:12; 21:15; 23:2-36; Mark 2:16; 3:6; Luke 7:30; 16:14; John 7:32; 8:3-6; 9:40-41).

The Pharisees were the more conservative and fundamental, but they held rabbinic tradition to be of equal authority with Scripture (see Matt. 15:2, 6). They were strongly separatistic, continuing the zealous protection of Judaism from Gentile influence that was begun

several centuries earlier by the Hasidim in their resistance to the Hellenization campaigns of Antiochus Epiphanes.

The **Sadducees**, on the other hand, cared nothing for rabbinic tradition and had no compunction about making religious, cultural, or political compromises. Their cardinal principle was expediency. Although they claimed to believe Scripture, their interpretations were so spiritualized that all significant meaning was lost. They were thoroughly liberal and materialistic, not believing in angels, immortality, resurrection of the dead, or anything else supernatural.

Once when Paul was brought before the Sanhedrin he capitalized on the great doctrinal differences between the two groups by identifying himself as a Pharisee and affirming his belief in the resurrection. When he did so, “there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. And there arose a great uproar; and some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party stood up and began to argue heatedly, saying, ‘We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?’” (Acts 23:6-9).

Matthew’s use of a single article (**the**) suggests that **the Pharisees** were the main group, with **Sadducees** intermingled among them; and from Mark 8:11 we learn that the Pharisees took the lead in confronting Jesus. Those “blind guides of the blind” (Matt. 15:14) enlisted the support of men who, if anything, were more spiritually blind than themselves. Instead of coming to Jesus for spiritual sight, they confirmed their love of blindness by making league with other ungodly men against Him. The ritualists and the rationalists joined forces on the basis of mutual contempt for Jesus. That is always the way of those who are willfully, sinfully blind. Their common trust is in themselves and in their own good works, and therefore their common enemy is God and His sovereign grace.

THEY CURSE THE LIGHT

A second characteristic of the willfully blind is the other side of the first: they curse the light. The person who is content in his spiritual blindness has no use for spiritual light, because it intrudes into his darkness and exposes his sin. “And this is the judgment,” Jesus said, “that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God” (John 3:19-21). The Pharisees and Sadducees did not come to Jesus in hope of finding truth for themselves but in hope of finding falsehood in Him. Therefore, **testing Him**, they **asked Him to show them a sign from heaven**.

They did not expect Jesus to perform such a **sign**, and if He had given them one, their unbelief would have remained just as strong. They had already seen sign after sign, the miraculous nature of which was irrefutable. They did not deny His supernatural power but refused to recognize it as being from God, having even accused Him of working as an agent of Satan (Matt. 12:24).

Popular Jewish superstition held that demons could perform earthly miracles but that only God could perform heavenly ones. **From heaven** indicates the desire to see a miraculous **sign** in the sky. The Pharisees and Sadducees demanded a miracle they thought was beyond Jesus, hoping to prove that His power, and therefore His message, were not divine. He would be publicly discredited, and they would be vindicated.

In their blindness they could not see that Jesus Himself was a **sign from heaven**. Nor could they see that they themselves were helping to fulfill that sign. As the godly Simeon held the infant Jesus in his arms he prophesied, “Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed” (Luke 2:34). Because the unbelieving religious leaders refused to recognize God’s supreme Sign, His only Son, they could not accept His lesser signs, despite the evidence they saw with their own eyes. Physical sight is of no help to spiritual blindness, and had those leaders seen a hundred more miracles a hundred times more dramatic, they would simply have been driven to deeper darkness—as their rejection of the

miracle of Jesus' resurrection proved. As Abraham said of the brothers in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31). Like Pharaoh before Moses, the more they saw God's power demonstrated, the more they hardened their hearts against Him (Ex. 7-11). Heavenly signs would come in the future (Matt. 24:29-30; Luke 21:11, 25; Acts 2:19; Rev. 15:1), but they would signal the very end.

If a person's heart is set on darkness, when the light comes he curses it. Proudly confessing that very disposition, the French atheist Voltaire declared, "Even if a miracle should be wrought in the open marketplace before a thousand sober witnesses, I would rather mistrust my senses than admit a miracle." Unbelief will always find a way to reject the truth, even to the point of denying the undeniable.

The liberal theologian does not prefer the speculations of philosophy or psychology because these are more provable or persuasive than the truths of Scripture but because he prefers man's wisdom to God's. And, contrary to his claim, the agnostic does not refuse to believe because he *cannot* know about God but because he *will not* know about Him. The person who turns to rationalism, evolution, skepticism, or simply to himself for meaning and purpose does not do so because of lack of evidence about God and Christ but in spite of it. The person who turns to man-made religion does not do so because no light about the true God is available but because he despises that light and that God.

Men turn to acts of penance, to self-affliction, to confessionals, and to every other human resource to try to expiate particular sins; but they refuse to deal with the root in their hearts, their basic sinful nature with which they do not want to part.

Knowing that the true intent of the Pharisees' and Sadducees' demand for a heavenly sign was to discredit Him, Jesus **answered and said to them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.'"** Those sayings correspond to the age-old mariner's ditty, "Red sky at night, sailor's delight. Red sky in the morning, sailor's warning." From many years of observation men learned that a red sky in the evening is usually

followed by good weather, whereas a red sky in the morning is often followed by a storm. The religious leaders who confronted Jesus accepted the reliability of that folk meteorology without question.

“Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky,” Jesus asked them, **“but cannot discern the signs of the times?”** Both the Pharisees and Sadducees were proud of their religious heritage and considered themselves experts on the things of God. But despite their religious training and positions, their primitive and limited knowledge of weather was far superior to their knowledge of God. “Your sensitivity to weather,” Jesus said in effect, “makes a mockery of your insensitivity to God’s kingdom. You have no idea of what God is doing in the world. You are oblivious to **the times** in which you are privileged to live, the very times of redemption by God’s own Son, before whom you now stand.” It was the beginning of the messianic age that Jews had long hoped for, but those Jewish leaders did not recognize it. They were better weathermen than biblical scholars (cf. Luke 12:54-56). They were “blind guides of the blind” (Matt. 15:14). In Matthew 23, Jesus labeled them blind guides (vv. 16, 24) and blind fools (v. 17).

Modern society also has many people with great insight and discernment about the things of the world but who have no comprehension of the things of God. Experts are able to predict whether the stock market will go up or down, whether gold and silver will become more or less valuable, and whether the dollar will become stronger or weaker. Others can predict the direction of interest rates, fashions, the real estate market, and of import/export ratios. Others can predict trends in education, sociology, morality, and government. But our society is short of those who know what God’s plan for the world is and that it is still the “last time,” the time of the Messiah. What it means to be a citizen of His kingdom escapes them.

In answer to the disciples’ question about “the sign of [His] coming, and of the end of the age,” Jesus said, “You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars; . . . nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. . . . And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many. And because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold” (Matt. 24:3, 6-7, 11-12).

Those signs that Jesus will return abound in our day. No period of history has experienced more wars or been so preoccupied with the prospect of war as our own. With unprecedented surpluses of food in some parts of the world, other parts still experience devastating famines. Cults and false religions of every sort are proliferating even in countries that have been nominally Christian for hundreds of years. The spirit of lawlessness and self-will is rampant.

Paul declared, “The mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. And then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming” (2 Thess. 2:7-8). The apostle explained to Timothy that “the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1). Peter wrote of the great apostasy, false teaching, heresies, mockery, and denial of Christ’s return that would characterize the last days (2 Pet. 2:1-3; 3:3-4).

Ezekiel predicted that in the end times God would restore His chosen people to the land He had promised them (Ezek. 34:11-31); and in our present generation that promise has begun to be fulfilled with the reestablishment of the state of Israel. The same prophet wrote of a hostile power from the north that would attack Israel (Ezek. 38); and Russia’s great military might, geography, atheism, and anti-Semitism make that nation a prime prospect for being that hostile power.

Scripture also declares that the end times will be characterized by great concern for world unity, world government, world economics, and world religion (see Dan. 2; 7; Rev. 13; 17-18). The world is looking for stability and security and is ripe for the unifying role of a world leader who can stop wars and bring an end to political, economic, and social chaos—the role that one day will be filled by the antichrist.

All of those signs that mark the end times are characteristic of our day. There can be no doubt that we live near the end of the age, and the concern of believers should be for what the Bible says rather than for what men say and for what God is doing rather than for what men are doing.

THEY REGRESS DEEPER INTO SIN

A third characteristic of the spiritually blind who will never see is that they continue to regress deeper and deeper into darkness. They become more and more hardened and blinded, and the very things they suppose make them more pleasing to God drive them further from Him.

Jesus knew the true motive of the Pharisees and Sadducees was to entrap Him, not to be convinced of His messiahship. He also knew that another sign, no matter how astonishing, would not convince them about that which they were determined to reject. It was for this reason He spoke to them in parables, as indicated in Matthew 13:13-15. He would not capitulate to their hypocritical and wicked demand. **“An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign,”** He told them; **“and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.”**

The sign of Jonah was the final sign Jesus gave to the world, the sign of His victory over sin, death, and Satan through His resurrection. As He had declared to a group of scribes and Pharisees on an earlier occasion, “Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Matt. 12:39-41; for further explanation, see the author’s commentary volume *Matthew* 8-15).

That **sign**, too, would be rejected by the Jewish religious leaders. When they heard of Jesus’ resurrection, they bribed the soldiers who guarded His tomb to say that His body was stolen by His disciples (Matt. 28:11-15).

THEY ARE ABANDONED BY GOD

The fourth characteristic of those who persist in their love of darkness and rejection of the light is that they are finally abandoned by God, given over by Him to their lusts, impurities, degrading passions, and depraved minds (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). That which is willful, sinful, and satanic blindness becomes God's sovereign blindness.

Because the unbelieving Pharisees and Sadducees would not have Him as Lord and Savior, Jesus **left them and went away**. *Kataleipō* (**left**) means to leave behind, and it often carried the idea of forsaking or abandoning (see 2 Pet. 2:15).

That event marked an important transition in Jesus' ministry. Henceforth the Lord spent most of His time with His disciples and little time with the crowds or religious leaders. He turned **away** from those who rejected Him and focused His attention on His own. He gave no more arguments or signs for unbelievers, only additional truth for those who believed.

2

The Blind Who Are Made to See (16:5-12)

And the disciples came to the other side and had forgotten to take bread. And Jesus said to them, “Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” And they began to discuss among themselves, saying, “It is because we took no bread.” But Jesus, aware of this, said, “You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread? Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets you took up? Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets you took up? How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (16:5-12)

When he was a college student, Thomas Steward accidentally jabbed himself in the eye with a knife, causing permanent blindness in that eye. Fearing that the good eye might be harmed, the doctor recommended removal of the damaged eye. As Thomas was recovering from the anesthetic, however, it was discovered that the surgeon had removed the wrong eye, thereby plunging the young man into total blindness.

Undaunted by the tragedy, Thomas determined to continue his law study at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. He completed the course at the top of his class, and his brother William was second. For four years William not only had pursued his own studies in law but had acted as his brother's eyes, accompanying him to classes, reading the assigned material to him, and writing his tests and papers. Understandably, Thomas's gratitude to his brother was unbounded, because without that help, his own degree and career in law would have been impossible.

Far worse than physical blindness is the reality that every person has been afflicted with spiritual blindness because of sin, and without the help of God through the work of His Son, Jesus Christ, spiritual life and sight remain forever impossible.

The famous seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes was totally godless and anti-Christian. When he was about to die it is said that he loudly declared, "I am about to take a leap into the dark." The truth was that he had been deep in darkness all his life.

The French philosopher Voltaire openly mocked God and was especially antagonistic against Christianity. When he felt he was near death, he was overcome with grief and despair. But instead of asking his believing friends to lead him to Christ, he gathered them together and told them bitterly, "Begone! Begone! It is you that have brought me to my present condition. Leave me, I say. Begone! What a wretched glory is this which you have produced for me." Having something of a change of mind, he later hoped to allay his anguish by making a written recantation of his unbelief. For two months he alternated between railing against God and calling on the name of Christ. But his heart was too long hardened and had become impervious to God's love and light. Among his last words were, "I die abandoned by God and man."

It is no wonder that Jesus frequently referred to hell as “outer darkness” (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30), because it is the eternal perpetuation of the spiritual darkness that unbelieving man refuses to forsake while he is on earth. Matthew 16:1-4 pictures spiritually blind persons who will never see, epitomized by the unbelieving Pharisees and Sadducees who refused to receive the light and life that Jesus offered.

In contrast, verses 5-12 give a picture of the spiritually blind who, by God’s sovereign grace, are made to see. The four characteristics of these persons are the reverse sides of the characteristics of the blind who will never see: they seek the light, curse the darkness, receive still greater light, and are taught by the Lord.

THEY SEEK THE LIGHT

The disciples stood at a crossroads as they decided whether or not to hold on to the system in which they were reared and identify themselves with the Pharisees and Sadducees, whom they had been trained to respect and honor. The Pharisees were the recognized interpreters of the Jewish law and traditions, and the Sadducees were the religious aristocracy, which customarily included the high priest and the chief priests.

But the Twelve did not hesitate in following Jesus, and when He crossed back to the eastern, Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee, they **came to the other side** with Him. They genuinely sought God’s light, and they knew Jesus was Himself that light. Through Jeremiah, the Lord had promised, “You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. And I will be found by you” (Jer. 29:13-14). The disciples had seeking hearts, and God honored His promise to lead them to Himself.

As He stood teaching in the Temple one day, Jesus declared to the disciples along with the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees, “I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12). The disciples

believed that truth, and they knew that, as God's light, He not only was to be seen but followed. They knew the Messiah would come "as a light to the nations" (Isa. 42:6) and, as David had proclaimed, would indeed *be* their "light and [their] salvation" (Ps. 27:1). Jesus was the light that illumined their darkness, and, though often stumbling and misunderstanding, they genuinely sought to follow Him.

But not everyone who became interested in Jesus was faithful to follow Him. When they began to realize the true nature of His message and the cost of discipleship, many superficial disciples "withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore" (John 6:66).

But the true believers knew they would never be able to have spiritual sight apart from the gracious work of God on their behalf through Jesus Christ. Some of them perhaps prayed with the psalmist, "Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Thy law . . . Teach me, O Lord, the way of Thy statutes, . . . Incline my heart to Thy testimonies, . . . Thy hands made me and fashioned me; give me understanding, that I may learn Thy commandments" (Ps. 119:18, 33, 36, 73).

THEY CURSE THE DARKNESS

Because they sought God's light, the true disciples also, in effect, cursed Satan's darkness. They had hungry hearts for God's light and truth and were eager learners. They turned their backs on the willfully blind and corrupt Pharisees and Sadducees, who led their followers into deeper and deeper darkness and made them even more wicked than themselves (see Matt. 23:15). When Jesus asked "the twelve, 'You do not want to go away also, do you?'" Simon Peter answered Him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God'" (John 6:67-69).

They were as naturally blind as the Pharisees and Sadducees, but unlike those unbelieving religious leaders, the Twelve recognized their blindness and came to Jesus for help.

THEY RECEIVE STILL GREATER LIGHT

As soon as the disciples arrived at **the other side** with Jesus, they realized they **had forgotten to take bread** with them. They had left hurriedly after the confrontation with the Pharisees and Sadducees (vv. 1-4), and on the sparsely populated northeastern **side** of the Sea of Galilee they were possibly many miles from a place where they could buy food. Mark reports that they “did not have more than one loaf in the boat with them” (Mark 8:14), far from enough to feed thirteen men even one meal.

Despite Jesus’ divine teaching, His perfect example, and His great miracles, the disciples still thought and functioned primarily on the physical level. When they became hungry after rowing to the other side of the lake, their thoughts did not turn to Jesus’ provision but to their own lack. As He frequently did, the Lord took their extremity as a divine opportunity to teach His truth.

That is an apt example of how Christians should disciple other Christians, walking alongside them and helping them interpret life’s struggles, perplexities, problems, and opportunities in light of spiritual truth and resources. Christian maturity is learning to live day by day by the light of God’s Word and in His provision.

Knowing the disciples’ concern over their lack of food, **Jesus said to them, “Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.”** The imperative **watch out** is from *horaō*, which has the basic meaning of seeing clearly or taking notice of. “Open your eyes,” Jesus was saying, “and pay close attention to **the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees**. Don’t be concerned about bread but about what is truly important. In the present situation, what is important is the spiritual danger of **the Pharisees and Sadducees.**”

Christ was only months from the cross, and He had much more to teach the disciples and they had much more to learn. One day without food was of no consequence. But like believers in all ages, the disciples were caught up in the physical and temporal. Their spiritual vision was limited, and their spiritual attention span was short.

Because the disciples' thoughts were on physical food they missed the spiritual warning, so that when Jesus mentioned leaven **they began to discuss among themselves, saying, "It is because we took no bread."** Perhaps they thought Jesus was concerned that they might buy some **bread** to eat that was baked by a Pharisee or sold by a Sadducee and that it would therefore somehow be defiled. But such things were of no consequence to Jesus, as the Twelve should have known from what He repeatedly said and did. Only a short while before, He had made plain that it is "not what enters into the mouth [that] defiles the man" (Matt. 15:11). Jesus was not the least concerned about whether the earthly bread they ate came from a Pharisee or a Sadducee, a Jew or a Gentile. Such matters have absolutely no bearing on spirituality and godliness and were not in His mind when He spoke that warning.

The disciples were confused about what Jesus meant because their earthly orientation was a great barrier to spiritual vision. Their response revealed again how much they needed divine help in understanding, prompting the Lord to say to them what He had said numerous times before: **"You men of little faith"** (cf. Matt. 6:30; 8:26; 14:31). They did not fail to understand because of limited information or limited intellectual ability but because of limited **faith**.

"Why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread?" "You should know that I am not speaking about the fact that we **have no bread**," He said in effect. **"Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets you took up? Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets you took up? How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread?"** "If I were concerned about our having bread, I would simply create some Myself," He implied, "just as I did when I fed **the five thousand** in Jewish territory, where twelve baskets were left over (see John 6:1-14), and **the four thousand** in Gentile territory, where seven baskets remained (see Matt. 15:32-39). Have you forgotten those occasions so soon?"

When believers live on the level of spiritual trust and obedience, God makes provision for their physical needs. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus cautioned, “Do not be anxious then, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘With what shall we clothe ourselves?’ For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you” (Matt. 6:31-33). “He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food,” Paul assured the Corinthians, “will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness” (2 Cor. 9:10).

The Twelve needed to heed the counsel Paul would one day give the church at Philippi: “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things” (Phil. 4:8; cf. Col. 3:2). The Christian needs constant exposure to the Word of God and constant illumination by the Spirit of God. Only God’s Word and Spirit can raise him above the cares, concerns, perplexities, and confusion that are the inevitable heritage of life that is viewed and lived purely in the human dimension.

Jesus was grieved that the Twelve, after so much clear teaching and so many miraculous manifestations, were still living by human rather than by divine sight. But He was patient with them, as He always is with His own, and He knew they could not comprehend without divine illumination.

He then repeated the warning (cf. v. 8): “**Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.**” Leaven made bread rise before baking and was used in much the same way yeast is used today. But the only method ancient peoples had for reproducing yeast was to save a small piece of unbaked dough, which was later used to start fermentation in the next batch of bread.

Because a small piece of leaven was able to cause a relatively large amount of dough to rise, the term was often used figuratively to represent any sort of influence—usually, but not inherently, a harmful influence, as seen in its use in Matthew 13:33. When the Israelites were led out of bondage in Egypt, the Lord did not allow them to take

any leavened bread with them, symbolically representing His intention that the people take no influence of pagan Egypt with them into the Promised Land. Israel was to start life afresh, with no contaminating influence from the wicked, ungodly land of her oppression.

It was the spiritually contaminating influence of the **Pharisees and Sadducees** that Jesus here uses **leaven** to represent. “**Beware of their influence,**” the Lord was saying. “Their way of thinking and living has no part in My kingdom or its righteousness.”

On another occasion Jesus explained that **the leaven of the Pharisees** was hypocrisy (Luke 12:1). Their particular form of ungodliness was characterized by religious phoniness, external purity without internal righteousness. The legalism, formalism, and ritualism they cherished so dearly were a cover for spiritual uncleanness and deadness. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” Jesus told them. “For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness” (Matt. 23:27). And their hypocrisy adversely permeated the whole religious scene in Israel.

The **leaven of the . . . Sadducees**, on the other hand, was religious liberalism. To them, religion was primarily a means to earthly, temporal ends. They did not believe in angels, miracles, the resurrection, an afterlife, or anything else supernatural (see Acts 23:8). They were thoroughly materialistic and rationalistic, and they, too, had an adverse permeating influence with many.

Both types of **leaven** are enemies of the gospel. They corrupt God’s truth and God’s people. “Don’t let either the legalism of the Pharisees or the liberalism of the Sadducees influence you,” Jesus was saying. False doctrine is always a danger, no matter what its form, and it should be shunned and rejected by the believer wherever and however it is encountered.

The Galatian church was threatened by the legalistic perversions of the Judaizers, who insisted that observance of circumcision and the Mosaic law be added to the finished work of Christ. To them Paul declared, “This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the

Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Gal. 3:2-3). The Colossian church, on the other hand, was threatened by religious rationalism and liberalism. To those believers Paul wrote, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ” (Col. 2:8).

False doctrine is never to be trifled with or minimized. Jude warns that when a believer seeks to help deliver someone from a false system he should go about it as if he were snatching a brand from the fire (Jude 23). To get too close to a cult or pagan religion is to risk being burned.

THEY ARE TAUGHT BY THE LORD

Because the Twelve received His light, God gave them still greater light. Jesus explained that He was not talking about physical bread but was warning them to **beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees**. By the Lord’s sovereign and gracious illumination, **then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees**.

Jesus’ continual desire during His earthly ministry was to teach those who trusted in Him, the apostles in particular. Even after He rose from the grave He continued to teach during the forty days before His ascension (Acts 1:3). He had already provided for the continuation of His teaching after the ascension: “The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you” (John 14:26). A short while later He told His disciples, “I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He shall glorify Me; for He shall take of Mine, and shall disclose it to you. All

things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said, that He takes of Mine, and will disclose it to you” (John 16:12-15).

Not only is the believer given God’s own Word to study and believe but is given His indwelling Spirit to illumine and interpret the Word. A vital part of the Holy Spirit’s present ministry is to elucidate God’s Word and apply it to the hearts and lives of those who belong to Christ. John assured his Christian readers, “You have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know. . . . And as for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him” (1 John 2:20, 27).

Paul declared to the Corinthian believers, “My message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:4-5). Writing as God’s apostle, Paul’s word was God’s Word, not human wisdom but divine. “For our gospel did not come to you in word only,” he explained to the Thessalonians, “but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess. 1:5).

When on a previous occasion the disciples had asked Jesus, “‘Why do You speak to them [the multitudes] in parables?’ . . . He answered and said to them, To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted” (Matt. 13:10-11). The majority of the people who heard Jesus teach and preach had no desire for the things of God, and therefore what He said made no sense to them. “While seeing they do not see,” Jesus explained; “and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. . . . For the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I should heal them” (vv. 13, 15). But to the Twelve Jesus then said, “Blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear” (v. 16). The difference was not in the innate ability of the disciples but in their willingness to be taught by God. They, too, were spiritually blind, but through their faith the Lord enabled them to see.

“Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him,” Paul wrote, quoting Isaiah. “For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. . . . Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God” (1 Cor. 2:9-10, 12; cf. Isa. 64:4; 65:17).

As the believer studies God’s Word and allows God’s Spirit to interpret and apply it, he is divinely enabled to understand even the deep things of God. Though utterly blind in his natural mind and spirit, by God’s gracious provision he is given knowledge and understanding of the most important truths in the universe. As with the two disciples to whom Jesus appeared on the Emmaus road, a Christian’s heart should burn with wonder and glory as the Lord makes His truth come alive (see Luke 24:32).

The story is told of a blind French girl who was given a copy of the gospel of Mark in braille. As she read and reread the book, she came to have faith in Christ, and the book became more precious with each reading. She read it so much that she developed callouses on her fingers that eventually prevented her from feeling the raised dots. She was so determined to read God’s Word that she peeled the skin off the tips of her fingers to make them more sensitive, but in doing so she permanently damaged the nerves. Devastated, she picked up the book to kiss it farewell, only to discover that her lips were even more sensitive than her fingers.

God will always find a way to feed the heart that hungers for His truth.

The famous American revolutionary hero Ethan Allen was an avowed atheist and wrote a book denying the deity of Christ. When his devout Christian wife died, the daughter was torn between the ways of her parents. Some years after her mother died, the daughter was also struck with a terminal illness. As she lay dying, she said to her father, “You will bury me by the side of Mother, for that was her dying request. But Father, you and Mother have never agreed on religion. Mother often spoke to me of the blessed Savior who died for us all, and she used to pray for both you and me that the Savior might

be our Friend and that we might all see Him when He sits enthroned in His glory.” Looking desperately into her father’s eyes, she pleaded, “I don’t feel I can go into death alone. Tell me whom I shall follow, you or Mother? Shall I reject Christ as you’ve taught me, or shall I accept Him, as Mother wanted me to do?” Deeply moved and heartbroken, her father replied, “My child, cling to your Mother’s Savior. She was right. And I, too, shall try to follow you to that blessed place.”

Only through Christ are the blind made to see.

3

The Supreme Confession (16:13-17)

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He began asking His disciples, saying, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” And Simon Peter answered and said, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.” (16:13-17)

This passage represents the climax of Jesus’ teaching ministry. It was, in effect, the apostles’ final examination, consisting of but one question, the ultimate question that every human being

must face: Who is Jesus Christ? A person's answer is of the most monumental importance, because on it hinges his eternal destiny. It is a question that no one can escape or avoid. Every soul, as it were, will be pinned against the wall of eternity and forced to answer that question.

For some two and a half years Jesus had been moving to this moment—teaching and reteaching, affirming and reaffirming, demonstrating and redemonstrating, building and rebuilding the truth of who He was in order to establish it completely and securely in the minds and hearts of the Twelve.

During the previous several months the Lord had largely shunned the crowds and the Jewish leaders. His few encounters with them were brief and terse. The misguided multitudes wanted to make Him their political deliverer from the military bondage of Rome and the capricious ambitions of Herod. The scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees were, for the most part, thoroughly convinced He was a threat to their religious system and were determined to be rid of Him, if necessary by taking His life.

As He spent more and more time alone with the Twelve, Jesus went more often into Gentile territory and stayed longer. He withdrew to the fringes of Palestine in order to be free of the misguided and fickle adulation of the multitudes and the growing hostility of the Jewish religious leaders.

THE SETTING

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, (16:13a)

The city of **Caesarea Philippi** was originally named Paneas (or Panias), after the Greek god Pan, who, according to pagan mythology, was born in a nearby cave. Caesar Augustus had given the region to Herod the Great, who built a temple in Paneas in honor of the emperor. Herod's son, Philip the tetrarch, inherited the land,

greatly enlarged the city, and renamed it after Caesar. He added the name **Philippi** both to gain honor for himself and to distinguish this **Caesarea** from the one on the Mediterranean coast west of Jerusalem.

Caesarea Philippi was located some 25 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee and 40 miles southwest of Damascus, on a beautiful plateau near the headwaters of the Jordan River. A few miles to the north, snow-covered Mount Hermon rose to a height of more than 9,000 feet above sea level. On clear days the majestic mountain can easily be seen from northern Galilee towns such as Capernaum, Cana, and Nazareth.

Caesarea Philippi was but a few miles from the ancient Jewish city of Dan, which for centuries had been considered the northernmost boundary of the Promised Land, the southernmost being Beersheba (see Judg. 20:1; 1 Chron. 21:2). On the north it was the last outpost of Israel and had always been especially susceptible to pagan influence.

The location offered Jesus and the disciples welcome relief from the hot Galilean lowlands and from the pressure of the Jewish leaders and the threat from Herod Antipas.

From Luke 9:18 we learn that Jesus posed His all-important question to the disciples just after He had spent time praying alone, and from Mark 8:27 that the group had not yet arrived in the city of **Caesarea Philippi** proper but were passing through some of the villages on the outskirts. At this crossroads of heathenism and Judaism Jesus left a time of intimate fellowship with His heavenly Father and confronted His disciples with the question that every person and every religion must one day answer.

THE EXAMINATION

He began asking His disciples, saying, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” (16:13b-15)

Son of Man was Jesus' most common designation of Himself and is used of Him some eighty times in the New Testament. It was clearly recognized by Jews as a title of the Messiah (see Dan. 7:13); but because it emphasized His humanness, many Jews preferred not to use it. No doubt it was for that reason that Jesus *did* prefer it—to focus on the humiliation and submission of His first coming and His work of sacrificial, substitutionary atonement.

Jesus' priority ministry in the world was to reveal Himself, to teach and to demonstrate who He was. **He** therefore **began** the examination by **asking His disciples, . . . “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”** The **people** to whom the Lord referred were the Jews, God's chosen people, to whom the Messiah was sent first (Rom. 1:16; cf. John 4:22).

It was not that Jesus was unaware of what the **people** were saying about Him but that He wanted the Twelve to think carefully about those popular perceptions. He was not concerned about the opinions of the unbelieving and hypocritical scribes and Pharisees, some of whom had even accused Him of being in league with Satan (Matt. 10:25; 12:24). He was rather **asking** about the thoughts of those who looked on Him positively, although uncertainly, and who recognized Him to be more than an ordinary religious leader. After hearing His teaching and witnessing His miracles, what was their final verdict about Jesus, **the Son of Man?**

“Some say John the Baptist,” the Twelve replied. Perhaps following the frightened assessment of Herod the tetrarch (Matt. 14:1-2), some of the Jews believed Jesus was a reincarnated **John the Baptist**, come back from the grave to continue his ministry of announcing the Messiah. Like Herod, those people recognized that Jesus' miraculous power was unexplainable on a human basis.

Others believed Jesus was a reincarnated **Elijah**, considered by most Jews to be the supreme Old Testament prophet, whom the Lord was to send again “before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord” (Mal. 4:5). In modern Jewish Passover celebrations an empty chair is reserved at the table for **Elijah**, in the hope of his one day coming to announce the Messiah's arrival.

Still others said Jesus was **Jeremiah**, another of the most revered prophets. In the apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees (2:4-8),

Jeremiah is said to have taken the Ark of the Covenant and the altar of incense out of the Temple and hidden them on Mount Nebo in order to preserve them from desecration and destruction by the Babylonians. Some Jews thought that before the Messiah returned to establish His kingdom, Jeremiah would return to earth and restore the Ark and the altar to their proper places in the Temple. The same apocryphal book pictures a white-bearded Jeremiah handing a golden sword to the great Jewish hero Judas Maccabaeus to use in overthrowing the Greeks (15:12-16).

Some of the people perhaps saw in Jesus something of the character and message of John the Baptist. Some saw in Him the fire and intensity of Elijah; and still others saw in Him the lament and grief of Jeremiah. In all three of those identities, however, Jesus was thought to be only the Messiah's forerunner, who had come back to life with God-given miraculous powers.

The rest of the people who recognized Jesus' uniqueness did not speculate about His particular identity but simply considered Him to be **one of the prophets** who was "risen again" (see Luke 9:19).

In each instance the people considered Jesus to be a forerunner of the Messiah but not the Messiah Himself. They could not deny His supernatural power, but they would not accept Him as Messiah and Savior. They came as close to God's ultimate truth as they could without fully recognizing and accepting it.

Since Jesus' day, much of the world has similarly wanted to speak highly of Him without recognizing His deity and lordship. Pilate said, "I find no guilt in this man" (Luke 23:4). Napoleon said, "I know men, and Jesus was no mere man." Diderot referred to Jesus as "the unsurpassed," Strauss, the German rationalist, as "the highest model of religion," John Stuart Mill as "the guide of humanity," the French atheist Renan as "the greatest among the sons of men," Theodore Parker as "a youth with God in His heart," and Robert Owens as "the irreproachable one." Some in our own day have called Him the ultimate Superstar. But all those titles and descriptions fall short of identifying Jesus as He fully is—the Messiah, God in human flesh.

After the disciples reported what the multitudes were saying about Him, Jesus then asked, "**But who do you say that I am?**" The

Twelve knew that most of the people's views of Jesus were inadequate. Now they had to answer for themselves.

THE CONFESSION

And Simon Peter answered and said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." (16:16)

As usual (see, e.g., Matt. 15:15; 19:27; John 6:68), **Simon Peter** was the spokesman, "the director of the apostolic choir," as Chrysostom called him. Also as usual, his comments were brief, emphatic, and decisive: "**Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.**" **Christ** is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *Messiah*, God's predicted and long-awaited deliverer of Israel, the supreme "Anointed One," the coming High Priest, King, Prophet, and Savior. Without hesitation **Peter** declared Jesus to be the Messiah, whereas the multitudes of Jews believed Him to be only the Messiah's precursor.

On first meeting Jesus, Andrew had excitedly proclaimed Him to be the Messiah, and Nathaniel had called Him "the Son of God . . . the King of Israel" (John 1:41, 49). The disciples knew that John the Baptist had borne witness that Jesus "is the Son of God" (John 1:34), and the longer they stayed with Him, the more evidence they had of His divine nature, power, and authority.

Like their fellow Jews, however, they had been taught to expect a conquering and reigning Messiah who would deliver God's people from their enemies and establish forever His righteous kingdom on earth. And when Jesus refused to use His miraculous power for His own benefit or to oppose the Roman oppressors, the disciples wondered if they were right about Jesus' identity. His humility, meekness, and subservience were in total contrast to their preconceived views of the Messiah. That the Messiah would be ridiculed with impunity, not to mention persecuted and executed, was inconceivable. When Jesus spoke of His going away and coming back, Thomas doubtlessly echoed the consternation of all the

disciples when he said, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?” (John 14:5).

It was similar bewilderment that caused John the Baptist to question his earlier affirmation of Jesus’ messiahship. “When John in prison heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples, and said to Him, ‘Are you the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?’” (Matt. 11:1-3). Jesus’ miracles were clear evidence of His messiahship, but His failure to use those powers to overthrow Rome and establish His earthly kingdom brought Jesus’ identity into question even with the godly, Spirit-filled John.

Like John the Baptist, the Twelve fluctuated between moments of great faith and of grave doubt. They could proclaim with deep conviction, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68-69). They could also display remarkable lack of faith and discernment, even after witnessing hundreds of healings and dramatic demonstrations of supernatural power (see Matt. 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). They were sometimes strong in faith and sometimes weak. Jesus frequently spoke of their “little faith.”

Now, at last, the truth of Jesus’ divinity and messiahship was established in their minds beyond question. They would still experience times of weakness and confusion about what Jesus said and did, but they would no longer doubt who it was who said and did them. He was indeed **the Christ, the Son of the living God**. God’s own Spirit had now imbedded the truth indelibly in their hearts.

It took two and a half years for them to come to this place of confession, through the struggles and hatred of the Jewish religious leaders, the mounting fickleness and rejection of the people, and their own confusion about what the Messiah had come to do. But without question they now knew He was the fulfiller of their hopes, the source of their salvation, the desire of the nations.

On behalf of all the apostles, Peter not only confessed Jesus as the Messiah, **the Christ**, but as **the Son of the living God**. The Son of Man (v. 13) was also **the Son of . . . God**, the Creator of the universe and all that is in it. He was the true and real **God**, not a mythological figment such as Pan or a mortal “deity” such as caesar

—both of whom had shrines in Caesarea Philippi. The disciples' Lord was **Son of the living God**.

As evidenced by numerous things the Twelve later said and did, they did not at this time have a full comprehension of the Trinity or even of the full nature and work of **Christ**. But they knew Jesus was truly **the Christ** and that He was truly divine, **the Son of the living God**. **Son** reflects the idea of oneness in essence, because a son is one in nature with his father. So Jesus Christ was one in nature with God the Father (cf. John 5:17-18; 10:30-33).

THE RESULT

And Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, (16:17a)

Those who truly confess that Jesus is God, which is to confess Him as Lord and Savior (1 John 4:14-15), are divinely and eternally **blessed**. They are “blessed . . . with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ,” chosen “in Him before the foundation of the world . . . [to] be holy and blameless before Him,” and “in love [are] predestined . . . to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself” (Eph. 1:3-5). God pours out all His supernatural resources on those who come to Him through faith in His Son, because through Him they become God’s own children.

Emphasizing Peter’s human inadequacy, Jesus called him by his original family name, **Simon Barjona**, the second part of the name being an Aramaic term that meant son of Jonah (or John).

THE SOURCE

because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.” (16:17b)

The disciples were not finally convinced of Jesus' messiahship and divinity because of His teaching or His miracles, amazing as those were. Those things alone were not sufficient to convince the Twelve, just as they were not sufficient to convince the thousands of other people who heard the same truth and witnessed the same miracles but failed to accept and follow the one who taught and performed them. Man's human capabilities, here represented by the metonym **flesh and blood**, cannot bring understanding of the things of God (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14). The **Father** Himself must **reveal** them and bring understanding of His Son to human minds.

From the gospel accounts it seems clear that the **Father** disclosed the Son primarily through the Son Himself. There is no record or intimation that any divine revelation was given to the Twelve during Jesus' earthly ministry other than that given through Jesus Himself. As the light of Jesus' teaching and the significance of His miraculous power began to dawn on them, the Spirit opened their minds to see Him as the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Jesus had made many astounding claims about Himself. He declared that He Himself had come to fulfill the law and the prophets (Matt. 5:17) and that in the last days many people will address Him as Lord (7:22). He said, "I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever" (John 6:51), and, "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved" (10:9; cf. 14:6).

Jesus had also performed astounding miracles. He had turned ordinary water into the highest quality wine (John 2:6-11), healed multiplied thousands of every sort of disease (see, e.g., Matt. 4:24; 8:16; 9:35), and even quieted a raging storm with a word (Matt. 8:26).

Perhaps the greatest testimony to Jesus' messiahship, however, was His claim to be Lord of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:8), a claim that for a Jew of His day could only have been interpreted as presumption of deity. The Sabbath, which has the basic meaning of rest or cessation, was the center of Jewish life. Not only their week but their entire calendar of feasts and holy days was built on the concept of sabbath. The seventh day of the week (Ex. 20:11) and every other sabbath observance was a time of rest and worship. The book of Leviticus mentions nine sabbath-based festivals, which

included the weekly Sabbath (Lev. 23:3); the Passover (vv. 4-8); the feast of first fruits (vv. 9-14); Pentecost (vv. 15-22); the feast of trumpets (vv. 23-25); the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur (vv. 26-32); the feast of tabernacles (vv. 33-44); the sabbatical year (25:2-7); and the year of jubilee (vv. 8-55), when, every fiftieth year, all slaves were freed and all land restored to its original owners.

All of those sabbath observances were pictures of the final and eternal rest of the children of God, the time when Messiah would come to earth to set His people free and establish His divine kingdom. Every time a Jew celebrated a sabbath he was reminded that some day he and all his fellow Jews would be released from all bondage—whether the bondage of political oppression, the bondage of continual sacrifices, or the bondage of labor to make a living. The entire sabbath system pointed to the true, perfect, and eternal rest that Messiah would bring to His people.

For Jesus to claim that He fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1-2, as He did in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:18-21), was unmistakably to claim messiahship. For Him to present Himself as the source of rest (Matt. 11:28) was to present Himself as the source of holiness, and to claim lordship over the Sabbath (Matt. 12:8) was to claim lordship over everything.

Because Jesus is Himself God's perfect sabbath rest and the source of true holiness, believers have no more reason to observe the seventh day of the week or any other special day. "For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said. . . . There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His" (Heb. 4:3, 9-10). "Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day," Paul wrote. Such things "are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ" (Col. 2:16-17).

The command to keep the Sabbath day is the only one of the Ten Commandments that the New Testament does not require of Christians. By His grace, Jesus Christ gives every believer in Him a jubilee liberation that is perfect, final, and eternal. A Christian therefore does not violate the Sabbath when he works on the Lord's

Day but when he persists in self-righteous works in the presumptuous hope of adding to what the Savior has already accomplished.

“All things have been handed over to Me by My Father,” Jesus had explained on an earlier occasion; “and no one knows the Son, except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him” (Matt. 11:27).

As with the disciples, when people today confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and fellowship with Him through His Word, the Spirit opens their minds and hearts to more and more of His truth and power. “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ,” Paul declared (Rom. 10:17). As we continue to gaze into His glory we are transformed into His image (see Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; Col. 3:10).

4

The Church That Christ Builds (16:18-20)

“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ. (16:18-20)

Throughout history, philosophers have speculated on the reason for man’s existence, the purpose and meaning of human life. Many ancient Greeks believed that life is cyclical, continually repeating itself in endless circles, going nowhere with no purpose. To many modern thinkers, life is just as pointless and futile. In his

inaugural address as president of Cambridge University, Dr. G. N. Clark said, "There is no secret and no plan in history to be discovered." The French novelist and critic André Maurois wrote, "The universe is indifferent. Who created it? Why are we here on this puny mud heap spinning in infinite space? I have not the slightest idea, and I am quite convinced that no one has." Jean-Paul Sartre, the famous existentialist philosopher, maintained that man exists in a watertight compartment as an utterly isolated individual in the midst of a purposeless universe.

The French molecular biologist Jacques Monod declared that man's existence is due to the chance collision between minuscule particles of nucleic acid and proteins in a vast "prebiotic soup." According to such cynical views, man is alone in the vast universe, out of which he accidentally emerged by chance. Francis Schaeffer observed that, according to such thinking, "man is the product of the impersonal plus time plus chance." Although many of its advocates would deny it, humanistic, evolutionary philosophy must inevitably conclude that there is no real difference between a man and a tree, and that therefore killing a man is no different than chopping down a tree.

In illustration of this point one needs merely to read the ideas of Peter Singer, present patriarch of the equal rights for animals movement, who believes that farmers who raise animals for food should be jailed. He writes: "We should reject the doctrine that places the lives of members of our own species [humans] above the lives of members of other species [animals]. Some members of other species are persons; some members of our own species are not. . . . Killing say a chimpanzee is worse than the killing of a gravely defective human who is not a person." Singer identifies nonpersons as the retarded and handicapped (*Practical Ethics* [Cambridge: Cambridge U., 1979], pp. 97, 73).

In light of such shallow, hopeless, and increasingly popular views of mankind, it is no wonder that many young people demand total license in their life-styles and willingly become entrapped in the seductive webs of drugs, sexual promiscuity, perversion, meaningless violence, and lawlessness. If men are only animals and there is no

meaning or purpose to life beyond mere existing, then nothing is wrong and everything is permissible.

When men see no ultimate and eternal reason for their existence and no accountability to God, they see no reason for anything else, including law, morality, or religion. Their only motive for self-restraint is fear of criticism by their peers or of being caught and punished by civil authorities. Their ultimate standard is hedonism, the desire to get everything out of life you can, while you can and in whatever way you can.

The Bible, however, makes clear that there *is* divine and eternal value and meaning to human life and that God revealed His high purpose to men. Despite men's spiritual darkness caused by the Fall, "that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made" (Rom. 1:19-20). In the same letter Paul declares that "from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever" (11:36).

The universe was created by God, and man was made in God's image in order to glorify Himself. All things were made *by* Him and *for* Him, Paul declared (Col. 1:16). That is the reason for human existence. And if the ultimate purpose of mankind is to glorify God, it should not seem strange that God is collecting for Himself a redeemed assembly of people who will forever be the praise of His glory (see Eph. 1:6; 3:21). That is the theme of redemptive history. Because He is a worthy God and deserving of glory, the Lord has made men who are able to give Him glory and who will reflect eternally the majesty and splendor of His glorious being. From out of the rebels who now populate the world, God is calling a redeemed church that will forever be privileged to render Him glory (see Rev. 4:6-11; 5:9-14). To be a part of that is to fulfill man's reason for existence.

As both the Maker and Redeemer of mankind, Jesus Christ is the supreme and sovereign architect of history. All the other notables of history, whether righteous and godly or wicked and rebellious, are no more than players in the great drama that Christ has written and now directs. As someone has said, history is "His story."

The background of Jesus' teaching in the present passage, however, was not cynical Greek or Roman philosophy but the God-given Jewish religion that had been humanly perverted. Jesus was speaking to those who from their earliest years had been taught to anticipate the coming of the Lord's Anointed—the Messiah, the Christ. But their expectations, though partly scriptural, were distorted by the traditional interpretations of the rabbis and scribes over the previous several centuries. They knew the Messiah would bring righteousness and truth, but they also believed that He would militarily conquer and destroy their oppressors and usher in a kingdom of everlasting peace and prosperity for God's chosen people.

As the disciples walked with Jesus through the outskirts of Caesarea Philippi (see Matt. 16:13), they knew they were in a type of self-imposed exile. The Jewish leaders were becoming more and more adamant in their opposition to Jesus and the multitudes were becoming more and more skeptical and disillusioned.

The disciples shared much of that disillusionment, because they, too, wondered why, if Jesus were truly the Messiah, He refused to overthrow Rome and establish His own earthly kingdom. Despite Jesus' obvious supernatural powers and His claims of divine authority, He was less influential and respected among the people now than when He first began His ministry. And instead of being the conquering King's vice-regents, the Twelve were still a nondescript band of nobodies who were beginning to share Jesus' rejection.

A short while later, Jesus would paint an even darker picture for them as He "began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed" (v. 21). That the Messiah should be rejected by His own people was unbelievable enough; that He should be executed by them, or by anyone else, was incomprehensible. The bad news became still worse when Jesus declared that every true disciple of His must "deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (v. 24).

But before revealing those heartrending truths, He assured the Twelve that His program was on schedule, that He was indeed in control, and that they had every reason to continue their unreserved trust in Him. What they saw on the surface did not reflect the reality

of what God was doing. Just as the Lord sought to bolster the confidence of His people in Egypt while He was preparing to deliver them, and just as He has continued to bolster the confidence of believers in every age while they are enduring trials and hardships on His behalf, He now sought to convince the Twelve that they had no reason to doubt or despair. The Lord here gives a message of great hope to the maligned, beleaguered, rejected, persecuted, and ignoble people of God in every age. In the end there is glorious purpose and victory, because they belong to the indomitable and eternal church that Jesus Christ Himself is building.

In Matthew 16:18-20 Jesus points up at least seven features and characteristics of the church that He builds. He speaks of its foundation, its certainty, its intimacy, its identity and continuity, its invincibility, its authority, and its spirituality.

First, Jesus set forth the foundation of the Church: **And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church.**

For more than fifteen hundred years the Roman Catholic church has maintained that this passage teaches the church was built on the person of **Peter**, who became the first pope and bishop of Rome and from whom the Catholic papacy has since descended. Because of this supposed divinely ordained apostolic succession, the pope is considered to be the supreme and authoritative representative of Christ on earth. When a pope speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, in his official capacity as head of the church, he is said to speak with divine authority equal to that of God in Scripture.

Such an interpretation, however, is presumptuous and unbiblical, because the rest of the New Testament makes abundantly clear that Christ alone is the foundation and only head of His church.

Peter is from *petros*, a masculine form of the Greek word for small stone, whereas **rock** is from *petra*, a different form of the same basic word, referring to a rocky mountain or peak. Perhaps the most popular interpretation is therefore that Jesus was comparing **Peter**, a small stone, to the great mountainous **rock** on which He would build His church. The antecedent of **rock** is taken to be Peter's divinely inspired confession of Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (vv. 16-17).

That interpretation is faithful to the Greek text and has much to commend it, but it seems more likely that, in light of other New Testament passages, that was not Jesus' point. In his letter to Ephesus Paul says that God's household is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone" (Eph. 2:20). In all four gospel accounts Peter is clearly the leading apostle, and he remains so through Acts 10. He was most often the Twelve's spokesman during Jesus' earthly ministry (see, e.g., Matt. 15:15; 19:27; John 6:68), and he was the chief preacher, leader, and worker of miracles in the early years of the church (see, e.g., Acts 1:15-22; 2:14-40; 3:4-6, 12-26; 5:3-10, 15, 29).

It therefore seems that in the present passage Jesus addressed Peter as representative of the Twelve. In light of that interpretation, the use of the two different forms of the Greek for **rock** would be explained by the masculine *petros* being used of Peter as an individual man and *petra* being used of him as the representative of the larger group.

It was not on the apostles themselves, much less on Peter as an individual, that Christ built His church, but on the apostles as His uniquely appointed, endowed, and inspired teachers of the gospel. The early church did not give homage to the apostles as persons, or to their office or titles, but to their doctrine, "continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42). When the Jews outside the Temple were astonished at the healing of the crippled man, Peter quickly warned them not to credit him with the miracle, saying, "Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk?" (Acts 3:12). Although it was he alone who commanded the man to walk (v. 6), Peter replied to the crowd in John's behalf as well as his own.

Because they participated with the apostles in proclaiming the authoritative gospel of Jesus Christ, the prophets of the early church were also part of the church's foundation (Eph. 2:20). In fact, as Martin Luther observed, "All who agree with the confession of Peter [in Matt. 16:16] are Peters themselves setting a sure foundation." The Lord is still building His church with "living stones, . . . built up as a

spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5).

Therefore, whether one interprets Matthew 16:18 as referring to Peter as a small stone placed on the mountainous stone of his confession of Christ or as referring to his being one with the rest of the Twelve in his confession, the basic truth is the same: The foundation of the church is the revelation of God given through His apostles, and the Lord of the church is the cornerstone of that foundation. Because it is His Word that the apostles taught and that the faithful church has always taught, Jesus Christ Himself is the true foundation, the living Word to whom the written Word bears witness (John 5:39). And “No man,” Paul says—not even an apostle—“can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11). The Lord builds the church on the truth of Himself, and because His people are inseparable from Him they are inseparable from His truth. And because the apostles were endowed with His truth in a unique way, by their preaching of that truth they were the foundation of His church in a unique way.

That the Lord did not establish His church on the supremacy of Peter and his supposed papal successors was made clear a short while after Peter’s great confession. When the disciples asked Jesus who was greatest in the kingdom of heaven, He replied by placing a small child before them and saying, “Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:1-4). Had the Twelve understood Jesus’ teaching about the **rock** and the keys of the kingdom (Matt. 16:18-19) as referring exclusively to Peter, they would hardly have asked who was greatest in the kingdom. Or, had they forgotten or misunderstood Jesus’ previous teaching, He would have answered by naming Peter as the greatest and probably would also have chided them for not remembering or believing what He had already taught (cf. Matt. 14:31; 26:24; John 14:9).

A short while after that, the mother of James and John asked Jesus to give her sons the chief places of honor in His kingdom, one on His left and the other on His right (Matt. 20:20-21). We learn from Mark 10:35-37 that James and John were themselves directly involved in the request, one they would never have made had they understood Peter to have been given primacy as Christ’s successor.

Or, as with the previous incident, had James and John misunderstood His teaching about the foundation **rock** of the church and the keys of the kingdom, Jesus would have taken the occasion to restate and underscore Peter's supremacy.

Although Peter recognized himself as an apostle (see, e.g., 1 Pet. 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1), he never claimed a superior title, rank, or privilege over the other apostles. He even referred to himself as a "fellow elder" (1 Pet. 5:1) and as "a bond-servant" of Christ (2 Pet. 1:1). Far from claiming honor and homage for himself, he soberly warns his fellow elders to guard against lording it over those under their pastoral care (1 Pet. 5:3). The only glory he claimed for himself was that which is shared by all believers and which is yet "to be revealed, . . . when the Chief Shepherd appears" (vv. 1, 4).

Second, Jesus pointed up the certainty of the church, declaring, "**I will build My church.**" As Peter had just confessed, Jesus is the Son of God; and God cannot lie or be mistaken. Therefore, because Jesus said, "**I will build My church,**" it will be built. It is the divine promise of the divine Savior.

In using the future tense, Jesus was not saying, as some contend, that He had not built His church in the past. The idea is that He would continue to build His church just as He had always done. As will be discussed below, **church** is used here in a general, nontechnical sense and does not indicate the distinct body of believers that first came into existence at Pentecost.

Jesus was not emphasizing the time of His building but its certainty. No matter how liberal, fanatical, ritualistic, apathetic, or apostate its outward adherents may be, and no matter how decadent the rest of the world may become, Christ **will build His church**. Therefore, no matter how oppressive and hopeless their outward circumstances may appear from a human perspective, God's people belong to a cause that cannot fail.

Several years ago a man traveled across the United States interviewing pastors in a number of large evangelical churches. He concluded that wherever there is great growth there is a corresponding great desire on the part of the church leadership to build the church. Perhaps the man misinterpreted some of the responses given to him, or perhaps the pastors did not express their

objectives in the best of terms. In any case, however, no leader in Christ's church should have the desire to build it himself. Christ declared that He alone builds the church, and no matter how well intentioned he may be, anyone else who attempts to build it is competing with, not serving, the Lord.

I once visited a church at which the pastor pointed to a certain man and said, "He is one of my converts." "That's wonderful," I replied. "When did he come to the Lord?" "I didn't say he was the Lord's convert," the pastor explained. "I said he was one of mine."

By human reason, persuasiveness, and diligence it is possible to win converts to an organization, a cause, a personality, and to many other things. But it is totally impossible to win a convert to the spiritual church of Jesus Christ apart from the sovereign God's own Word and Spirit. Human effort can produce only human results. God alone can produce divine results.

When he studies and is obedient to the Word, and when he walks in the Spirit and produces the fruit of the Spirit, a believer can be sure he is living where Christ is building His **church**. It is not faithful believers who build Christ's church, but Christ who builds His church through faithful believers. Wherever His people are committed to His kingdom and His righteousness the Lord builds His church. If believers in one place become cold or disobedient, Christ does not stop building but simply starts work somewhere else. His true church is always "under construction."

Jesus said, "All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me" (John 6:37). At Pentecost, Peter declared that from among both Jews and Gentiles, Christ builds into His church "as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself" (Acts 2:39). It was not the apostles but the Lord Himself who "was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (v. 47; cf. 11:24). When the Gentiles of Pisidian Antioch heard the preaching of Paul and Barnabas, "they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region" (Acts 13:48-49). That preaching, true and faithful as it was, was not capable by itself of winning converts to Christ. Only those whom He had sovereignly

chosen for salvation and who believed the truth of His Word were saved.

The New Testament is replete with commands and guidelines for believers' attitudes and conduct. It gives direction for selecting godly men and women to serve in the church. It gives abundant instruction for righteous living, for prayer, and for acceptable worship. Many of the Lord's blessings are contingent on His people's obedience and trust. But the most sincere and diligent efforts to fulfill those commands and standards are useless apart from Christ's own divine provision and control. He desires and He uses the faithful work of those who belong to Him; but only He builds His church, the church that He loves and for whom He "gave Himself up, . . . that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:25-27). Men are able to build human, earthly, physical organizations, but they cannot build the eternal, spiritual church.

Third, Jesus alluded to the intimacy of the fellowship of believers. "It is **My church**," He said. As Architect, Builder, Owner, and Lord of His **church**, Jesus Christ assures His followers that they are His personal possession and eternally have His divine love and care. They are His Body, "purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28), and are one with Him in a marvelous, holy intimacy. "The one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him" (1 Cor. 6:17). Christ is not ashamed to call them "brethren" (Heb. 2:11) and "God is not ashamed to be called their God" (Heb. 11:16). That is why when men attack God's people they attack God Himself. When Jesus confronted Paul (then known as Saul) on the Damascus road, He asked, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:4). By persecuting Christians (see 8:3; 9:1-2) Saul had been persecuting Christ.

God has always identified Himself with His people and jealously guarded them as His own. He several times referred to His chosen people Israel as the apple, or pupil, of His eye. Through the prophet Zechariah He declared to them, "He who touches you, touches the apple of His eye" (Zech. 2:8; cf. Deut. 32:10; Ps. 17:8;

Prov. 7:2). The front part of the eye, the cornea, is the most sensitive exposed part of the human body. God was therefore saying that to harm Israel was to poke a finger in His own eye. To harm God's people is to harm God Himself, and to cause them pain is to cause Him pain.

Fourth, Jesus emphasized the identity and continuity of His people. They are His **church**. The word *ekklēsia* (**church**) literally means "the called out ones" and was used as a general and nontechnical term for any officially assembled group of people. It was often used of civic gatherings such as town meetings, where important announcements were made and community issues were debated. That is the sense in which Stephen used *ekklēsia* in Acts 7:38 to refer to "the congregation" of Israel called out by Moses in the wilderness (cf. Ex. 19:17). Luke used it of a riotous mob ("assembly") incited by the Ephesian silversmiths against Paul (Acts 19:32, 41).

Matthew 16:18 contains the first use of *ekklēsia* in the New Testament, and Jesus here gives it no qualifying explanation. Therefore the apostles could not have understood it in any way but its most common and general sense. The epistles use the term in a more distinct and specialized way and give instructions for its proper functioning and for its leadership. But at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus' use of *ekklēsia* could only have carried the idea of "assembly," "community," or "congregation." If He spoke in Aramaic, as is probable, He would have used the term *qāhāl* (taken directly from the Hebrew), which means an invited gathering, and was commonly used of synagogue meetings. In fact, the word *synagogue* itself originally referred to any gathering or congregation of people. Only during the Babylonian exile did Jews begin using it to denote their formal and organized place of religious activity and worship. And only after the Day of Pentecost did the term *ekklēsia* take on a new and technical significance in reference to the distinct redeemed community built on the work of Christ by the Holy Spirit's coming.

In describing the inhabitants of heaven, the writer of Hebrews speaks of "the general assembly and church of the first-born" (Heb. 12:23), referring to the redeemed saints of all ages. That seems to be the sense in which Christ uses **church** in Matthew 16:18, as a

synonym for citizens of His eternal kingdom, to which He refers in the following verse. The Lord does not build His kingdom apart from His church or His church apart from His kingdom.

Fifth, Jesus spoke of the invincibility of the church, which **the gates of Hades shall not overpower**.

The gates of Hades has often been interpreted as representing the evil forces of Satan attacking the church of Jesus Christ. But **gates** are not instruments of warfare. Their purpose is not to conquer but to protect those behind them from being conquered, or, in the case of a prison, to keep them from escaping. And **Hades**, which corresponds to the Hebrew *sheol*, refers here to the abode of the dead, not to eternal hell.

When the terms **gates** and **Hades** are properly understood, it becomes clear that Jesus was declaring that death has no power to hold God's redeemed people captive. Its **gates** are not strong enough to **overpower** (*katischū*, to have mastery over) and keep imprisoned the church of God, whose Lord has conquered sin and death on her behalf (Rom. 8:2; cf. Acts 2:24). Because "death no longer is master over Him" (Rom. 6:9), it is no longer master over those who belong to Him. "Because I live," Jesus said, "you shall live also" (John 14:19). Satan now has the power of death, and he continually uses that power in his futile attempt to destroy Christ's church. But Christ's ultimate victory over Satan's power of death is so certain that the writer of Hebrews speaks of it in the past tense: "Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14; cf. Rev. 1:18).

It is that great truth of which Peter spoke at Pentecost, declaring that "God raised [Christ] up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power" (Acts 2:24). It is the truth about which Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers who were wavering in their belief in the resurrection. He declared, "Death is swallowed up in victory," and then asked, "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:54-57).

In light of what He was about to teach them concerning His own death and resurrection and their own willingness to deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow Him (Matt. 16:21-24), Jesus now assured the Twelve, and all believers who would ever come to Him, that **the gates of Hades**, the chains of death itself, could never permanently **overpower** them and hold them captive.

Sixth, Jesus spoke about the authority of the church. **“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven,”** He said; **“and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”**

The Lord was still addressing Peter as representative of the Twelve, telling him that **whatever you shall bind**, that is, forbid, **on earth shall be bound in heaven** and that **whatever you shall loose**, that is, permit, **on earth shall be loosed in heaven**. He told Peter and the Twelve, and by extension all other believers, that they had the astounding authority to declare what is divinely forbidden or permitted **on earth!**

Shortly after His resurrection Jesus told the disciples, “If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained” (John 20:23). In giving instruction for church discipline to all His people, Jesus said that, if a sinning believer refuses to turn from his sin after being counselled privately and even after being rebuked by the entire congregation, the church not only is permitted but obligated to treat the unrepentant member “as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer” (Matt. 18:15-17). He then said to the church as a whole what He earlier had said to Peter and to the other apostles: “Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (v. 18). In other words, a duly constituted body of believers has the right to tell an unrepentant brother that he is out of line with God’s Word and has no right to fellowship with God’s people.

Christians have such authority because they have the truth of God’s authoritative Word by which to judge. The source of the church’s authority is not in itself, anymore than the source of the apostles’ authority was in themselves or even in their office, exalted as it was. Christians can authoritatively declare what is acceptable to

God or forbidden by Him because they have His Word. Christians do not *determine* what is right or wrong, forgiven or unforgiven. Rather, on the basis of God's own Word, they recognize and proclaim what God has already determined to be right or wrong, forgiven or unforgiven. When they judge on the basis of God's Word, they can be certain their judgment corresponds with the judgment of **heaven**.

If a person declares himself to be an atheist, or to be anything other than a believer in and lover of the Lord Jesus Christ, Christians can say to that person with absolute certainty, "You are under God's judgment and condemned to hell," because that is what Scripture teaches. If, on the other hand, a person testifies that he has trusted Christ as his saving Lord, Christians can say to him with equal certainty, "If what you say is true, then your sins are forgiven, you are a child of God, and your eternal destiny is heaven." The authority of the church lies in the fact that it has heaven's word on everything "pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence" (2 Pet. 1:3). When believers are in agreement with God's Word, God is in agreement with them. Believers can declare a person's spiritual state with divinely granted authority by comparing that person to the Word of God.

Finally, Jesus reminds the disciples that His church is a *spiritual* reality, as **He warned them that they should tell no one that He was the Christ**. Most Jews, including the disciples, expected the Messiah to come as a conquering King, as a military and political leader to set them free from Rome, not as a Savior to set them free from sin. The people's expectations were so warped and selfishly misguided that to **tell** them that Jesus **was the Christ** would be to cast pearls before swine (see Matt. 7:6).

Jesus declared to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm" (John 18:36). When Christians mix their faith with politics and various humanitarian causes, they run the risk of losing their spiritual focus and their spiritual power. Although human government is divinely ordained by God (Rom. 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; 1

Pet. 2:13), the state is no more to be an instrument of the church's program than the church is to be an instrument of the state's.

Like the kingdom of God, the church is "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God" (Rom. 14:17-18).

This great teaching of our Lord only introduces the subject of the church, which from Acts on dominates the rest of the New Testament.

5

Offending Christ

(16:21-23)

From that time Jesus Christ began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You.” But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s. (16:21-23)

Throughout its pages the Bible contrasts God’s view of things with man’s. Perhaps the strongest and best-known declaration of that contrast is found in Isaiah: “‘My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts’” (Isa. 55:8-9). “There is a

way which seems right to a man,” Solomon tells us, “but its end is the way of death” (Prov. 14:12). The psalmist wrote, “How great are Thy works, O Lord! Thy thoughts are very deep. A senseless man has no knowledge; nor does a stupid man understand this” (Ps. 92:5-6).

When the Lord refused David the privilege of building the Temple because he was a military man, a man of blood, He nevertheless promised David an eternal heritage of the throne of Israel, on which the Messiah Himself would some day sit and reign. In awe and deep gratitude David exclaimed, “Thou art great, O Lord God; for there is none like Thee, and there is no God besides Thee. . . . Thou art God, and Thy words are truth” (2 Sam. 7:22, 28).

When Peter rebuked Jesus for declaring that He must be crucified in Jerusalem by the Jewish leaders there, he either forgot or ignored that great truth. Peter had just proclaimed Jesus as being “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16); yet when Jesus made a statement that did not fit Peter’s ideas about the Messiah, the apostle held to his way above the Lord’s and found himself contradicting the Son of God he had just confessed.

By this time Peter had been a believer for some while, so that the lessons drawn from this passage are therefore primarily for believers. Not even Christians can know and understand God’s ways except through a proper understanding of and submission to His Word and the illumination of His Spirit. When believers insist on their own way above God’s, then, like Peter, they become an offense and a stumbling block.

It is likely that both in his confession and his rebuke of Christ, Peter also reflected the perspective of the other eleven. They shared Peter’s belief that Jesus was the divine Messiah and they likely shared his confidence that the Messiah could hardly be rejected by His own people, much less put to death by them. Jesus had just assured them that He Himself was building His church, which not even death could overcome, and that through the divine Scripture they had heavenly authority to declare what is acceptable and not acceptable to Him (vv. 18-19). Jesus then “warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ” (v. 20), not only because the Jewish people and their leaders had false notions about the Messiah but because the Twelve still shared many of those false

notions. The idea of the Messiah suffering on a cross was anathema to Jews and a massive stumbling block to their faith in Jesus (1 Cor. 1:23).

From that time seems to be a transition phrase Matthew used to indicate a significant change in Jesus' ministry. He used the same phrase in 4:17 to mark the beginning of the Lord's public ministry to Israel. He now uses it to mark the beginning of His private ministry to the Twelve. The first phase was primarily public, with some occasional private instruction. The second was primarily private, with some occasional public instruction.

THE PLAN OF GOD

Jesus Christ began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. (16:21)

At this time **Jesus Christ began to show His disciples** some deeper and more difficult truths about His divine plan and work. It was not that He had said nothing previously about His rejection and crucifixion. In veiled ways He had spoken of His impending death, saying that "the Son of Man [would] be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40) and had declared to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). He would continue to speak of His burial (John 12:7) and to explain that the Son of Man would rise from the dead after He had suffered at the hands of His enemies (see, e.g., 17:9, 12, 22-23).

The **must** of which Jesus spoke was not that of human devotion to a great ideal but a divine imperative and absolute necessity. God had no backup or alternate plan. This **must** came thundering out of eternity. It was the essential, unalterable plan of God set in motion before the foundation of the world.

Four things made that plan necessary. First was human sin, for which the Messiah had to give His life as the penalty in man's stead, as "a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). Second was the divine requirement that, "without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb. 9:22). Third was the divine decree of God's sovereign foreknowledge (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:4-5), and fourth was the prophetic promise that the Messiah must die (see Pss. 16; 22; Isa. 53). God's plan is not subject to change. It can only be believed or rejected, never altered.

In verse 21 Jesus mentions four stages or phases of that divine plan which He had come to fulfill, four things **that He must** do before it would be completed.

The first **must** was for Him to **go to Jerusalem**. Had Jesus chosen any road but the one to Jerusalem, He could not have become the Savior of mankind, no matter how many more people He healed or how much more truth He taught. He had to go to the city of sacrifices and become the Passover Lamb, offering Himself "once for all" (Heb. 7:27).

When Jesus spoke of going to **Jerusalem**, He was in Caesarea Philippi, as far from Jerusalem as He could be and still remain in Palestine. After a brief stay in that remote northern city, He and the disciples would move down again through Galilee and Samaria to **Jerusalem**, where the Twelve began to fear that death by stoning at the hands of the hostile Jewish leaders awaited Jesus and probably them as well (John 11:16). At that point the disciples saw such a possibility not as the fulfilling of the plan of God but as the hindrance or even destruction of it.

Even when He was in Galilee, it was the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem who gave Jesus the most opposition (see Matt. 15:1-2). The hypocritical, self-righteous Judaism that flourished in Jerusalem could not stand Jesus, because He exposed their wickedness and ungodliness and rejected their cherished, man-made traditions (see vv. 3-9). But the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem would not have to seek Him out or hunt Him down like a fugitive. He would go there entirely of His own volition and in His own time. "I lay down My life that I may take it again," He declared. "No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it

down, and I have authority to take it up again” (John 10:17-18). He told Pilate, “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11).

The name **Jerusalem** means “foundation of peace,” although at few times in its long history has that description been fitting. The city is located 33 miles east of the Mediterranean Sea and 14 miles west of the Dead Sea, elevated on a plateau some 2,500 feet above sea level. When first mentioned in Scripture it was known as Salem, whose king was Melchizedek, “a priest of God Most High” (Gen. 14:18) and a picture of Christ, who was “designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 5:10). It was on Mount Moriah, which was near Salem, that Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice to the Lord (Gen. 22:2). At the time David was made king, Jerusalem was in the hands of the Jebusites, and one of the first acts of the new monarch was to conquer the city and name it after himself (2 Sam. 5:5-9). Three months later he brought the Ark of the Covenant there and Jerusalem became the city where the Lord Himself symbolically dwelled. It was in Jerusalem that David’s son, Solomon, built the Temple, and the city therefore became the central place for Jewish worship.

Jerusalem was alternately lost and recaptured by the Jews, but it never lost its identity in their minds and hearts as the city of God. When they were led into captivity to Babylon, the psalmist cried, “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget her skill. May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy” (Ps. 137:5-6).

But when Jesus came to earth, **Jerusalem** was far from living up to its title of the city of God. During the first Passover of His ministry, Jesus took a whip and cleansed the Temple of the defiling money changers and merchants of sacrificial animals (John 2:13-16). During the next Passover, He violated the revered Sabbath traditions that the rabbis had devised, and the Jewish leaders tried to kill Him for it (5:16-18). During the third Passover, He deliberately stayed away because of the hatred of Him there. Later, when He attended the Feast of Booths, the Jewish leaders again tried to arrest Him and have Him put to death (7:1-19, 44-45; cf. 8:59).

Because of its rejection of Jesus, **Jerusalem** was given a new and pagan name, “the great city which mystically is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified” (Rev. 11:8). In A.D. 70 God used the Roman army to destroy the city, which would not again be under Jewish control until 1,900 years later, when the modern state of Israel came into being in 1948. One day the city will deserve the name Jerusalem, because “it will come about in that day that living waters will flow out of Jerusalem, . . . [it] will rise and remain on its site from Benjamin’s Gate as far as the place of the First Gate to the Corner Gate, and from the Tower of Hananel to the king’s wine presses. And people will live in it, and there will be no more curse, for Jerusalem will dwell in security” (Zech. 14:8, 10-11).

It was in the divine plan that Messiah should die in **Jerusalem**, the divinely ordained place of sacrifice, and therefore, Jesus said, “I must journey on today and tomorrow and the next day; for it cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem” (Luke 13:33).

The second **must** in God’s great plan was that His Son, the Messiah, would **suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes**. Those three groups of religious leaders comprised the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high council, whose headquarters was in Jerusalem. **The elders** were primarily the leaders of the various tribes scattered throughout Israel. The **chief priests** were largely Sadducees, and the **scribes** were largely Pharisees. Because of their unbelief and rejection, as well as their political power, Jesus would **suffer many things** at the hands of those men.

The third **must** in God’s plan was that Jesus **be killed**. The Greek word behind **killed** was not used of legal executions, and in this context the meaning is that of murder. Jesus was not legally tried or proved guilty of any wrongdoing but was sentenced to death on the false and vindictive charges of the Jewish leaders, who were determined to be rid of Him at any cost. It was in God’s plan that at the hand of man He was to be murdered (Acts 2:22-23).

The fourth and last **must** was that Jesus would **be raised up on the third day**. But because of their great distress at hearing the first three imperatives, it is likely the disciples failed to hear this one at all. Yet it was this truth that made the others bearable. This was the

truth of victory that would conquer those seeming defeats. This was the **must** of triumph and glory.

Peter's reply (v. 22) makes clear that he and his fellow disciples had not really heard Jesus' words about His being **raised up on the third day**, any more than they had really heard Him say that "the gates of Hades," that is, death, would not overcome His church (v. 18). They had seen Him raise the daughter of Jairus and the son of the widow of Nain. But if He Himself were to die, they probably reasoned, who would raise Him? How could a dead Messiah deliver and rule His people?

THE PRESUMPTION OF PETER

And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You." (16:22)

Because what Jesus had just said was so utterly contrary to what he himself strongly believed, **Peter** brashly **took Him aside and began to rebuke Him**.

Yet it was more than brashness that caused Peter to do such a thing. What he did also gave testimony to Jesus' humanness. Had He been a mystical and demanding Lord of the kind the Jews expected the Messiah to be, Peter would never have dared address Him as he did here and on many other occasions. Despite Peter's arrogant presumption, it is comforting to realize that Jesus was his close friend as well as his Lord. Peter showed no fear in speaking this rebuke to Jesus, demonstrating the reality of their intimate relationship as men.

Christians who are quick to rebuke Peter for such incredible presumption should be honest in recognizing that they, too, have in effect contradicted the Lord at times. The believer who complains about his sufferings and trials and asks, "Why me, Lord?" shares in Peter's presumption. It is easy to accept God's blessings, but not His testings. It is easy to accept prosperity and health as part of God's plan for us, but not hardship and sickness. When joy comes to us, that

seems to be our proper lot as a child of God, but when sorrow comes we are inclined to doubt our heavenly Father's wisdom and love.

Rebuke translates the same word (*epitimaō*) Matthew used of Jesus' warning the disciples to tell no one He was the Christ (v. 20). The word carried the idea of authoritative judgment, normally used by an official or leader against someone under his jurisdiction. The present infinitive form suggests that Peter made the rebuke repeatedly.

Perhaps Peter's presumption came out of the officiousness that sometimes comes with age, or out of his being the acknowledged leader of the apostles. It was to him that Jesus had just declared the Father had given special revelation (v. 17), and Peter may now have considered himself a spokesman for God. Or perhaps the response was simply typical of Peter's self-confident personality. Certainly his deep love for and dependence on the Savior made the thought of His death a fearful prospect, so that both love and fear entered into Peter's response. In any case, his sinful pride led him to place his own understanding above Christ's.

God forbid it translates a Hebrew colloquialism that literally meant, "gracious to you" or "merciful to you" and was understood to mean something such as "God be gracious to you" or "May God in His mercy spare you this." In the context of Peter's rebuke, the phrase is here translated in its most negative connotation, **God forbid it**. Consequently, Peter's addressing Jesus as **Lord** rings hollow, because Peter was placing his own human will above the divine will of Christ.

To reinforce his rebuke, Peter said, "**This shall never happen to You,**" completely contradicting what Jesus had just declared was necessary. Because he could not understand or accept the idea of a humiliated, abused, and crucified Messiah, Peter rejected God's plan for redemption. The wisdom of the best of men is typically antagonistic to the wisdom of God.

THE PROTEST OF CHRIST

But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; (16:23a)

It would be hard to imagine anything that would have shocked Peter more than those words of Jesus. On the surface, Peter’s intention not only seems honorable but loving and compassionate. He did not want his Lord and Friend to die. He could not even bear the idea of Jesus suffering. Even Peter’s more selfish motives are understandable. For several years he and the rest of the Twelve had become completely dependent on Jesus, not only for teaching and guidance but for food, tax money, and virtually everything else. Without Him, they would be a ship with no rudder.

As one commentator has observed, Peter “could hardly have understood that by his attempt to dissuade Jesus from the cross he was placing arrows in the bow of Satan to be shot at his beloved Savior.”

But when Peter rebuked Him for even considering the idea of going to His death, the Lord must have looked the disciple straight in the eye as **He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan.”** It was a stinging, devastating response that must have shaken Peter to the core of his being. Before Peter had a chance to finish his objections, Jesus abruptly cut him off and accused him of being the mouthpiece for His adversary, **Satan.**

Jesus had spoken almost the same words to Satan himself after the temptations in the wilderness (Matt. 4:10). And although Satan left, we learn from Luke’s parallel account that “he departed from Him until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13). He continued to tempt Jesus throughout His ministry in every way he could. Now he put into Peter’s mind the same idea He had tried to put into Jesus’: “God’s plan is too difficult and demanding. Give Your allegiance to me and your life will be immeasurably better. My way is superior to God’s.”

That is basically what Peter was saying to Jesus: “My way is better than Yours and the Father’s.” The same apostle who had just confessed Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God (v. 16) now

contradicted Him. The one whom the Father had just inspired to give that confession (v. 17) was now “inspired” by Satan.

If such a thing could happen to Peter, it can happen to any believer. The same Christian who extols the plan of God can be lured into extolling the plan of Satan. When he follows his own wisdom instead of the Spirit’s, the same one who has strongly taken the side of God can find himself unwittingly taking the side of Satan.

Jesus knew that **Satan** had as surely put the rebuke in Peter’s mind as the Father had put the confession there. Whether by obsession, oppression, or simply by supernatural influence, Satan managed to prompt Peter to oppose Christ’s way and try to lure Jesus into disobeying God’s will. The text does not explain the means of the temptation, only its source. And because he succumbed, Peter found himself opposing the plan of God in the same way the devil had opposed it in the wilderness. Before he realized what he was doing, he found himself speaking for Satan rather than for God. In trying to defend Christ on the basis of his own understanding, he found himself standing against Christ.

Satan knew that the way of the cross was the way of his own defeat, and he therefore opposed the cross with all his being. And it is because they are spiritual children of the devil (John 8:44) that unbelievers consider the cross of Christ to be a foolish stumbling block (1 Cor. 1:18, 23). Satan knows that the cross is the place of men’s deliverance from his dominion of sin and death, the only path from his kingdom of darkness to God’s kingdom of light. After Christ died on the cross, Satan tried to keep Him dead; but the grave had no power over Him, just as it would have no power over His church (Matt. 16:18), the redeemed fellowship of those who put their trust in Him.

The temptation to avoid the cross was a real temptation to Christ, because He knew the cross meant inconceivable agony to Him. He knew what the agony would be in taking all the consequences of the world’s sin upon Himself and what a horror it would be to be separated from His heavenly Father even for a few hours. That is why in the Garden of Gethsemane He sweat drops of blood and prayed, “Father, if Thou art willing, remove this cup from Me” (Luke 22:42-44).

Because Peter had taken the side of Satan, he became a **stumbling block** to Christ. **Stumbling block** is from *skandalon*, a word originally used of an animal trap, in particular the part where the bait was placed. The term eventually came to be used of luring a person into captivity or destruction. Satan was using Peter to set a trap for Jesus.

THE PRINCIPLES FOR US

for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."
(16:23b)

Jesus here gives the reason Peter fell into Satan's trap and found himself trying to lure his Lord into it as well: he was **not setting his mind on God's interests, but man's**. Because he is fallen and sinful, **man's** ways are not the Lord's, his **interests** are not **God's**.

Because Peter was reasoning from his own finite and sinful mind, he found himself siding with Satan and opposing God. When he trusted in his own perspective, he could no longer see God's. Because he did not continue to submit to the leading of the Father (see v. 17), he lost the Father's perspective. In his human wisdom he could not fathom why his Lord, the Messiah, had to "go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed" (v. 21). He was thinking like an unredeemed, fleshly man and found himself becoming "hostile toward God" (Rom. 8:7).

When believers focus on their present pain or potential distress rather than on the Lord who has allowed that pain, they are easy prey for Satan's traps and can even become his traps for ensnaring others. James therefore says, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4). "Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial," he goes

on to say; “for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him” (v. 12).

From Peter’s rebuke and Jesus’ counter rebuke, Christians can learn two important lessons. The first is that God’s way of salvation does not correspond to men’s. His kind of Messiah is not man’s kind. Therefore the person who insists on his own kind of Savior and on coming to God on his own terms finds himself opposing God and moving away from Him. Men’s ways never lead to God.

Men cannot have Christ on their own terms. To reject the way of the cross is to reject Christ, no matter how much He may be professed and praised.

Although he failed totally on that occasion in Caesarea Philippi, Peter came to understand and love the way of the cross. That was the way he preached at Pentecost and throughout his ministry. He would one day write with great conviction and joy that Christ “Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed” (1 Pet. 2:24).

The second important lesson is that there is pain in God’s refining process. As Jesus went on to explain in the next verse, He calls His disciples to share His suffering and His cross. They are called to deny themselves and take up their own crosses as they follow Him (Matt. 16:24). There is no crossless obedience to Christ.

To make spiritual gold of His children, the Father must burn off the sinful dross. Of His redeemed remnant He says, “I will . . . refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on My name, and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are My people,’ and they will say, ‘The Lord is my God’” (Zech. 13:9).

Someone has written,

Man judgeth man in ignorance,
he seeth but in part;
Our trust is in our Maker, God,
Who searcheth every heart;
And every wrong and every woe,
when put beneath our feet,

As stepping-stones may help us on
to His high mercy-seat.
Then teach us still to smile, O Lord,
though sharp the stones may be,
Remembering that they bring us near
to Thee, dear Lord, to Thee!

6
Winning by Losing:
the Paradox of
Discipleship
(16:24-27)

Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it. For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense every man according to his deeds.” (16:24-27)

This passage sets forth the heart of Christian discipleship and it strikes a death blow to the self-centered false gospels that are so

popular in contemporary Christianity. It leaves no room for the gospel of getting, in which God is considered a type of utilitarian genie who jumps to provide a believer's every whim. It closes the door to the gospel of health and wealth, which asserts that if a believer is not healthy and prosperous he has simply not exercised his divine rights or else does not have enough faith to claim his blessings. It undermines the gospel of self-esteem, self-love, and high self-image, which appeals to man's natural narcissism and prostitutes the spirit of humble brokenness and repentance that marks the gospel of the cross.

To come to Jesus Christ is to receive and to keep on receiving forever. But Jesus, through His direct instruction during His earthly ministry and through His apostles in the rest of the New Testament, repeatedly makes clear that there must be a cross before the crown, suffering before glory, sacrifice before reward. The heart of Christian discipleship is giving before gaining, losing before winning.

This was not the first time Jesus spoke of the high cost of discipleship. He had said, "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life shall lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake shall find it" (Matt. 10:37-39; cf. Luke 14:26-27). He had told the wealthy young man in Perea, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Mark 10:21). To the Greeks who asked to see Him, Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it; and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal" (John 12:24-25).

But those teachings ran contrary to the popular Judaism of Jesus' day, just as they run contrary to much popular quasi-Christianity today. Like most of their fellow Jews, the Twelve expected the Messiah to throw off the Roman yoke, dethrone the Herods, and establish God's earthly kingdom in all its glory. It was therefore difficult to reconcile Jesus' teachings about humility, sacrifice, and self-giving with that view. Jesus did not act like the regal Messiah they expected, and He forbade them to act like vice-

regents of such a mythical Messiah. Yet they knew Jesus' miracles and His teaching could not be explained humanly, and by the work of God in their hearts they had finally come to recognize that He was indeed the Messiah (Matt. 16:16). The whole picture did not yet fit together for them.

Particularly as Peter's brash reply to Jesus makes clear (v. 22), they were not yet willing to accept the idea of the Messiah's rejection, suffering, and death. Nor were they yet convinced that the way of discipleship involved those same great costs. Jesus therefore repeated the lesson many times and in many forms. They were not yet thinking like God thinks but still like fallen men think, because their minds were not "on God's interests, but man's" (v. 23).

They did not accept the truism that it is impossible for God, whether incarnate in His Son or living in the hearts of believers, to come into the midst of an anti-God society without there being hostility, reproach, and oppression. When holiness meets unholiness, a violent reaction is inevitable. "And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted," Paul said (2 Tim. 3:12).

THE PRINCIPLE

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. (16:24)

When **Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me,"** they were doubtless reminded of the time He had called each of them. Some two and a half years earlier they had left families, friends, occupations, and everything else in order to follow Jesus.

To unbelievers among the multitudes who were present on that occasion (see Mark 8:34), Jesus' words **come after Me** applied to the initial surrender of the new birth, when a person comes to Christ for salvation and the old life of sin is exchanged for a new life of righteousness. To the believers there, including the Twelve, **come after Me** reiterated the call to the life of daily obedience to Christ.

It is sadly possible for believers to lose the first love they had when they received Christ as saving Lord and surrendered all they were and had to Him (see Rev 2:4). It is a constant temptation to want to take back what was given up and to reclaim what was forsaken. It is not impossible to again place one's own will above God's and to take back rights that were relinquished to Him. It is especially tempting to compromise our commitment when the cost becomes high. But the fact that believers sometimes succumb to disobedience does not alter the truth that the character of a true disciple is manifest in obedience. Although imperfect obedience is inevitable because of the unredeemed flesh, the basic desire and life-direction of the true Christian is obedience to the Lord.

Discipleship is on God's terms, just as coming to Him is on His terms. The Lord here reminds us that the key discipleship principle of winning by losing involves self-denial, cross-bearing, and loyal obedience.

The first requirement of discipleship is self-denial. A person who is not willing to **deny himself** cannot claim to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. **Deny** is from *aparneomai*, which means to completely disown, to utterly separate oneself from someone. It is the word Jesus used to describe Peter's denial of Him while He was being questioned by the high priest (Matt. 26:34). Each time he was confronted about his relationship to Jesus, Peter more vehemently denied knowing Him (vv. 70, 72, 74). He disowned his Master before the world.

That is exactly the kind of denial a believer is to make in regard to **himself**. He is to utterly disown himself, to refuse to acknowledge the self of the old man. Jesus' words here could be paraphrased, "Let him refuse any association or companionship with **himself**." Self-denial not only characterizes a person when he comes in saving faith to Christ but also as he lives as a faithful disciple of Christ.

The self to which Jesus refers is not one's personal identity as a distinct individual. Every person is a unique creation of God, and the heavenly Father knows each of His children by name. He has every believer's name "recorded in heaven" (Luke 10:20). The self of which Jesus is speaking is rather the natural, sinful, rebellious, unredeemed self that is at the center of every fallen person and that

can even reclaim temporary control over a Christian. It is the fleshly body, the “old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit” (Eph. 4:22) and is yet to be redeemed in glorification (cf. Rom. 8:23). To deny that self is to confess with Paul, “I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh” (Rom. 7:18). To deny that self is to have the sincere, genuine conviction that one has nothing in his humanness to commend himself before God, nothing worthwhile to offer Him at all.

The believer is made acceptable before God when he trusts in Jesus Christ, and he stands before the Lord in perfect righteousness, clothed in “the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Eph. 4:24). But as Paul also declared, even after salvation a believer has no more goodness in *himself*, “that is, in [his] flesh,” than he had before salvation. To deny self is to “make no provision for the flesh” (Rom. 13:14) and to “put no confidence in [it]” (Phil. 3:3). To deny self is to subject oneself entirely to the lordship and resources of Jesus Christ, in utter rejection of self-will and self-sufficiency.

Jesus proclaimed that the first requirement for entering the kingdom is to be “poor in spirit” (Matt. 5:3), to have the spirit of utter poverty in regard to one’s own goodness, righteousness, worth, and merit. It is to humbly recognize one’s spiritual destitution. It is only the person who realizes how poor he is who will ever know the riches of Christ. It is only the person who realizes how sinful and damned he is who will ever come to know how precious the forgiveness of God is. “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Ps. 34:18). It is the broken and contrite heart that God loves and will never despise (Ps. 51:17). It is not the self-righteous and self-satisfied but the penitent and humble whom God saves. It was not the proud Pharisee who had such a high image of himself, but the brokenhearted tax collector who asked God for mercy, who Jesus said “went down to his house justified” (Luke 18:14).

The whole purpose of the Old Testament, reflected pointedly in the law of Moses, was to show man how spiritually and morally destitute and powerless he is in himself. The law was not meant to show men how they could work their way into God’s favor but to

show them how impossible it is to live up to God's holy standards by their own resources.

Arthur Pink wrote, "Growth in grace is growth downward; it is the forming of a lower estimate of ourselves; it is a deepening realization of our nothingness; it is a heartfelt recognition that we are not worthy of the least of God's mercies."

To be saved calls for a sinner to deny self so as to "consider the members of [his] earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry" (Col. 3:5). It is to "lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and . . . be renewed in the spirit of [one's] mind" (Eph. 4:22-23).

The second requirement of discipleship is to **take up** one's **cross**. This idea has profound meaning which must be understood. Taking up one's **cross** is not some mystical level of selfless "deeper spiritual life" that only the religious elite can hope to achieve. Nor is it the common trials and hardships that all persons experience sometime in life. A cross is not having an unsaved husband, nagging wife, or domineering mother-in-law. Nor is it having a physical handicap or suffering from an incurable disease. To **take up** one's **cross** is simply to be willing to pay any price for Christ's sake. It is the willingness to endure shame, embarrassment, reproach, rejection, persecution, and even martyrdom for His sake.

To the people of Jesus' day the **cross** was a very concrete and vivid reality. It was the instrument of execution reserved for Rome's worst enemies. It was a symbol of the torture and death that awaited those who dared raise a hand against Roman authority. Not many years before Jesus and the disciples came to Caesarea Philippi, 100 men had been crucified in the area. A century earlier, Alexander Jannaeus had crucified 800 Jewish rebels at Jerusalem, and after the revolt that followed the death of Herod the Great, 2,000 Jews were crucified by the Roman proconsul Varus. Crucifixions on a smaller scale were a common sight, and it has been estimated that perhaps some 30,000 occurred under Roman authority during the lifetime of Christ.

When the disciples and the crowd heard Jesus speak of taking up the **cross**, there was nothing mystical to them about the idea. They

immediately pictured a poor, condemned soul walking along the road carrying (which is an accurate translation of *airō*, meaning “to raise, bear, or carry”) the instrument of his execution on his own back. A man who took **up his cross** began his death march, carrying the very beam on which he would hang.

For a disciple of Christ to **take up his cross** is for him to be willing to start on a death march. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to be willing, in His service, to suffer the indignities, the pain, and even the death of a condemned criminal.

Obviously the extent of suffering and persecution varies from believer to believer, from time to time, and from place to place. Not all the apostles were martyred, but all of them were willing to be martyred. Not every disciple is called on to be martyred, but every disciple is commanded to be willing to be martyred. “Beloved,” Peter wrote to his fellow believers, “do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Pet. 4:12-14).

To come to Jesus Christ for salvation is not to raise a hand or sign a card, although such things may sometimes play a part. To come to Jesus Christ is to come to the end of self and sin and to become so desirous of Christ and His righteousness that one will make any sacrifice for Him.

Jesus had earlier said, “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s enemies will be the members of his household” (Matt. 10:34-36). He had also said, “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. . . . If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!” (vv. 24-25). Christ was now in effect saying to His disciples that if He, their Lord, would have to “suffer many things . . . and be killed” (Matt. 16:21), how could they expect to escape the same treatment?

The **cross** represents suffering that is ours because of our relationship to Christ. As Jesus moved unwaveringly toward Jerusalem, the place of execution where He “must go” (v. 21), He had already taken up His cross and was beginning to bear on His back the sins of the whole world. And in His train, millions of disciples, all with their own crosses, have since borne reproach with Him.

Christ does not call disciples to Himself to make their lives easy and prosperous, but to make them holy and productive. Willingness to **take up his cross** is the mark of the true disciple. As the hymnist wrote, “Must Jesus bear the cross alone, and all the world go free? No, there’s a cross for everyone, and there’s a cross for me.” Those who make initial confessions of their desire to follow Jesus Christ, but refuse to accept hardship or persecution, are characterized as the false, fruitless souls who are like rocky soil with no depth. They wither and die under threat of the reproach of Christ (Matt. 13:20-21). Many people want a “no-cost” discipleship, but Christ offers no such option.

The third requirement of discipleship is loyal obedience. Only after a person denies himself and takes up his cross, Jesus said, is he prepared to **follow Me**. True discipleship is submission to the lordship of Christ that becomes a pattern of life. “The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked” (1 John 2:6). “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus declared; “but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). To continue in His Word is to be His true disciple (John 8:31).

Paul calls salvation the “obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5; 16:26). Peter describes God’s sovereign saving work in a life as “the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood” (1 Pet. 1:2). Obviously, obedience is an integral feature in salvation and is as characteristic of a believer as is the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit and the sacrificial saving work of the Son. Peter told the Jewish Sanhedrin that the Holy Spirit is given only to those who obey God (Acts 5:32), and since every believer has the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9), every believer is also characterized by obedience to God as a pattern of life.

“If anyone serves Me,” Jesus said, “let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall My servant also be; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him” (John 12:26).

THE PARADOX

For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it. For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? (16:25-26)

Life and **soul** are here synonymous with each other and with the self (v. 24). All three words represent the inner person, the “real you.”

What may here seem to be a complex and contradictory idea is really quite simple. The Lord is saying that **whoever** lives only **to save his** earthly physical **life**, his ease and comfort and acceptance by the world, will **lose** his opportunity for eternal **life**. But **whoever is willing to give up his** earthly, worldly life and to suffer and die, if necessary, for Christ’s sake, will **find** eternal life. Every person has a choice. He can “go for it” now and lose it forever; or he can forsake it now and gain it forever.

Jesus also identified the false believer who makes initial gestures of following the gospel, but will not let go of the world and all its trinkets, as bad soil full of weeds that choke out true spiritual life (Matt. 13:22).

The true disciple is willing to pay whatever price faithfulness to the Lord requires. The price may mean suffering martyrdom as Paul did or enduring physical exhaustion and illness in Christ’s service as Epaphroditus did. Whatever the particulars of a believer’s cross-bearing may be, it requires the willingness to abandon safety, security, personal resources, health, friends, job, and even life.

The story is told of a plantation slave in the old South who was always happy and singing. No matter what happened to him, his

joy was always abounding. One day his master asked him, “What have you got that makes you so happy?”

The slave replied, “I love the Lord Jesus Christ. He has forgiven my sin and put a song in my heart.”

“Well, how do I get what you have?” his master asked.

“You go and put on your best Sunday suit and you come down here and work in the mud with us and you can have it,” came the reply.

“I would never do that,” the owner retorted indignantly as he rode off in a huff.

Some weeks later, the master asked the same question and was given the same answer. A few weeks later, he came a third time and said, “Now be straight with me. What do I have to do to have what you have?”

“Just what I’ve told you the other times,” came the answer.

In desperation, the owner said, “All right, I’ll do it.”

“Now you don’t have to do it,” the slave said. “You only had to be willing.”

It is not that a disciple has to be a martyr, but that he is willing to be a martyr if faithfulness to Christ demands it.

Jesus reinforced the paradox by adding, “**For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?**” Here is the ultimate hyperbole. “Imagine, if you can,” Jesus was saying, “what it would be like to somehow possess **the whole world**. Of what lasting benefit would that be, if in gaining it you forfeited your **soul**, your eternal life?” Such a person would be a walking dead man who temporarily owned everything but who faced an eternity in hell rather than in heaven.

“**Or,**” Jesus continued, “**what** could possibly be worth having during this lifetime, if to gain it you would have to **exchange** your **soul?**” To gain every possession possible in this world and yet be without Christ is to be bankrupt forever. But to abandon everything in this world for the sake of Christ is to be rich forever (cf. Matt. 6:19-21).

THE PAROUSIA

For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense every man according to his deeds. (16:27)

Parousia is a noun form of the Greek verb behind **to come** and is often used to refer to Christ's second coming, of which this is the first mention in the New Testament.

A day of judgment is coming, Jesus reminded the disciples and the multitude. The Father "has given all judgment to the Son" (John 5:22), and when **the Son of Man**, who is also the Son of God, comes **in the glory of His Father with His angels** (an event further described in Matt. 24-25), He **will then recompense every man according to his deeds**. Christ's holy **angels** are the instruments of His service and His judgment, and when He comes to earth again they will come with Him, to raise "those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life" and "those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment" (John 5:29).

That general truth had been proclaimed long before by the psalmist: "Thou dost recompense a man according to his work," the psalmist declared (Ps. 62:12). It was also echoed by Paul in his letter to the church at Rome. In 2:5-8, he is specific:

But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every man according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.

"Each one of us," the apostle later wrote, "shall give account of himself to God" (Rom. 14:12). Matthew 25 records the Lord's

teaching about the judgment of the nations. They, too, will be judged by their works (vv. 31-46).

As the Lord reviews the life of each person who has ever lived, He will say, as it were, “There is a believer. I can tell by his works, because they are the product of My Holy Spirit. There is an unbeliever, as I can also tell by his works, because they are the product of the flesh.” It is not that works save, but that they are the product of salvation. James teaches that the only kind of faith that saves is the kind that results in righteous behavior (James 2:14-26; cf. Eph. 2:10).

Those whose works are pleasing to the Lord are those who, by God’s sovereign grace and power, have trusted in Christ as saving Lord, while denying self, taking up their crosses, and following Him. They will receive everlasting life and all the blessings of heaven. Those whose works are rejected by the Lord are those who put their hope and trust in the ephemeral things of this life. They will receive eternal damnation and all the torments of hell.

The call to salvation is a call to discipleship as described in this passage. When God saves, He produces this kind of follower.

7
Promise and
Warning
Concerning the
Second Coming
(16:27-28)

“For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then recompense every man according to his deeds. Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” (16:27-28)

Although the Old Testament contains more than 1,500 prophecies of the coming of the Messiah, the Christ, it was not revealed clearly to the saints of that era that His coming would be in

two separate stages, thousands of years apart. The first stage would be characterized by suffering and sacrifice for sin, and the second by conquest and splendor. The central focus of the New Testament is on Christ's first coming, but the second coming is also mentioned or alluded to once in every 25 verses, a total of some 320 times.

The Old Testament references to a suffering Messiah and Redeemer were frequently rationalized away by Jewish interpreters or spiritualized to the point of insignificance. In the minds of most Jews in Jesus' day, the Messiah was to come but once, as the conquering King of the earth.

Therefore as Jesus moved closer to His time of suffering, He continued to prepare His disciples for what they all but refused to believe: that He, the divine Son of Man and the Messiah, rather than conquering His enemies and establishing His eternal kingdom on earth at that time, would first have to die at the hands of those enemies.

Matthew 16:27—17:6 contains one of the great highlights of the Lord's ministry on earth. It looks ahead to His coming that second and last time, the time of His return in exaltation and glory, when all His enemies will indeed be placed under His feet and He will establish the long-hoped-for eternal kingdom. As He introduces this teaching (16:27-28), Jesus gives a promise, a warning, and then a repeat of the promise.

THE PROMISE

For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; (16:27a)

Jesus referred to Himself as **the Son of Man** more than by any other designation. The name reflects His humanness and His incarnation, of His fully identifying Himself with mankind as one of their own, and in this prophetic context the ancient title has especially rich significance.

In his vision of the four beasts, Daniel looked, as it were, across the entire history of mankind and saw its awesome climax. “I kept looking until thrones were set up,” he says, “and the Ancient of Days took His seat; His vesture was like white snow, and the hair of His head like pure wool. His throne was ablaze with flames, its wheels were a burning fire.” It was a scene of God, “the Ancient of Days,” sitting on His throne of judgment. His white garments speak of His perfect purity and holiness, His pure wool hair speaks of His perfect wisdom, and the burning wheels speak of His sovereign authority. The “river of fire . . . flowing and coming out from before Him” portrays His consuming, purging divine judgment. With “thousands upon thousands . . . attending Him, and myriads upon myriads . . . standing before Him,” the court of divine judgment convened and “the books were opened” (Dan. 7:9-10).

After the beast, the supreme satanic world leader and the Antichrist, is destroyed, Daniel sees “One like a Son of Man,” who “came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed” (vv. 11-14).

It was about that time of fateful judgment that Jesus was here speaking to the disciples, who desperately needed a word of encouragement. Recently they had heard much of pain but little of gain, much of suffering but little of glory, much of the cross but little of the crown. Jesus therefore assured them that He was indeed the **Son of Man** whom Daniel saw **come in the glory of His Father with His** thousands upon thousands and myriads upon myriads of holy **angels** to receive the kingdom and execute judgment.

Here was Jesus’ first specific revelation to His disciples of His second coming. After just telling them that He was God in human flesh, that He was the promised Messiah, that He would build a kingdom that nothing could hinder or destroy—but that He first had to be rejected, killed, and rise from the dead—He now informed them that He will one day return in great glory and righteous judgment to establish His throne.

In Scripture, the word **glory** is often used to represent the totality of God's nature, character, and attributes. When He came to earth as a man, Jesus' deity was veiled (cf. Phil. 2:6-8), and there was nothing in His human appearance to mark Him as being different from other men (cf. Isa. 53:2). That very fact made it difficult for many Jews to acknowledge Him as the Messiah, whose divine power and glory they thought would be immediately manifest. But that was not God's plan.

When Moses asked God, "I pray Thee, show me Thy glory!" the Lord replied, "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the Lord before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion" (Ex. 33:18-19). To witness God's attributes is to have a glimpse of His **glory**, all that the fullness of His *name* implies.

During the Olivet discourse, only a few days before His arrest and crucifixion, Jesus spoke again of His coming. "But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened," He said, "and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other" (Matt. 24:29-31). He will then come in blazing, unveiled **glory**, and the entire earth will be filled with that **glory**, just as in Isaiah's vision (Isa. 6:3; cf. Ps. 72:19).

The message that the Messiah would come in **glory** was not new. It was perhaps the messianic truth with which the Jews of that day were most familiar. Jesus now affirmed and gave a more complete perspective to that truth, a truth His disciples thought was being contradicted and frustrated both by His rejection by the Jewish leaders and by His own failure to assert His divine power and glory.

In *Son of Man to Thee I Cry*, an old and out-of-print hymn by an unknown author, we find these lovely truths:

He who wept above the grave,
He who stilled the raging wave,
Meek to suffer, strong to save,
He shall come in glory!

He who sorrow's pathway trod,
He that every good bestowed—
Son of Man and Son of God—
He shall come in glory.

He who bled with scourging sore,
Thorns and scarlet meekly wore,
He who every sorrow bore—
He shall come in glory.

Monarch of the smitten cheek,
Scorn of Jew and scorn of Greek,
Priest and King, divinely meek—
He shall come in glory.

He who died to set us free,
He who lives and loves e'en me,
He who comes whom I shall see, Jesus only—only He—
He shall reign in glory!

For those who know and love the Lord Jesus Christ, His return in **glory** is a comforting and thrilling promise that fills them with great hope and anticipation. Like the saints under the heavenly altar (Rev. 6:9-10), they wonder how long the Lord will allow the world to go its sinful way before intervening in sovereign power and bringing righteousness, equity, and justice to the world. They wonder with the psalmist, "How long, O God, will the adversary revile, and the enemy spurn Thy name?" (Ps. 74:10; cf. 35:17). In response to Jesus' promise, "Yes, I am coming quickly," they pray with John, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

At this point in Jesus' ministry the disciples especially needed a word of hope from their Lord. He had just told them of His

impending suffering and death and of the demanding conditions of true discipleship, of taking up one's own cross and of giving up one's own life in order to save it (Matt. 16:21-25). Perhaps for the first time it was becoming clear to them that the way of Christ is the way of self-denial, sacrifice, rejection, persecution, and quite possibly martyrdom. It was beginning to dawn on them that the way of Christ is the way of willing obedience at any price. It is saying no to ease, comfort, money, and pleasure and of saying yes to pain, struggle, persecution, and spiritual warfare for His sake.

THE WARNING

and will then recompense every man according to his deeds.
(16:27b)

At His glorious coming Jesus also **will then recompense every man according to his deeds**. The believer looks forward to the second coming in the hope of sharing His Lord's glory, whereas the unbeliever can look forward to it only in the fear of being condemned under the Lord's judgment. **Every man** here is comprehensive!

In light of that twofold prospect, the Lord's return is bittersweet for believers who are sensitive and loving. Like John as he tasted the little book he took from the angel's hand (Rev. 10:10), they think of the second coming as "sweet as honey" regarding their own destiny but "bitter" regarding the destiny of the myriad lost souls who will have nothing of Christ. It was perhaps that truth that prompted Paul to declare, "Therefore knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Cor. 5:11).

In speaking here of His recompensing **every man according to his deeds**, Jesus was speaking in general terms about the second coming, not about a specific event or element within it. He was simply pointing out that it will be a time of glory and reward for those who belong to Him and a time of judgment and punishment for

those who do not. His coming will resolve the destiny of **every man** (cf. John 5:25-29).

On the day of judgment **every man** will be judged on the basis of his **deeds**. It is not that **deeds** are the means of salvation, which is by grace through faith alone. But a person's outward **deeds** are the surest evidence of his inward spiritual condition. People are best known by their fruits, Jesus said (Matt. 7:16). James declared that "faith, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17).

Righteous **deeds** are not the source of salvation, but they are the objective verification that it has occurred. Jesus declared, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). Paul told the Corinthian believers in his first letter to them, "Each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work" (1 Cor. 3:13). In his second letter to them he said, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). To the church at Thyatira the Lord Himself declared, "I will give to each one of you according to your deeds" (Rev 2:23; cf. 20:13).

Among the last words of Scripture is Jesus' declaration, "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done" (Rev 22:12). Throughout the New Testament it is repeatedly made clear that "each one of us shall give account of himself to God" (Rom. 14:12), who "will render to every man according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, . . . but glory and honor and peace to every man who does good" (Rom. 2:6-10).

No genuinely righteous works can be manifest in the life of an unbeliever, because he has no indwelling Holy Spirit to produce them and no godly new nature through which the holiness of the Spirit can be expressed. The life of the believer, on the other hand, is

characterized by righteous works, because he has God's own life and Spirit within him as the source and power for those works. A person who has no evidence of righteous behavior in his life has no basis for assurance of salvation, no matter how long and vocally he may have professed being a Christian.

Yet the honest, humble believer knows that, no matter how faithfully he studies and obeys God's Word and has fellowship with Him in prayer, he still falls far short of the Lord's perfect righteousness. But he also knows that, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). He knows that, by God's gracious Spirit continuing to work through him, even such confession is verification of his genuineness. His life is sure to produce more fruit that is pleasing to God, fruit for which the Lord will say, "Well done, good and faithful slave, . . . enter into the joy of your master" (Matt. 25:21). Because a believer has given his life to Jesus Christ, His own Spirit produces in us works that are worthy of God's reward. For the believer, therefore, the truth that the Lord **will then recompense every man according to his deeds** is a wonderful promise.

For unbelievers, however, that truth is a dire warning, because at Christ's judgment seat they will have no acceptable **deeds** to present to the Lord as evidence of salvation. Many professed Christians will say to the Lord "on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then [Christ] will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'" (Matt. 7:22-23).

For the unsaved, that day will be one of unrelieved fear as they finally realize that the good works on which they had been relying to make them right with God were nothing more than filthy garments (cf. Isa. 64:6) that leave them totally unfit to stand before the righteous King and Judge. The term Isaiah uses in that passage (usually translated "filthy rags" or "filthy garment") literally means menstrual cloth, a graphic figure used to represent the best that human goodness can produce. At Jesus' second coming, Paul warns, He will deal out "retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will

pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day” (2 Thess. 1:8-10).

For all men there will be a day of accounting, a day of reckoning. For the cross-bearing, obedient Christian it will be a day of great rejoicing and glory, because he will have evidence that the life of God is within him by faith in Jesus Christ. But for the unrepentant, Christ-rejecting sinner, it will be a day of great terror and torment, because he will have had no evidence of divine life.

THE PROMISE REPEATED

Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom. (16:28)

In light of Jesus’ growing opposition by the Jewish religious leaders and His predictions of impending suffering and death, it was no doubt with some skepticism that the disciples heard their Lord’s promise of one day returning in glory. “If we were so confused about His first coming,” they may have reasoned, “why should we get our hopes up about a second coming of which we know so little?” All they seemed sure of at the present time was that their Lord’s work appeared to be an utter failure, that He was facing imminent death, and that He had commanded them to willingly accept the same fate. Therefore, understanding the disciples’ bewilderment and weak faith, Jesus repeated the promise, adding that **“some of those who are standing here . . . shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.”**

Taste death was a common Jewish expression that referred to drinking the cup of death, in other words, to dying. Jesus assured the Twelve that, before death, some of them would see Him **coming in His kingdom.**

Because all the Twelve have long been dead and Jesus still has not returned after nearly 2,000 years, many people have stumbled over this text. But because Jesus was incapable either of lying or of being mistaken, it should be obvious He was not saying that some of them would not physically die before His actual second coming.

To understand correctly what Jesus meant, it is first of all helpful to know that *basileia* (**kingdom**) was often used as a metonym to mean “royal majesty” or “regal splendor”—in much the same way that *scepter* has long been used figuratively to represent royal power and authority. Used in that way, *basileia* would refer to a manifestation of Jesus’ kingliness rather than to His literal earthly reign. His promise could therefore be translated, “**until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingly splendor.**”

At the beginning of his Pentecost sermon Peter quotes an extensive passage from the prophet Joel (Acts 2:28-32), a passage that specifically relates to events that “shall be in the last days” (Acts 2:17; cf. Joel 2:28). Referring to the dramatic events that had just occurred on the Day of Pentecost, Peter said, “This is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:16). Yet it is obvious that all of those events did not transpire at Pentecost. God’s Spirit was not poured out on all mankind; there were no “signs on the earth beneath, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke”; and the sun was not “turned into darkness” or “the moon into blood” (Acts 2:17-21). The events of that day, wondrous as they were, did not signal the second coming. The day of Pentecost was not “in the last days” of which Joel spoke.

Nevertheless, the Pentecost events were a glimpse and foretaste of the last days, as Peter declares in verse 16. The “noise like a violent, rushing wind” that “filled the whole house where they [the 120 believers who had gathered for prayer] were sitting,” the appearance of “tongues as of fire” that “rested on each one of them,” and their being filled with the Spirit and enabled “to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance” (2:2-4) were foreshadows of the Lord’s second coming glory. To some extent, *all* of Jesus’ divine teaching and miracles and the teaching and miracles of the apostles were a glimpse of the kind of phenomena that will characterize that future glory. They were a taste of “the good word of God and the powers of the age to come” (Heb. 6:5) that countless

thousands, unbelievers as well as believers, had been privileged to hear and see.

Yet it seems that Jesus' promise to the Twelve about seeing **the Son of Man coming in His kingdom** was more definite and immediate than those general glimpses.

It was not uncommon for Old Testament prophecies to combine a prediction of a far distant event with a prediction of one in the near future, with the earlier even prefiguring the latter. Such prophecies would thereby have near as well as distant fulfillments. The fulfillment of the near prophecy served to verify the reliability of the distant one. It seems reasonable, therefore, to assume that Jesus verified the reliability of His second coming prophecy by giving a glimpse of His second coming glory to **some** of the disciples before they would **taste death**.

In light of that interpretation—and because in all three gospel accounts the promise of seeing His glory is given immediately preceding the account of the transfiguration (see Mark 9:1-8; Luke 9:27-36) and, as mentioned above, *basileia* can be translated “royal splendor”—it seems that Jesus must here have been referring specifically to His unique and awesome transfiguration before Peter, James, and John only six days later (see 17:1). Those three disciples were the **some** among the Twelve who would not die until, in a most miraculous preview, they would **see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom**.

8

Preview of the Second Coming (17:1-13)

And six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and brought them up to a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. And Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and behold, a voice out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!” And when the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were much afraid. And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, “Arise, and do not

be afraid.” And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one, except Jesus Himself alone.

And as they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, “Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.” And His disciples asked Him, saying, “Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” And He answered and said, “Elijah is coming and will restore all things; but I say to you, that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist. (17:1-13)

As noted at the end of the previous chapter, the preview of His glory that Jesus promised some of the disciples would experience before they died (16:28) doubtlessly referred to His transfiguration, the event related in the present text.

Six days after the promise was given it was fulfilled. The fact that Luke says it was “some eight days later” (9:28) simply indicates that he was speaking in inclusive terms, unlike Matthew and Mark (9:2). Whereas those writers referred to the **six** intervening days between the prediction and the fulfillment, Luke also included the days on which those events occurred.

Peter and James and John his brother were the most intimate disciples of Jesus, constituting, with Peter’s brother Andrew; the Lord’s inner circle. (See vol. 2 in this commentary series [*Matthew* 8-15], p. 136). It is therefore not surprising that it was these three men whom He **brought . . . up to a high mountain by themselves.**

Four reasons seem to suggest themselves for Jesus’ taking only these three with Him to witness His transfiguration. First, they would be reliable witnesses of His manifested glory, able to confirm the event to the other disciples and to the rest of the church. According to Deuteronomy 19:15, “on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed.” The Lord’s promised display of His kingdom glory (Matt. 16:27-28) would be confirmed by the testimony of these three trustworthy witnesses.

Second, these three men were probably chosen because of their intimacy with Jesus. They were with Him the most and understood Him the best, and they frequently accompanied Him when He went away for times of intense fellowship with His heavenly Father (Mark 5:37; 14:33). It was fitting that those who would most intimately share His suffering and sorrow would also most intimately share in witnessing His glory.

Third, as the acknowledged spokesmen among the Twelve, the ones whose word was most respected, these three men could most reliably and convincingly articulate what they witnessed on the mountain.

The fourth possible reason is negative. If all twelve disciples had seen the transfiguration, or if all of them plus the crowds that had been with them in upper Galilee were to have seen Jesus transfigured, the entire region could quickly have been in turmoil. The people may have run down the hillside and into the surrounding towns babbling uncontrollably about what they had seen. The accounts doubtlessly would have varied greatly and been embellished with each retelling, and Jesus could have been pressured even more forcefully to become the political and military deliverer the people expected the Messiah to be (see John 6:15; 12:12-19).

The particular **high mountain** is not identified, but it was apparently somewhere near and to the south of Caesarea Philippi, on the route to Capernaum and eventually Jerusalem (see Matt. 16:13, 21; 17:24).

We learn from Luke 9:32 that, as in the Garden (Matt. 26:40-45), these three disciples could not stay awake, despite the momentousness of the experience. It was “from sorrow” that they slept in the Garden (Luke 22:45), and it was perhaps for the same reason that they slept on the mountain top. Sleep can be a form of escape, a way of temporarily forgetting problems and anxieties. Depression accelerates weariness. It is likely that the promise Jesus made a few days earlier was too vague and indefinite to bolster their spirits after learning of His impending suffering and death and His call for them to be willing to suffer and die in His service (16:21-25). They slept the sleep of frustration and depression. It was not until

Moses and Elijah appeared that the three “became fully awake . . . and saw His glory and the two men standing with Him” (Luke 9:32*b*).

In the events that followed are found five powerful confirmations, or proofs, that Jesus was indeed the predicted Son of Man, the Messiah, the divine King of glory. First is the transformation of the Son (Matt. 17:2); second is the testimony of the saints (vv. 3-4); third is the terror of the Father (vv. 5-6); fourth is what may be called the tapestry of the scene (vv. 7-9); and fifth is the tie with Jesus’ forerunner, John the Baptist (vv. 10-13). The first three are given during the transfiguration, and the last two are given just afterward.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SON

And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. (17:2)

Was transfigured is from *metamorphoō*, which has the basic meaning of changing into another form and is the term from which we get *metamorphosis*. Because no further description is given, all we know of the change is that, during this brief display of divine glory, Jesus’ **face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light**. The Jesus who had been living for over thirty years in ordinary human form was now partially seen in the blazing effulgence of God (cf. Heb. 1:1-3). From within Himself, in a way that defies full description, much less full explanation, Jesus’ divine glory was manifested **before** Peter, James, and John.

Here is the greatest confirmation of His deity yet in the life of Jesus. Here, more than on any other occasion, Jesus revealed Himself as He truly is, the Son of God. As the divine glory radiated from **His face**, it illumined even **His garments**, which **became as white as light**, in supernatural testimony to His spiritual splendor. As with the Shekinah manifestations of the Old Testament, God here portrayed

Himself to human eyes in a form of **light** so dazzling and overwhelming that it could barely be withstood.

The **light** portrayed Jesus' glory and majesty, as Peter testified years later in his second epistle: "For when He received honor and glory from the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased'" (2 Pet. 1:17). The experience of seeing Christ's glory must have been a major contributor to the second coming's becoming a dominant theme of Peter's preaching and writing. The message of his two epistles might be summarized as: "Fellow believers, don't worry about your pain, your hardship, your testing, your persecution, your sacrifice. Jesus is coming! That's all that really matters." John later testified that "we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). We have no record of James's testimony to this event, because he was martyred in the very early days of the church, the first apostle to give his life for Christ (Acts 12:2; cf. Mark 10:39). As best they could with human eyes, these three men had seen the essence of God shine forth from Jesus.

That awesome experience was but a foretaste of the day in which "the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels" (Matt. 16:27). On that day, "all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory" (Matt. 24:30). And "when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne" (25:31). In his vision on Patmos, John saw the returning Christ as "one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His breast with a golden girdle. And His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire; and His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been caused to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. And in His right hand He held seven stars; and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength" (Rev. 1:13-16).

In His human form Jesus Christ was veiled, but when He comes again to earth He will come in His full divine majesty and glory, a glimpse of which Peter, James, and John witnessed on the mountain. There could henceforth be no doubt in their minds that He

was God incarnate, and there should have been no doubt that He would come some day in the fullness of glory.

THE TESTIMONY OF THE SAINTS

And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. And Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” (17:3-4)

As the three disciples watched in amazement, **Moses and Elijah** also **appeared to them**, shrouded in the Lord’s glory (Luke 9:31). The testimony of those two Old Testament saints was a second confirmation of Jesus’ deity.

Why, we may wonder, were these two men chosen out of the many godly Old Testament believers who might have been chosen? Why, for instance, did God not present Abraham, the father of the Hebrew people and of all the faithful? Why was not David selected, the one from whose throne Jesus would one day reign? Why was Isaiah or Jeremiah or Ezekiel or one of the other prophets not chosen? Scripture gives no explanation, but it seems that, more than any others, Moses and Elijah typified the Old Testament man of God.

Moses was synonymous with the Old Covenant, which the Lord gave through him. The Jewish Scriptures were often referred to as Moses and the prophets, and the Old Testament law was often called the law of Moses. Reared in the court of Pharaoh, exiled to the fields and flocks of Midian to learn humility and become a servant of God, and then chosen by the Lord to lead His people out of bondage and to give them His law and lead them to the borders of the Promised Land, **Moses** was supremely God’s man. Besides the Lord Himself, he was arguably the greatest leader in human history. He led an estimated two million rebellious, faithless people out of Egypt and into the wilderness, where they wandered together for forty years while God raised up a more obedient and manageable generation.

Before the people of Israel had formal prophets, Moses was a kind of prophet, bringing them God's word. Before they had formal priests, he was a kind of priest, mediating between them and God. And before they had formal kings, he was a kind of king, ruling them in God's name.

Perhaps the only other Old Testament man who could have stood with Moses was **Elijah**. Moses was the great law giver, and Elijah was the great defender of the law. This prophet was zeal personified, a godly man of unmatched courage, boldness, and fearlessness. He had a heart for God, he walked with God, and, more than any other Old Testament saint, he was the instrument of God's miracle-working power. He was the preeminent prophet of God, and to the Jews the most romantic Old Testament personality.

As no others, **Moses and Elijah** represented the Old Testament, the law and the prophets. And as no others, they could give human testimony to Christ's divine majesty and glory. By their presence together, they affirmed, in effect: "This is the One of whom we testified, the One in whose power we ministered, and the One in whom everything we said and did has meaning. Everything we spoke, accomplished, and hoped for is fulfilled in Him."

From Luke we learn that these two great saints were talking with Jesus "of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (9:31). They were not simply standing there, passively reflecting on the Lord's glory, but were talking with Him as friend to Friend about His departure, His imminent sacrifice, which was the supreme objective and work of His earthly ministry. "Departure" is from the Greek term from which we get *exodus*. Just as the Exodus out of Egypt under Moses led God's people out of the bondage of slavery, the "exodus" of Jesus out of the grave would lead believers out of the bondage of sin. This would be accomplished, as Luke reports, at Jerusalem.

It was significant that the discussion was about Christ's saving work through His death, because that was the central work of His ministry, yet the truth the disciples found most difficult to accept. **Moses and Elijah** not only gave confirmation of Jesus' divine glory but of His divine plan. Their supernatural testimony no doubt later gave the apostles added conviction and courage as they proclaimed

that Jesus was “delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). “Jesus is the predicted Savior and King,” they were affirming before the three apostles, “and His divine plan is on schedule.”

Jesus’ death and resurrection were an inescapable part of that plan, without which redemption from sin would have been impossible. He was infinitely more than a good man whose example shows other men the way to God. He Himself was God, and it was by His atoning sacrifice as a substitute for men that He Himself brings those who trust in Him to God. No man can come to God by following Jesus’ example, because no man could offer a sufficient sacrifice even for his own sins, much less for the sins of the whole world. It was therefore imperative for the disciples to understand that Jesus’ coming the first time to die and rise again was as much a part of the divine plan as His coming again in glory.

As Moses and Elijah “were parting from Him” (Luke 9:33a), **Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”**

Luke gives the additional information that **Peter** spoke “not realizing what he was saying” (9:33b). Peter completely failed to comprehend the significance of Jesus’ glory or of Moses’ and Elijah’s testimony. Seemingly oblivious to the affirmation that Jesus must go to Jerusalem to die and that the glory they now witnessed was but a preview of the full glory in which He would in the future come again, in his combined bewilderment and fear Peter could think of nothing but making **three tabernacles** with his own hands in which Jesus and the two Old Testament witnesses could dwell.

We can only guess at Peter’s motive for making the suggestion, except that he obviously was content to remain with the Lord on the mountain top. He had no interest in Jesus’ going to Jerusalem or in His coming again. He wanted the Lord to stay, not leave and return. He especially did not want Him to leave by way of death (Matt. 16:22). As usual, he was caught up in his own plans and will rather than the Lord’s. Although he prefaced his suggestion with **if You wish**, Peter probably assumed Jesus would approve.

New Testament chronologists have determined that the Jewish month in which the transfiguration took place was Tishri (October), the sixth month before Passover and therefore six months before Jesus' crucifixion. During this month the Jews celebrated the feast of Tabernacles, or Booths, and it is possible that at this very time the feast was being observed in Jerusalem. During a period of seven days the people lived in small shelters, or booths, made of boughs, symbolizing the temporary dwellings of their forefathers in the wilderness. It was a memorial to God's preserving His chosen and redeemed people (see Lev. 23:33-44).

Zechariah predicted that during the Millennium, when "the Lord will be king over all the earth; in that day the Lord will be the only one, and His name the only one. Then it will come about that any who are left of all the nations that went against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths" (Zech. 14:9, 16). That is the only week-long Old Testament festival that will be celebrated during the millennial reign of Christ. The feast of Tabernacles will be remembered every year for a thousand years as a picture of God's deliverance and preservation of His people.

The feast's being close at hand may therefore have caused Peter to suggest building the **three tabernacles** on the mountain. That possibility is even more likely in light of the fact that this festival commemorated the Exodus from slavery in Egypt and the wilderness wanderings of Israel under Moses. As noted above, Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus "of His departure," or exodus (Luke 9:31), the soon-coming and infinitely greater deliverance of believing mankind from sin. How appropriate then, Peter may have thought, to celebrate the feast in that sacred place, not only in the presence of Moses himself but in the presence of the even greater Deliverer whom Moses foreshadowed and of whom Elijah was to be the forerunner.

Peter's idea was not so much wrong as foolish. He was foolish in perhaps thinking that Jesus might not have to die after all, that there was now opportunity to fulfill His mission by avoiding the cross and therefore avoiding the need of later returning. Peter was also foolish in placing Moses and Elijah, great as they were, on the same level as Christ by wanting to build **tabernacles** for all three of them.

As previously noted, when Peter made this suggestion, Moses and Elijah were already departing (Luke 9:33). They knew their mission was temporary and their testimony to Christ was now completed. In their ministries they had merely proclaimed the word of the law and the prophets. But Jesus Christ, the living Word, was both the giver and the perfect fulfillment of the law and prophets, whose purpose was to point men to Himself (see Rom. 8:3; 10:4; Gal. 3:24). Leaving Christ in unchallenged supremacy, Moses and Elijah faded away so that the sole remaining object of adoration was the glorious Lord Himself. Once their testimony to Him was finished, they would not stay and risk detracting from Him.

THE TERROR OF THE FATHER

While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and behold, a voice out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" And when the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were much afraid. (17:5-6)

A third confirmation of Jesus' deity was the terror caused by the intervention of the Father while Peter **was still speaking**. Through the form of **a bright cloud** God **overshadowed** the three disciples and spoke to them in **a voice out of the cloud**. To the testimony of the transfiguration itself and the testimony of the two Old Testament saints was now added the surprising testimony of God the Father.

Throughout the wilderness wanderings of Israel the Lord manifested Himself through "a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way" (Ex. 13:21; Num. 9:17; Deut. 1:33). Isaiah predicted that "when the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion, and purged the bloodshed of Jerusalem from her midst, by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning, then the Lord will create over the whole area of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke, and the brightness of a flaming fire by night; for over all

the glory will be a canopy” (Isa. 4:4-5). In his vision of the last days John “looked and behold, a white cloud, and sitting on the cloud was one like a son of man, having a golden crown on His head, and a sharp sickle in His hand. And another angel came out of the temple, crying out with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, ‘Put in your sickle and reap, because the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is ripe.’ And He who sat on the cloud swung His sickle over the earth; and the earth was reaped” (Rev. 14:14-16).

Out of such a **bright cloud** the Father **overshadowed** Peter, James, and John, and spoke to them in an audible **voice**, . . . **saying**, **“This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!”** The Father spoke almost identical words at Jesus’ baptism (Matt. 3:17), and during Jesus’ last week in Jerusalem—but a few days before His betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion—the Father again publicly and directly declared His approval of the Son (John 12:28).

In calling Jesus His **Son**, the Father declared Him to be of identical nature and essence with Himself (cf. John 5:17-20; 8:19, 42; 10:30, 36-38). Scripture frequently refers to believers as children of God, but they are adopted children, brought into the heavenly family only through the miracle of His grace (Rom. 8:15, 23; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5). Jesus is the essence of divine nature, as the apostles repeatedly emphasize (see Rom. 1:1-4; 2 Cor. 1:3; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:3; Col. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:3; 1 John 1:3; 2 John 3).

In calling Jesus His **beloved Son**, the Father declared not only a relationship of divine nature but a relationship of divine love. They had a relationship of mutual love, commitment, and identification in every way.

In saying, **“with whom I am well-pleased,”** the Father declared His approval with everything the **Son** was, said, and did. Everything about Jesus was in perfect accord with the Father’s will and plan. Compare John 5:19; 8:29; 10:37-38; 12:49-50.

Then, directly addressing the three disciples, perhaps Peter in particular, God said, **“Listen to Him!”** He was saying, in effect, “If My Son tells you He must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die, believe Him. If He tells you He will be raised up on the third day, believe Him. If He tells you to take up your own cross and follow Him, that is

what you are to do. If He says He will come again in glory, then believe Him and live accordingly.”

The outspoken, brash Peter and his two companions now knew they stood in the awesome presence of Almighty God. As would be expected, **when the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were much afraid.** Peter was probably so utterly traumatized that he promptly forgot about his presumptuous suggestion to build the three tabernacles.

The combined awareness of the Lord’s grace and His majesty, His love and His justice, His friendship and His lordship should cause a kind of spiritual tension in every believer. On the one hand he rejoices in his loving fellowship with the Lord because of His gracious kindness, and on the other hand he has reverential fear as he contemplates His awesome holiness and righteousness. As the believer walks in obedience to God, he experiences the comfort of His presence. But as he walks in disobedience, he should feel the terror of that same presence. Proverbs declares that spiritual wisdom begins with the fear of God (Prov. 9:10).

Sinful men in the presence of a holy God always want to hide. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve had uninterrupted fellowship with God, but after they sinned the relationship was vastly changed. When “they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, . . . the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (Gen. 3:8). When Isaiah beheld the divine majesty and glory that surrounded the heavenly throne, he cried out in great fear, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isa. 6:5). As he stood in the presence of perfect holiness, the sense of his own utter sinfulness overwhelmed him. Daniel was likewise terrified when the Lord spoke directly to him after his vision of the ram, goat, and little horn (Dan. 8:15-17).

THE TAPESTRY OF THE SCENE

And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, “Arise, and do not be afraid.” And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one, except Jesus Himself alone.

And as they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, “Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.” (17:7-9)

The fourth confirmation of Jesus’ deity was the entire tapestry of the scene that gave testimony to Christ’s majestic power and royal splendor. It was less specific and dramatic than the first three, but in its own way was impressive.

Jesus was still the center of the scene, just as He will be at His second coming. He was standing on a high mountain, much as when He returns to earth, when “His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east” (Zech. 14:4). When He comes, He will come *with* His saints (1 Thess. 3:13; Jude 14), just as here He is accompanied by Moses and Elijah, saints of the Old Covenant. And when He comes, He will also come *to* His saints (2 Thess. 1:10; Rev 21:3-7), ministering to His own people, just as now He ministered to Peter, James, and John.

Another interesting aspect of the scene is the fact that, whereas Moses died, Elijah did not, having been carried to heaven by a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11). Moses therefore represented the saints who will have died by the time Jesus returns, and Elijah those who will have been raptured.

Symbolically, the mountain is there. The people with whom He comes are there. The people to whom He comes are there. And both the saints who have died and the saints who have been translated are there.

Jesus’ first actions and words after His mighty display of splendor were those of gentle, loving care. Knowing the great fear of His three beloved companions, **Jesus came to them and touched them and said, “Arise, and do not be afraid.”** As they hesitatingly lifted up their eyes, it must have been a great relief to see **no one, except Jesus Himself alone.**

The impressions of the experience were now indelibly inscribed in their minds. They could testify with certainty and boldness that Jesus had indeed manifested Himself in glory before some of them had tasted death (16:28). Some thirty years later, Peter would write, “We did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased’—and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain” (2 Pet. 1:16-18).

As they saw **Jesus . . . alone**, the disciples realized they had witnessed a preview of the Lord’s second coming glory. And once they regained their composure, they must have had a strong and understandable desire to run down and report their astounding experience to the other disciples and to anyone else who would listen. **But as they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, “Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead.”** How extremely difficult it must have been to keep **the vision** to themselves.

Just as Jesus had told the Twelve that “they should tell no one that He was the Christ” (16:20), He now told the three to tell no one of His manifestation of glory. The Christ that most Jews of that day were expecting was not the Christ who had come. Instead of coming to conquer, He had come to die. Instead of coming in divine glory, He came in humble meekness. And instead of coming to deliver the Jews from political bondage, He came to deliver from sin’s bondage all men who would trust in Him.

For the people to have learned then about the experience on the mount would, as already mentioned, only have incited them to try as they did on other occasions (John 6:15; 12:12-19) to make Jesus into a king of their own kind to fulfill their immediate selfish and worldly expectations. But when they would hear the story after **the Son of Man had risen from the dead**, it would be clear that He had not come to conquer the Romans but to conquer death.

THE TIE WITH THE FORERUNNER

And His disciples asked Him, saying, “Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” And He answered and said, “Elijah is coming and will restore all things; but I say to you, that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that He had spoken to them about John the Baptist. (17:10-13)

The fifth and final confirmation of Jesus’ deity is seen in His messianic relationship to John the Baptist.

Having just seen Elijah on the mountain, a natural question for Jesus’ **disciples** was, **“Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?”** That particular teaching of **the scribes** was not based simply on rabbinical tradition but on scriptural teaching. Through Malachi the Lord declared, “Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse” (Mal. 4:5-6).

The prediction that the actual Old Testament person of Elijah would be the forerunner of the Messiah and His judgment was well-known to Jews of Jesus’ day. Therefore, as Peter, James, and John came down the mountainside with the Lord, they could not have helped wondering how the appearance of Elijah they had just witnessed fit in with Malachi’s prophecy. “If You are the Messiah, as you have declared and we have believed,” they asked, in effect, “why did Elijah not appear *before* You began Your ministry?”

It was doubtlessly that same concern that many of the Jewish leaders used to justify rejecting Jesus’ messiahship. And it was probably Malachi’s prophecy that caused some people to think that Jesus was Elijah rather than the Messiah (Matt. 16:14). “Despite His great miracles,” they may have reasoned, “Jesus cannot be the

Messiah, because Elijah has not yet come. So He must Himself be Elijah.”

That misunderstanding was made easier by the many embellishments that **the scribes** and their fellow rabbis had made to the prophecy of Malachi. Like many Bible interpreters throughout the ages, including many in our own day, they liked to “fill in the blanks,” as it were, where a Bible prediction was not as clear and detailed as they would have liked. Consequently, they taught that Elijah would come again as a mighty miracle-working reformer who would bring order out of chaos and holiness out of unholiness. They maintained that when the Messiah arrived, the world, or at least Israel, would be morally and spiritually prepared for Him, and He would execute swift judgment and establish the kingdom for Israel.

Like all teaching that is only partly based on Scripture, theirs was, for that reason, all the more misleading. Jesus responded by first acknowledging the partial truth, saying, “**Elijah is coming and will restore all things.**” There is an **Elijah** who is yet to come; and when he arrives, he **will restore all things**, just as Malachi prophesied. “**But I say to you,**” Jesus went on to explain, “**that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished. So also the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.**” Then the disciples understood that **He had spoken to them about John the Baptist.**

The Elijah prophesied by Malachi was not to be a reincarnation of the ancient prophet. Rather, as the angel of the Lord told Zacharias regarding his son, **John the Baptist**, the prophesied forerunner would come “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17). **John** would not be the ancient prophet come back to earth but would minister in much the same style and power as had Elijah. In that way, as Jesus had told the disciples at least once before, “[John] is Elijah, who was to come” (Matt. 11:14).

Why then, some wonder, did **John** himself disclaim being Elijah? When the priests and Levites from Jerusalem asked him, “‘Are you Elijah?’ . . . he said, ‘I am not’” (John 1:21). He denied being Elijah because, though he knew of the prophecy of Luke 1, like Jesus, he realized the question was about a literal, reincarnated Elijah. And, though John did not share Jesus’ omniscience, he doubtlessly

also realized that the questioning of the priests and Levites originated from unbelief, not sincere faith. They were not interested in learning the truth but of finding a way to discredit John, just as they would later seek ways to discredit the One whose way he came to prepare.

The Jewish leaders' false motives and ungodliness became even more evident when **they did not recognize** John as the prophesied Elijah **but did to him whatever they wished**. They imprisoned and beheaded him. Therefore, whatever John's answer to the Jerusalem priests and Levites might have been, they would ultimately have rejected him because they hated John, and their hearts were opposed to God and His truth. Those who reject God inevitably reject His messengers.

The full wickedness of the Jewish leaders was manifested, however, when they rejected and persecuted **the Son of Man** Himself, who soon would **suffer at their hands**. Because they rejected the restoration work of Messiah's Elijah-like precursor and then rejected the Messiah Himself, the messianic kingdom was postponed.

In the last days, the Lord will send still another like Elijah, and the Messiah Himself will return, this time to establish His eternal kingdom in power, righteousness, and glory.

9

The Power of Faith

(17:14-21)

And when they came to the multitude, a man came up to Him, falling on his knees before Him, and saying, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic, and is very ill; for he often falls into the fire, and often into the water. And I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him.” And Jesus answered and said, “O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me.” And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once.

Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” And He said to them, “Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible to you. [But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.]”
(17:14-21)

Matthew 17:14 marks the beginning of a special period of instruction by Jesus to the Twelve that continues through chapter 20. Having given them a revelation of His person as King and of His program for the kingdom, He now gives them further principles for living in the kingdom. The first is the foundational principle of faith. Just as spiritual life must be received by faith, so also it is to be lived by faith.

Scripture gives continual testimony to the power of faith in God in the lives of believers. It was faith in God's power that caused young Caleb to look at the land of Canaan with its giants and report to Moses, "We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it" (Num. 13:30). It was faith in God's care that enabled Job to say of Him in the midst of personal disaster, "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him" (Job 13:15). It was faith in God's protection that enabled Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to stand at the edge of the fiery furnace and declare to King Nebuchadnezzar, "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up" (Dan. 3:17-18). It was faith in God's protection that enabled Daniel to continue faithfully worshiping God, even though it meant being thrown into the lion's den (Dan. 6:10). It was faith in Jesus to forgive her sins that brought spiritual deliverance to the woman who entered the Pharisee's house and washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair (Luke 7:37-50).

From Hebrews 11 we learn that "by faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain" (v. 4), that "by faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death" (v. 5), that "by faith Noah . . . prepared an ark . . . and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith" (v. 7), and that "by faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed, . . . went out, . . . [and] lived as an alien in the land of promise, . . . for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (vv. 8-10). The rest of that chapter names a host of other Old Testament saints who "gained approval through their faith" (v. 39). In view of "so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us," the writer continues, "let us also lay aside

every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith” (12:1-2).

It is not surprising, therefore, that the first lesson Jesus taught the disciples after He returned from the mount of transfiguration was a lesson about faith. Peter, James, and John had just had a glimpse of the power and majesty of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 17:2), which Paul may have been referring to when he spoke of “the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). But now the disciples were brought face to face with their own *lack* of power, which was due directly, Jesus told them, to their lack of faith.

For this lesson, the scene shifts dramatically from the mountain of glory to the valley of despair. From the dazzling majesty of the unveiled Christ in the presence of Moses, Elijah, and God the Father, in a glorious preview of the Lord’s second coming, Jesus and the three disciples descended into the reality of the sin-cursed world at its worst.

The Lord used the first tragic situation He encountered after the transfiguration as a living illustration of a principle He wanted to teach. Within this story can be seen four key elements: the pleading of the father (Matt. 17:14-15), the powerlessness of the followers (v. 16), the perversion of the faithless (vv. 17-18), and the power of faith (vv. 19-21).

THE PLEADING OF THE FATHER

And when they came to the multitude, a man came up to Him, falling on his knees before Him, and saying, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic, and is very ill; for he often falls into the fire, and often into the water. (17:14-15)

From the second gospel we learn that **the multitude** included some scribes, the Jewish legal experts, who were arguing with the nine disciples who had remained below, and that as soon as the crowd

saw Jesus coming, “they were amazed, and began running up to greet Him” (Mark 9:14-15).

From somewhere within **the multitude**, **a man came up to Jesus**, and fell **on his knees before Him**. From that posture of humility and reverence, the man said, “**Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic, and is very ill; for he often falls into the fire, and often into the water.**” We do not know how much the father meant by calling Jesus **Lord**, but at the least he recognized Him as a man of God who was endowed with divine power to heal. He fully believed that Jesus could bring sanity and wholeness to his **son**, his “only boy” (Luke 9:38), who had had this terrible affliction since childhood (Mark 9:21). Though the father may not have realized it at the time, he was about to bring *his* only beloved **son** into the presence of *God’s* only beloved Son.

Have mercy translates the aorist imperative of *eleeō*, which means to demonstrate sympathy and compassion. In his deep anguish, the father pleaded with Jesus to have compassion on his **son** and restore him to health.

Like the Greek term it translates, **lunatic** literally refers to something related to the moon (lunar). It is the idea seen in the word *moonstruck*, an expression based on the ancient belief that mental illness or madness was caused by the influence of the moon. The Greek word was used to describe what we now understand to be various nervous disorders, including epilepsy, that cause convulsions.

This particular boy was **very ill**, indicating that his condition was unusually serious. It was so severe, the father explained, that **he often falls into the fire, and often into the water**. Open fires were common, as were many open bodies of water, such as pools or wells. Because the boy had actually fallen **into the fire** many times, he must have carried burn scars that added to his unattractiveness and probable ostracism. He was also in constant danger of drowning by falling **into the water**. The father or some other member of the family probably had to stay near the boy at all times, never knowing when a seizure might occur.

The father sensed what Jesus verified, that the boy’s affliction was not simply physiological or mental but demonic. When he

brought him to Jesus, he described his son as being “possessed with a spirit which makes him mute” (Mark 9:17). In addition to having seizures, the boy was unable to speak and was apparently deaf as well (see v. 25). The demon was exceptionally violent. Whenever the “spirit seizes him,” the father said, “he suddenly screams, and it throws him into a convulsion with foaming at the mouth, and as it mauls him, it scarcely leaves him” (Luke 9:39).

Every unsaved person is subject to the control of Satan, “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2), and the more a person willfully sins and rejects God, the more he leaves himself open to Satan’s influence. But there is no indication that this boy’s demonic affliction was due to any unusual moral or spiritual wrongdoing on his part or on the part of his parents. For his own reasons, Satan caused the demon to torment this particular child.

THE POWERLESSNESS OF THE FOLLOWERS

And I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him.” (17:16)

While Jesus had been on the mountain with Peter, James, and John, the man had **brought** his demon-possessed boy to the other **disciples** for healing, but **they could not cure him**.

In light of their previous commissioning, empowering, and experience, it seems strange that the **disciples** now failed where once they had succeeded. About a year earlier, Jesus had sent the Twelve out to minister “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go,” He said, “preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons” (Matt. 10:6-8; cf. Mark 3:15). Perhaps to their own surprise, the disciples were highly successful “in casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them” (Mark 6:13).

What had gone wrong or changed? Their failure now was not due to the fact that Jesus was not with them, because He was not with them on those earlier occasions, either. They still had Jesus' promise and His power, yet **they could not cure** the boy. The explanation for their failure is therefore obvious. They failed to appropriate the power available to them.

With increasing frustration and anguish, the father understandably despaired of help from the disciples and turned to Jesus Himself.

Throughout the history of the church, the faithlessness, weakness, and indifference of Christians has caused many seeking unbelievers to despair of help from God's people. Sometimes, like the father in this story, they turn to the Lord Himself.

THE PERVERSION OF THE FAITHLESS

And Jesus answered and said, "O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me." And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured at once. (17:17-18)

The disciples' faithless impotence not only grieved the boy's father but Jesus as well. Speaking to the disciples and to the multitude rather than to the man who had just confronted Him, **Jesus answered and said, "O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?"**

Here Jesus gives a rare glimpse into the depths of His divine heart and soul. Having been accustomed from eternity past to having the angels instantly do His bidding, He was grieved at the blindness and faithlessness of God's people Israel, especially His disciples, whom He had personally chosen, taught, and endowed with unique power and authority.

The entire **generation** of Jews was faithless, represented on this occasion by the multitude, the disciples, and the self-righteous scribes who were there to entrap and discredit the Lord if they could. Even the father's faith was not complete, as he himself confessed: "I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

The people not only were **unbelieving** but **perverted**. **Perverted** is from *diastrephō*, which has the basic idea of twisting or bending out of shape. The term was frequently used to describe a piece of pottery that a careless craftsman had misshaped or that had somehow become distorted before being fired in the oven.

Although many of His listeners doubtlessly were also morally **perverted**, Jesus was here speaking primarily of the spiritual perversion that is inevitable in those who are **unbelieving**. Any person who does not genuinely trust God cannot escape having a distorted view of Him and His will.

"How long shall I be with You? How long shall I put up with you?" the Lord said, perhaps as much to Himself as to them. No doubt He was becoming increasingly anxious to return to His heavenly Father, with whom He had just experienced a unique time of fellowship on the mountain. In His humanness, He must have been tempted to doubt whether His soon-coming suffering and death would be worthwhile. "If they do not trust You while You are with them," Satan may have whispered in Jesus' ear, "how do You expect them to trust You after You have returned to heaven?"

The thrill-seeking crowds followed Jesus for the personal benefit of His healing and out of curiosity. The gloating Jewish leaders followed Him in order to convict Him of a capital crime. And although the disciples knew He was the promised Christ (Matt. 16:16), they were frequently confused about the meaning of His teaching and work.

But Jesus would not vary from His divine mission nor succumb to Satan's temptation to despair. He was on earth to do His Father's business, from which nothing would deter Him. He therefore said to the father, **"Bring him here to Me."**

When **Jesus rebuked him, . . . the demon** had no choice but to come **out of him**. But before he departed, the evil spirit made a last attempt to destroy the boy, "crying out and throwing him into terrible

convulsions; . . . and the boy became so much like a corpse that most of them said, ‘He is dead!’” (Mark 9:26; cf. Luke 9:42).

The demon knew his efforts were hopeless, because, like the demon who tormented the man of Gadara (Mark 5:7) and the one who attacked the seven sons of Sceva (Acts 19:15), he recognized the divine identity of Jesus. He was compelled to obey the Son of God.

As soon as the demon was gone, **the boy was cured at once**. While the child was still in the death-like stupor in which the demon left him, “Jesus took him by the hand and raised him; and he got up” (Mark 9:27). He could now play like other boys, with no fear of suddenly being thrown into a fire to be burned or into water to be drowned. He would have no more seizures, no more foaming at the mouth or grinding of his teeth.

Although Jesus already had successfully cast out countless demons (see Matt. 4:24; 8:16, 32; 9:33; 12:22), Luke reports that on this occasion, the crowds “were all amazed at the greatness of God” (Luke 9:43). “Greatness” is from *megaleiotes*, which refers to great splendor or magnificence. It is the word used by Peter to describe the divine majesty of which he, James, and John were eyewitnesses at the transfiguration. It was perhaps with that glory in mind that Luke here used the term to describe the crowd’s amazement. Unknowingly, they, too, had had a small glimpse of the kind of majesty and splendor the Lord would reveal at His second coming.

THE POWER OF FAITH

Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” And He said to them, “Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible to you. [But this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.]” (17:19-21)

Jesus' purpose in the miracle went beyond the healing of the demonized boy, important as that was. The healing not only brought health to the boy and great joy to his father, but glory to God. But for **the disciples** the important lesson of that event was yet to be learned.

It is not surprising that they questioned **Jesus privately**—in a house, Mark tells us (9:28), perhaps the home of one of the disciples. They were embarrassed at their own failure and were perplexed as to **why** they themselves **could . . . not cast it out**. Why was He able to accomplish with a word what they had not been able to accomplish with great effort? “You commissioned and empowered us to heal and to cast out demons,” they said, in effect. “And we have been successful before. Why did we fail this time?” They probably went about the act of casting out the demon in the same way they had on earlier occasions. They probably invoked the Lord's name, commanded the demon to leave, and awaited his departure. But this time nothing happened.

“The reason should be obvious,” Jesus implied. “You failed **because of the littleness of your faith.**” It was not because of total lack of faith but **because of . . . littleness of . . . faith** that they were powerless. They had saving faith, which they could not lose. And they had trusting faith to some degree, or they would not have attempted to heal the boy. But they lacked sufficient faith to employ the power Jesus had given to them.

Having **littleness of . . . faith** was a somewhat typical condition of the disciples. Soon after Jesus called them into His service, they sat among the crowd on the mountainside whom He charged with being anxious because of their little faith in God to provide for their physical needs (Matt. 6:25-34). When during the fierce storm on the Sea of Galilee they despaired of their lives, Jesus rebuked them before He rebuked the waves, saying “Why are you timid, you men of little faith?” (8:26). When Peter started to walk on the water but became afraid and began sinking, “Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’” (14:31). Shortly before healing the demonized boy, Jesus had again charged the disciples with having little faith in not expecting Him to be able to feed the multitude near Magadan (16:8).

Those incidents illustrate that little faith is the kind of faith that believes in God when you have something in your hand, when His provision is already made. When things were going well with the disciples and everything seemed under control, they found it easy to trust their Lord. But as soon as circumstances became uncertain or threatening, their faith withered. Their faith was like the faith of most believers in all ages. When they are healthy and have the necessities of life, their faith is great and strong, but when they are in need, their faith is small and gives way to doubt.

Great faith trusts God when there is nothing in the cupboard to eat and no money to buy food. Great faith trusts in God when health is gone, work is gone, reputation is gone, or family is gone. Great faith trusts God while the windstorm is still howling and persecution continues.

The Lord was giving the disciples a sample of what their lives would be like once He had returned to heaven, when they could no longer see Him or touch Him or talk with Him in the way they were used to doing. He was also teaching them persistence. We do not know how often they tried to cast the demon out of the boy, but at some point they gave up. When Jesus first sent the disciples out, their success at healing and casting out demons was immediate. But Jesus had not promised that that would always be the case. The Twelve had to learn that, unlike the Lord's power, theirs was not inherent in themselves. It came only from Him, by His divine provision and will.

It is encouraging to realize that even the apostles, with their unique calling and miraculous gifts, always had to rely on Jesus to minister effectively. To strengthen their faith and sense of dependence, the Lord sometimes made them wait—just as He often does with believers today. To help strengthen our faith, He may sometimes make us wait a long time for an answer to prayer. Just as an athlete grows stronger by gradually lifting heavier weights or by running longer distances, so a believer grows stronger in faith by facing ever-increasing challenges that expose his own weakness and drive him to the Lord.

Continuing the lesson on faith, Jesus said, **“For truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this**

mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible to you.”

Jesus seems to contradict Himself, first rebuking the disciples for having small faith and then telling them that even the smallest faith can move mountains. But as He made clear in the parable of the mustard seed, the seed does not represent littleness as such but rather littleness that grows into greatness. “When it is full grown,” He explained, “it is larger than the garden plants, and becomes a tree” (Matt. 13:32). Small faith can accomplish great things only if, like a **mustard seed**, it grows into something greater than it was. Only when small faith grows into great faith can it move a **mountain**.

Mustard seed faith is persistent faith. It continues to grow and become productive because it never gives up. It is the sort of faith exercised by the importunate man who kept knocking on his neighbor’s door late at night until he got a response. “I tell you,” Jesus said, that “even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs” (Luke 11:8). Jesus also illustrated **mustard seed** faith in the parable of the oppressed widow, a parable He gave specifically “to show that at all times [the disciples] ought to pray and not to lose heart” (Luke 18:1). When the widow would not take no for an answer, the godless, indifferent judge finally gave her “legal protection, lest,” he said, “by continually coming she wear me out” (v. 5). “Hear what the unrighteous judge said,” Jesus went on to explain; “now shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them speedily” (vv. 6-8).

It must also be clearly understood that Jesus was not talking about moving a literal **mountain**. Neither the apostles nor the Lord Himself ever performed such a feat—nor has anyone else in the nearly 2,000-year history of the church. That would have been the sort of grand but pointless miracle the scribes and Pharisees expected of the Messiah but which Jesus refused to perform (Matt. 12:38-39).

The expression “able to move mountains” was a common figure of speech in that day that represented the ability to surmount great obstacles. As William Barclay has observed,

A great teacher, who could really expound and interpret Scripture and who could explain and resolve difficulties, was regularly known as an *uprooter* or even a *pulverizer* of mountains. To tear up, to uproot, to pulverize mountains were all regular phrases for removing difficulties. Jesus never meant this to be taken physically and literally. After all, the ordinary man seldom finds any necessity to remove a mountain. What He meant was: "If you have faith enough, all difficulties can be solved, and even the hardest task can be accomplished. Faith in God is the instrument that allows men to remove the hills of difficulty which block their path. (*The Gospel of Matthew* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959], pp. 184-85)

Jesus was talking figuratively about mountain-size difficulties, such as the nine disciples had just experienced in not being able to cure the demonized boy.

The promise **nothing shall be impossible to you** is conditional, valid only within the framework of God's will. Mountain-moving faith is not faith in oneself, much less faith in faith, but faith in God. It is not faith itself, no matter how great, that moves mountains, but the God in whom the faith is grounded. Faith has only as much power as its object. When Jesus said to the Samaritan leper and the blind man of Jericho, "your faith has made you well" (Luke 17:19; 18:42), He did not mean that their faith in itself healed them. That would mean they healed themselves, which, of course, they did not do.

Jesus' point was that "**nothing shall be impossible to you** when you prayerfully and persistently trust in Me." The disciples could not heal the demonized boy, even though they had Jesus' commission and promised power, because they did not persist in dependent prayer.

Throughout the ages believers often have failed to receive God's promised joy, freedom, forgiveness, guidance, fruitfulness, protection, wisdom, and countless other blessings simply because, like those disciples, they have not persisted in prayer.

"This kind of demon does not go out except by prayer," Jesus declared. Although that phrase is not found in the best

manuscripts of Matthew (indicated by brackets in some versions), it is a genuine saying of Jesus and is found in Mark's account (9:29), from which an early scribe probably picked it up and added it to Matthew. However, the last two words of the verse, **and fasting**, are not found in the best manuscripts of any gospel.

Jesus' emphasis was clearly on **prayer**. As James wrote some years later, "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (James 5:16). Dedicated, fervent, passionate, persistent prayer gets results, because such prayer is honored by God.

During one point of his ministry, the nineteenth-century Christian leader George Mueller began to pray for five personal friends. It was not until five years later that the first one of them came to Christ. After five more years, two more of them became Christians, and after twenty-five years the fourth man was saved. He prayed for the fifth friend until the time of his death, a few months after which the last friend came to salvation. For that friend George Mueller had prayed more than fifty years!

10
The Believer as a
Citizen
(17:22-27)

And while they were gathering together in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men; and they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the third day.” And they were deeply grieved.

And when they had come to Capernaum, those who collected the two-drachma tax came to Peter, and said, “Does your teacher not pay the two-drachma tax?” He said, “Yes.” And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, “What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?” And upon his saying, “From strangers,” Jesus said to him, “Consequently the sons are exempt. But, lest we give them offense, go to the sea, and throw in a hook, and take the first fish

that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a stater. Take that and give it to them for you and Me.” (17:22-27)

In the last several decades many religious political action groups have arisen, including a number that claim to speak for evangelical Christianity. Some of the groups are highly critical of certain laws, policies, and court decisions. Some even specifically endorse and campaign for candidates they think would support Christian values in government.

Other evangelicals believe that, beyond voting, Christians should shy away from political and government involvement as much as possible, leaving the running of secular government to the secular world. The only legitimate work of the church, they believe, is to preach the gospel and faithfully live by its standards.

The New Testament certainly makes clear that a believer’s primary citizenship is not in this world. Paul charged the church at Philippi, “Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.” In contrast to such people, he goes on to say, “our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself” (Phil. 3:17-21). To the Ephesian Christians Paul wrote, “You are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household” (Eph. 2:19). The writer of Hebrews says to believers, “You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” (Heb. 12:22-23).

How then, some Christians argue, can those who have such a glorious heavenly heritage contaminate themselves by becoming involved in the earthly affairs of unbelieving society and government? Their attempt to appeal to the Bible for support leads

them to such queries as the following: Did not Paul teach that believers are “to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom [they] appear as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15)? Did not both Paul and Isaiah command believers in God’s name, “‘Come out from their midst and be separate,’ says the Lord. ‘And do not touch what is unclean’” (2 Cor. 6:17; cf. Isa. 52:11)? Did not John declare, “If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15)? And did not James say “that friendship with the world is hostility toward God” and that “whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4)?

In light of such passages, some Christians have opted out of any government involvement, including paying taxes. Because they not only are citizens of God’s kingdom but members of His family, they argue, why should they participate in a sinful human society that, for the most part, never takes God into account, tramples on His standards of righteousness, blasphemes His name, and often even denies His existence?

Such advocacy forces the believer to ask what is the Christian’s reasonable relationship to human society and to governmental authority in particular? That is the issue, specifically in regard to the basic duty required by government, that of paying taxes, which Jesus confronts in Matthew 17:24-27. But before He gave that lesson to Peter, the Lord again told the Twelve of His coming death and resurrection.

After the brief ministry in Caesarea Philippi (16:13) and the manifestation of His second coming glory before Peter, James, and John on the mount of transfiguration (17:1-8), Jesus and His disciples **were gathering together in Galilee**. The exact location is not mentioned, but it was probably just northwest of Capernaum (see v. 24).

It should be noted that as He entered the last six months of His public ministry, Jesus spent less and less time with the multitudes and more and more time alone with the disciples, giving them intense further instruction about the principles of His kingdom. Interjected throughout those teachings were periodic reminders of His imminent

suffering, death, and resurrection, which He here mentions to them for the third time (see Matt. 16:21; 17:12).

While He was still meeting with the disciples privately (17:19), **Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men; and they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the third day.”**

Jesus was neither helpless nor passive in going to the cross. “When the days were approaching for His ascension, . . . He resolutely set His face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51; cf. 13:22). As He later explained, He willingly accepted the cross in order that “all things which are written through the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished” (18:31). He willingly laid down His life (John 10:15, 17), which no one could have taken from Him without His consent. “No one has taken it away from Me,” He said, “but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again” (v. 18).

But in His willingness to give His life a ransom for many, Jesus submitted Himself both to the evil plans of men and to the gracious and righteous plan of His heavenly Father (see Acts 2:22-23). Because of His willing submission to wicked men, He was **going to be delivered**, by the treachery of Judas, **into the hands of men**. Also because of His willing submission to wicked men, **they** (the Jewish and Roman leaders) would **kill Him**. But because of His willing submission to His righteous heavenly Father, He would **be raised on the third day**.

Mark reports that the disciples “did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him” (9:32). Because they still could not comprehend the full reality and significance of Jesus’ promised resurrection—partly because they were stunned by the prospect of His promised suffering and death—the disciples **were deeply grieved**. After having just witnessed Jesus’ resplendent glory at the transfiguration, Peter, James, and John were perhaps even more **deeply grieved** than the others in hearing again of Jesus’ death.

The disciples also may have taken Jesus’ reference to **the third day** as merely figurative and, like Martha concerning Lazarus, were thinking only of “the resurrection on the last day” (John 11:24).

They believed in the resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked as predicted by the Lord through Daniel (Dan. 12:2), but that far away prospect was of little comfort to them now.

Jesus understood their slow comprehension (cf. Luke 24:25) as well as their small faith (Matt. 17:20) and realized that they needed repeated reminders, especially about truths that not only were hard to understand but painful to accept. They needed to be prepared for the reality that their Lord was soon going to be taken from them by death and that before He died He would suffer and be tormented. They also needed assurance that His suffering and death were in God's plan, that those events, horrible as they were, would not interrupt, much less destroy, the Messiah's work. That was, in fact, the ultimate work He came to accomplish, without which His other divine work—His teaching and miracles—would have left men better informed and in better health but still lost and eternally condemned in their sin. The crucifixion did not catch Jesus or His heavenly Father by surprise; it was the reason the Father sent Him to earth and that He willingly came. "For this purpose," He said, "I came to this hour" (John 12:27).

After Jesus gave the Twelve that third prediction of His death and resurrection, He gave Peter a private object lesson in the believer's obligation to human government. In spite of what that hostile leadership would do to the Lord Jesus, the disciples had a certain obligation to it.

THE PAYMENT DEMANDED

And when they had come to Capernaum, those who collected the two-drachma tax came to Peter, and said, "Does your teacher not pay the two-drachma tax?" He said, "Yes." (17:24-25a)

Shortly after Jesus and the disciples **had come to Capernaum**, perhaps even as they entered the city, those **who**

collected the two-drachma tax singled out **Peter**. He not only was a resident of the city but was known to be the leading member of Jesus' disciples. It is likely Jesus was staying at Peter's house and that the other disciples had gone elsewhere to lodge, since only those two are mentioned here.

The two-drachma tax was a government-approved tax that the Romans allowed the Jewish religious leaders to collect for the operation of the Jerusalem Temple.

When the Tabernacle was first built in the wilderness, God provided for its maintenance and operation through the yearly assessment of every male twenty years old and over for a half shekel. "The rich shall not pay more, and the poor shall not pay less than the half shekel, when you give the contribution to the Lord to make atonement for yourselves." The money was to be used "for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may be a memorial for the sons of Israel before the Lord" (Ex. 30:11-16). When the Temple replaced the Tabernacle, the same assessment continued, although it was temporarily reduced to a third of a shekel by Nehemiah because the former exiles in Babylon were so poor when they returned to Judah (Neh. 10:32).

Two-drachma tax translates the single Greek word *didrachma*, which means simply "two drachmas," or "double drachma." Although there was no two-drachma coin in circulation, the term *didrachma* was commonly used in reference to the Jewish Temple tax because two drachmas were equivalent to the required half shekel, which amounted to about two days' wages for the average worker.

The ancient Jewish historian Josephus reported that, after Titus destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70, the emperor Vespasian decreed that Jews throughout the Roman Empire would continue to be assessed the two-drachma tax in order to maintain the pagan temple of Jupiter Capitolinus. The tax was imposed as a calculated, vindictive reminder both to Jews and to the rest of the world of the high cost of opposing Rome.

Because the Jewish Temple tax was to be paid by the time of Passover, collectors were sent throughout Palestine a month or so in advance. It was such tax collectors, rather than the Roman-appointed

publicani (“publicans”), who **came to Peter, and said, “Does your teacher not pay the two-drachma tax?”**

The phrasing of the question suggests that the collectors, perhaps under instruction from Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, intended to challenge Jesus on the issue of paying the tax. Because He claimed to be the Messiah, they reasoned, He might consider Himself exempt. If He did, that would be yet another charge they could make against Him.

Peter did not have to ask his **teacher** for the answer, because he knew Jesus had always paid taxes, whether assessed by Rome or by the Jewish leaders. He therefore simply **said, “Yes.”**

THE PRINCIPLE DISCUSSED

And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, “What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?” And upon his saying, “From strangers,” Jesus said to him, “Consequently the sons are exempt. But, lest we give them offense, (17:25b-27a)

When Peter came into the house to tell Jesus about his confrontation with the collectors, **Jesus spoke to him first**. In His omniscience He already knew what they had said and that Peter was thinking about it.

We are not specifically told what Peter’s thoughts were, but from Jesus’ comments it seems reasonable to infer that he was wondering why Jesus, the Messiah and Son of God, would condescend to pay taxes to those over whom He was eternally sovereign.

Using a method of teaching common in that day and beneficial in any day, Jesus answered Peter’s unspoken question by first asking a question Himself. Addressing Peter by his original family name, Jesus said, **“What do you think, Simon? From whom**

do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?”

With few exceptions, all ancient governments were autocratic, with power centered in one individual who passed on his royal legacy to his heirs. Whether called pharaoh, emperor, or other such titles, all supreme rulers were included in the term **kings**, and they all assessed taxes to support their families as well as their governments. The two basic types of taxes were **customs** (levied on goods) and the **poll-tax** (levied on individuals).

His question was rhetorical, and the answer was obvious. It would not make sense for a father to collect money from his **sons** who were dependent on him. To assess them would be to assess himself. In this context **strangers** is a general term referring to those outside the king's family, specifically his subjects.

When Peter answered, **“From strangers,”** Jesus stated the corollary truth: **“Consequently, the sons are exempt.”** In the human governments of that day, the rulers' families, represented by **the sons**, were **exempt** from taxation.

Had Jesus ended the lesson at that point, Christians would have a basis for arguing that they, too, as fellow heirs with Christ and children of God, should be exempt from human taxation. They could even argue that, as His children, they were not even obligated to support God's work.

If there was any tax that Jesus was not obligated to pay it would have been the Temple tax. He was the One whom the Temple was built to honor and to whom its sacrifices and offerings were made. He was Lord of all the earth but supremely Lord of the Temple. Jesus called the Temple His “Father's house” (Luke 2:49; John 2:16) and declared Himself to be greater than the Temple (Matt. 12:6). He had every right to refuse paying the Temple tax, just as He had every right to refuse being humiliated and persecuted. But when He willingly emptied Himself of His divine glory, “taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:7), He also willingly relinquished the rights and prerogatives belonging to that glory.

“Lest we give them offense,” Jesus told Peter, the tax was to be paid. Clearly implied was the idea that it was not only to be paid in

full but paid willingly and without argument.

Regardless of how unjust a tax is assessed or how blasphemously or irresponsibly it is spent, it is to be paid. If the Son of God claimed no exemption for Himself in paying taxes to the “den of thieves” run by the wicked, false teachers and leaders of Israel, how much less can His followers claim exemption for themselves? And if He was concerned about not giving **offense** to unbelievers over that issue, how much more should His followers have such concern?

THE PROVISION DELIVERED

go to the sea, and throw in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a stater. Take that and give it to them for you and Me.” (17:27b)

There is no evidence that at any other time Jesus provided tax money through a miracle. On this occasion, however, the miracle reinforced the point that He was the Son of God and had the right with perfect impunity to refuse to pay the tax had He so chosen. He agreed to pay it entirely of His own divine volition.

Peter was instructed to **go to the sea**, apparently to any place he might choose on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, **throw in a hook**, apparently unbaited, **and take the first fish that comes up**. Then **“when you open its mouth,”** Jesus assured the disciple, **“you will find a stater. Take that and give it to them for you and Me.”**

Because there was no two-drachma coin, it was customary for two Jewish men to pay the tax together, using **a stater**, which was equal to two *didrachma*. The coin Peter found in the fish’s mouth was the exact amount needed to pay the tax for Jesus and himself.

Although this tax was for the support of the Temple services, it is certain that the hypocritical and corrupt Jewish leaders misappropriated a large part of what was collected. It is even more certain that the taxes Jesus paid to Rome were used for many ungodly and immoral purposes. Most of the Roman tax collectors were

traitors to their own people, and the taxes they extorted from their fellow countrymen not only were excessive and unjust but were used to support the occupying army, the pagan rulers, and even pagan religions.

The general principle derived from this account is clear. A believer is obligated to fulfill his duties as a citizen of this world. Although his ultimate and eternal citizenship is in heaven and the governments of men are all in varying degrees of corruption, while he remains on earth he is also under obligation to human government. Except when it would cause him to disobey God directly, he is bound by divine law to be subject to human law.

When Peter wrote his first epistle he no doubt still vividly remembered the miraculous provision of the stater in the fish's mouth and the teaching of Jesus that accompanied the miracle. In the second chapter of that epistle he declares to believers, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

Peter reminds his Christian readers that they are elected by God to be His own people and to minister as His priests to the unbelieving world around them. They are uniquely the Lord's possession, His children, and citizens of His divine kingdom, with their assignment on earth being to fulfill a divine mission. Having previously been a people of no consequence, they are now the people of God. Having previously been apart from God's mercy, they now live under His abundant mercy (v. 10). Because of that high standing, Peter says, "I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation" (vv. 11-12).

Regarding the same issue, and in spite of the godlessness of Rome and the claim to deity by Caesar, Paul wrote, "Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon

themselves. . . . For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to *all* what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor” (Rom. 13:1-2, 5-7; italics added).

Believers are to submit themselves “for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right” (1 Pet. 2:13-14). The key to the command is that it is obeyed “for the Lord’s sake.” It is not that every human law and ruler is godly and just. Most of them are not and make no claim to be. But the institution and operation of government are ordained by God for social order, and as a testimony to Him, human government is to be respected and obeyed by His people even when it is unjust.

Obedience to civil law and government is not to be done with reluctance or condescension but willingly, “not only because of wrath, but also for conscience’s sake” (Rom. 13:5). Christians should have an attitude of genuine respect for human government, not because it is always deserving of respect but because that is the will of their Lord, who instituted it for man’s benefit.

The people to whom Paul and Peter wrote were experiencing increased persecution and oppression at the hands of Rome. Yet the apostles told them not only to be loyal and law-abiding citizens but helpful citizens as well.

The early church did not start an insurrection against Rome or a campaign against slavery, wicked and cruel as both those were. In fact, the Holy Spirit took the words of slavery (slave, bond-slave, bondage, servant, etc.) and made them the symbols of Christian dedication and submission. In His omniscient providence God also used the pagan Romans to spread the Greek language, a universal language used to record His Word and carry it to the ends of the known world of that day. God used them to build a system of roads over which His messengers could easily travel as they carried the good news throughout the empire. And God used the Pax Romana, or Roman peace, to allow those messengers to travel in relative safety.

As Peter declared early in his ministry, there are obvious limits to a believer's submission to human authority. When he and John had been charged by the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem not to preach the gospel, the two men responded, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20; cf. 5:28-29). Many believers in the early church lost their freedom, their possessions, and even their lives because they refused to offer incense to Caesar. They would honor him as a human leader, but they would not worship him as a god.

The Christian's first obligation is to obey God, and when His law is directly opposed by men's laws, God's law must prevail. The Christian, for example, has no right to lie, steal, commit murder, or worship a false god, no matter what the dictates of a human government might be and no matter what the consequences for disobedience might be.

Nor is it that a Christian has no right to help change unjust laws and governments when he has opportunity to do so. But in a democratic society especially, the major injustices and evils within it are never primarily the result of poor government or poor laws, bad as those might be. When the people have no respect for law, God's or men's, and when their standards and motives revolve around their own selfish interests, no government can be stable or provide justice and order. Even the most godly and moral leaders cannot infuse morality into an immoral society. It is futile to work at changing evil laws and removing evil leaders without changing the evil hearts of those whom the laws try to control and the leaders try to rule.

Even slaves are to be submissive to their masters, Peter declared, "with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly" (1 Pet. 2:18-19). Just as with a submissive wife who desires to win her unbelieving husband to Christ (3:1-2), effective witnessing begins with submission.

The supreme example of godly submission is Jesus Christ, who "suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His

mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Pet. 2:21-23). Jesus submitted to suffering He did not deserve from those who had no right to judge Him in the first place. He committed no sin, outwardly or inwardly, yet He submitted to corrupt and sinful authorities, both religious and political. He took unjust abuse in order that He might better win men to Himself, and He is the example for everyone who calls Him Lord.

The Christian’s being a citizen of God’s kingdom does not exempt him from responsibility to human kingdoms. In fact His being a citizen of God’s kingdom gives him a special obligation to human kingdoms, because those, too, belong to God and are ordained by Him.

By being a good citizen the believer shows love for his fellow men, even those who are lost and unjust. By being a good citizen he shows respect for God-ordained human government, even when its leaders are ungodly, corrupt, and oppressive. By being a good citizen he shows that he loves God as well as his country and his fellow citizens. In the light of such testimony the onlooking world is compelled to consider the power that makes such love possible.

11

Entering the

Kingdom

(18:1-4)

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (18:1-4)

Scripture describes and identifies the people of God by many names. But more frequently than anything else we are called children—children of promise, children of the day, children of the light, beloved children, dear children, and children of God.

As believers we can rejoice in the wonderful truth that, through Christ, we have become God’s own children, adopted through

grace. Consequently, we bear the image of God's family and are joint heirs with Jesus Christ of everything God possesses. We enjoy God's love, care, protection, power, and other resources in abundance for all eternity.

But there is another side to our being children, and in Scripture believers are also referred to as children in the sense that we are incomplete, weak, dependent, undeveloped, unskilled, vulnerable, and immature.

Matthew 18 focuses on those immature, unperfected, childlike qualities that believers demonstrate as they mutually develop into conformity to the fullness of the stature of Jesus Christ.

This chapter is a single discourse or sermon by our Lord on the specific theme of the childlikeness of the believer, speaking directly to the reality that we are spiritual children with all the weaknesses that childhood implies. It is also essential to see that the chapter teaches the church, as a group of spiritually unperfected children, how to get along with each other. It is no exaggeration to say that this is the single greatest discourse our Lord ever gave on life among the redeemed people in His church. Sadly, because it has been largely misinterpreted, its profound riches often have been lost. We shall attempt to recover these truths that are so vital, powerful, and needed by the church in every age and place.

The first lesson in this masterful sermon is that everyone who enters the kingdom does so as a child (vv. 1-4). Jesus then teaches that all of us in the kingdom must be treated as children (vv. 5-9), cared for as children (vv. 10-14), disciplined as children (vv. 15-20), and forgiven as children (vv. 21-35).

The setting for the sermon is indicated by the phrase **at that time**, which refers to a period soon after Jesus told Peter to go to the Sea of Galilee and retrieve the coin from the fish's mouth (17:27). While Peter was paying the tax with the coin or, more likely, just after he returned, the rest of **the disciples came to Jesus**, possibly at Peter's house in Capernaum.

The two scenes are closely connected in time and in thought. On the same day the disciples received the lesson on being citizens of the world they were given a series of lessons on the issues related to being children of God.

The Lord's teaching was prompted by the disciples themselves, who asked Him a very selfish question that betrayed their sinful ambitions. We learn from Mark and Luke that the question, **Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?** resulted from an argument the Twelve had been having among themselves "as to which of them might be the greatest" (Luke 9:46; cf. Mark 9:34). Although He omnisciently knew what had happened, Jesus asked, "What were you discussing on the way?" They were so ashamed of their attitude and conversation that "they kept silent" (Mark 9:33-34).

Their embarrassed reticence shows they knew that what they had been doing was inconsistent with what their Master had been teaching on humility. But the fact that they nevertheless were arguing about their relative ranks in the kingdom shows they were making little effort to apply what they had been taught. They were as proud, self-seeking, self-sufficient, and ambitious as ever. In light of what they had been discussing and the way they phrased the question to Jesus, it is obvious they expected Him to name one of them as the **greatest**.

Just as they had heard but not really accepted what Jesus had been teaching about humility, they also had heard but not really accepted what He had been teaching about the **kingdom**. Much like those to whom Isaiah was sent to preach (Isa. 6:9), the disciples listened but did not perceive and looked but did not understand. They obviously still expected Jesus soon to set up an earthly kingdom, and each of them was hoping to have a high rank in that dominion. They were especially competitive about being number one.

Perhaps it was earlier that same day (see 17:22-23) that Jesus had told them (for the third time) about His impending suffering and death. Although they did not fully understand what He was saying to them (Mark 9:32), they should have sensed its gravity. And even though they were afraid to ask Jesus what He meant (v. 32b), it would seem they would have been discussing *that* issue rather than which of them was to be the greatest. They were so caught up in their own desire for prestige, glory, and personal aggrandizement that they were impervious to much of what Jesus said—even about His suffering, death, and resurrection. They demonstrated no concept of humility, very little compassion, and certainly no willingness to take up their

own crosses and follow Christ to death as they had been taught (Matt. 10:38-39; 16:24-26).

Several months after this lesson in Capernaum, their selfish ambition was still very much evident. Probably at her sons' instigation, the mother of James and John asked Jesus, "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left" (Matt. 20:20-21). The other disciples were indignant at the two brothers, but their indignation was not righteous but envious (v. 24).

It must have been especially painful to Jesus that, just as on the occasion recorded in chapter 18, this self-seeking request came immediately after He had predicted His suffering and death (20:19). There is no indication of sympathy, consolation, or grief concerning what their Lord was about to endure on their behalf and on the behalf of all the world. And on the night before He died, while He was eating the Last Supper with them, they were still arguing about their own greatness (Luke 22:24). Their insensitivity and selfishness is thus demonstrated as all the more sinful because it occurred at times when Jesus was speaking of His own suffering and death.

The rest of the disciples may have been jealous of Peter, knowing that he was the most intimate with Jesus and was always their chief spokesman. Peter was one of the three privileged to witness Jesus' transfiguration, and only Peter had walked on the water or had his Temple tax miraculously provided. But it was also only Peter who had been told by Jesus, "Get behind Me, Satan" (Matt. 16:23), and perhaps the other disciples thought the number one position was not yet finalized.

The teaching here is desperately needed in the church today, where selfish ambition is widespread and obligation to perform our duty to fellow children of God is routinely ignored.

Like all of us, the disciples needed repeated lessons in humility, and here Jesus used a child as His illustration. **And He called a child to Himself and set him before them.**

Paidion identifies a very young **child**, sometimes even an infant. This particular **child** was perhaps a toddler, just old enough to run to Jesus when **He called him to Himself**. Because the group was likely in Peter's house, the **child** may have belonged to Peter's family

and already been well known to Jesus. In any case, he readily responded and allowed himself to be taken up into Jesus' arms (Mark 9:36). Jesus loved children and they loved Him, and as He sat before the disciples holding this small child in His arms, He had a beautiful setting in which to teach them profound lessons about the childlikeness of believers.

The essence of the first lesson is in verse three: **Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.** That is an absolute and far-reaching requirement of ultimate importance. Entrance into Christ's kingdom demands childlikeness. There is no other way to receive the grace of salvation than as a child.

The kingdom of heaven, a phrase Matthew uses some 32 times, is synonymous with the kingdom of God. It had become common for Jews at the end of the Old Testament era, and especially during the intertestamental period, to substitute out of reverence the word *heaven* for the Hebrew tetragrammaton (YHWH), God's covenant name (often rendered as Yahweh, or Jehovah). Used in that way, **heaven** was simply another way of saying *God*. Both phrases refer to the rule of God, **kingdom of heaven** emphasizing the sphere and character of His rule, and kingdom of God emphatically pointing to the ruler Himself. God rules His kingdom with heavenly principles and heavenly blessings and in heavenly power, majesty, and glory. Entering the kingdom means coming under the sovereign rule of God.

Our Lord is talking directly about entering God's kingdom by faith, through salvation that will result in future millennial blessing and eternal glory. The phrase "enter the kingdom of heaven" is used three times in the book of Matthew (see also 7:21; 19:23-24) and in each case refers to personal salvation. It is the same experience as entering into life (18:8) and entering into the joy of the Lord (25:21).

The fact that a person must **enter the kingdom** assumes he is born outside of it under the rule of Satan and that he is not naturally a heavenly citizen under the rule of God. The purpose of the gospel is to show men how they may **enter the kingdom** and become its citizens, moving from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God's beloved Son (Col. 1:13). It is God's desire to have men come into His kingdom, and He does not wish "for any to perish but for all

to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). The purpose of Christ’s ministry and the ministries of John the Baptist and the apostles was to call people to the kingdom. That is still the supreme task of the church.

The central focus of Matthew’s gospel is to draw men and women into the kingdom through faith in Jesus Christ, and that is doubtlessly one of the reasons the Holy Spirit placed this book at the beginning of the New Testament. Throughout his gospel, Matthew carefully and systematically presents the components of genuine belief.

The first component presented for entering the kingdom is repentance. The message of John the Baptist was, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (3:2), and it was with that identical message that the Lord began His own ministry (4:17). The initial call for entering the kingdom was a call for people to recognize and repent of their sin, which involves genuine desire to turn away from it. This repentance is not a human work but a divine gift that only God can grant (see 2 Tim. 2:25).

A second component of the faith that grants entrance to the kingdom is the recognition of spiritual bankruptcy. That, too, is a work of God, not man, because it is the Holy Spirit who convicts of sin (John 16:8-11). The Beatitudes begin with a call to humility, expressed there as poverty of spirit (Matt. 5:3). The person who genuinely wants to enter God’s kingdom sees himself as utterly unworthy and undeserving. His awareness of his sin brings guilt and frustration over his inadequacy to remove it. He knows that he cannot himself cleanse his sin and that he has nothing to offer God that could merit forgiveness for it. The Greek term behind “poor in spirit” refers to a beggar who has absolutely no resources of his own. Because the repentant and bankrupt person is deeply aware of his sin, he mourns over it (v. 4); because he has no righteousness of his own, he hungers and thirsts for God’s righteousness (v. 6); and because he cannot himself cleanse his sin, he longs for the purity of heart (v. 8) that only God can provide.

A third component of the faith that allows entering the kingdom is meekness, which is closely related to the sense of having nothing of value to offer God. Because of his sense of personal unworthiness, the humble and meek person neither claims nor

demands anything of glory for himself. He is committed to fight for God's causes, not his own.

The one who enters God's kingdom also will have a desire and capacity to be obedient. "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven," Jesus declared, "but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). Entering God's kingdom is more than simply expressing the wish to be in it and having the conviction that Jesus is its Lord. The sovereign, saving God will produce in the soul a personal submission to Jesus as Lord and a new heart longing to obey His commands. The person who is unwilling to leave the things of the world for the things of the Lord has no genuine desire for salvation (8:19-22). Coming into the **kingdom** assumes by the very term that one comes under the rule of the Lord of that kingdom.

When Jesus called people to follow Him, He was calling them to salvation (cf. Matt. 19:21). The new birth makes people followers of Jesus. It would be more consistent with the method of our Lord if, instead of asking people to "make a decision for Christ," modern evangelists would call them to turn from sin to follow the Lord's leadership and turn over to Him the rule of their lives.

The one who enters God's kingdom also is willing to make public confession of his desire to follow the Lord. "Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men," Jesus said, "I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven" (10:32-33).

The one who enters God's kingdom is aware of his need to be self-denying. Jesus said, "He who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life shall lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake shall find it" (10:38-39).

Further in Matthew's presentation of the faith that saves is the component of persistence. The Canaanite woman with the demon-possessed daughter did not give up when Jesus at first ignored her, when the disciples wanted to send her away, or even when Jesus reminded her that she was not an Israelite, one of God's chosen people. She was willing to take even the Lord's leftovers and would not give up until He had met her need. In response to her childlike

persistence, Jesus said, “O woman, your faith is great; be it done for you as you wish” (15:28).

All of these components of the faith that God grants for salvation can be summed up in the first lesson Jesus teaches—the lesson of humility.

It is impossible to miss the fact that this teaching is directed at the disciples and implies they needed to hear and accept it. And from the argument among them that prompted this lesson from Jesus, it is obvious they were not living according to His standard of humility. They were manifesting pride and self-seeking. It may be that some of them were not yet in the kingdom (certainly this invitation was pertinent to the power-hungry, money-hungry Judas), and those who were in the kingdom had allowed their fallen flesh to dominate their attitudes. This makes the important statement that even though our hearts are in line with these principles of genuine saving faith at the time God graciously grants it to us, we fall often and easily to the power of sin that is still in us.

As He took the young child in His arms and held him up before the disciples, the Lord gathered up all those elements of salvation: **“Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.”**

The phrase **are converted** translates an aorist passive of *strephō*, which elsewhere in the New Testament is always translated with an idea of “turning” or “turning around.” It means to make an about face and go in the opposite direction. Peter used a form of the term twice in his message shortly after Pentecost, as he called his hearers to “repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away” and declared of Jesus that “God raised up His Servant, and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways” (Acts 3:19, 26). The term is used repeatedly in the book of Acts to speak of conversion (11:21; 15:19; 26:18, 20). Paul used the word when speaking of the Thessalonian believers, who had turned “to God from idols to serve a living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9).

Conversion is the other half of repentance. Repentance is being sorry for sin and turning away from it; conversion is the expression of will that fully turns from sin to the Lord. Psalm 51:13 alludes to these two halves of the turning when it declares, “and

sinner will be converted to Thee.” Jesus’ use here of the passive voice indicates that the disciples could not be **converted** from sin to righteousness by their own efforts but needed someone else to turn them around. Although the response of a person’s will is required, only God has the power to convert.

To be **converted** requires people to **become like children**, Jesus explained. A little child is simple, dependent, helpless, unaffected, unpretentious, unambitious. Children are not sinless or naturally unselfish, and they display their fallen nature from the earliest age. But they are nevertheless naive and unassuming, trusting of others and without ambition for grandeur and greatness.

“It is the person who **humbles himself as this child**,” Jesus declared, “who **is greatest in the kingdom of heaven**.” The verb behind **humbles** is *tapeinoō*, which has the literal meaning of making low. In God’s eyes, the one who lowers himself is the one who is elevated; the one who genuinely considers himself to be the least is the one God considers to be **the greatest**. “The greatest among you shall be your servant,” Jesus told the self-righteous Pharisees. “And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted” (Matt. 23:11-12). The person who is not willing to humble himself as Jesus “humbled Himself” (Phil. 2:8) will have no place in Jesus’ **kingdom**. For self-righteous Jews who exalted themselves so highly as to think God was pleased with them for their own goodness, this was a shattering blow.

But Jesus makes clear that you rise higher in His kingdom as you go lower. The great Lutheran commentator R. C. H. Lenski has written, “He who thinks of making no claims shall have all that others claim and by claiming cannot obtain. . . . Only an empty vessel can God fill with his gifts. And the emptier we are of anything that is due to ourselves, the more can God pour into these vessels his eternal riches, honors, and glories” (*The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943], 683).

A little **child** makes no claims of worthiness or greatness. He simply submits to the care of his parents and others who love him, relying on them for all that he needs. He knows he cannot meet his own needs and has no resources to stay alive. That is the kind of

humble submissiveness that results in greatness in God's eyes and in His **kingdom**.

A number of years ago I ministered to a group of black schools in the south. At one rural elementary school, I presented a simple message about God's love and the unique and lovely person of Jesus Christ, who especially loved children and died as a sacrifice for them on the cross to pay the punishment for all our sins. At the end of the message I asked, "How many of you would like to have Jesus live in your heart and forgive all your sin and desire to follow such a wonderful Lord and Savior and have Him take you to heaven some day?" To my amazement, every one of the one hundred or so hands in the room immediately went up. There was no skepticism, no doubting, no hesitation, no looking around to see how their friends would react. When the invitation was asked for, the heart of each one of those children was ready to respond positively to the claims of Jesus Christ. To be sure that they understood the commitment they were making, I asked, "Now how many of you are willing to let Jesus control your life and to obey whatever He says?" Again, every hand went up.

God knew the intent of their hearts and what that simple affirmation meant as a step toward Him. But what I saw was the illustration of saving faith. None of those children felt adequate in himself or so perfect as not to recognize sin and the need of forgiveness. None was reluctant to give his life to One who was so lovely and gracious and could provide all they would need in time and eternity. Nor were they reluctant to do what He asked them in obedience.

That is the kind of unpretentious, nonhypocritical, humble, childlike faith Jesus was talking about. That sort of response to His Son is **the greatest** in God's sight. **The greatest in the kingdom of heaven** is the one who is humble, unaffected, genuinely sincere, undemanding, nonself-centered, receptive to whatever God offers, and eagerly obedient to whatever He commands.

The popular "gospels" that propagate self-fulfillment and personal success are the antithesis of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are a mockery of New Testament Christianity and strike at the heart of salvation and of Christian living. The Lord made no provision for

the elevation of self, but rather declared unequivocally that the person who, on his own terms, “has found his life shall lose it” (Matt. 10:39). The way of self is the way of disqualification from the kingdom. Those who glorify self not only will not be great in the kingdom but will never enter it.

James presents an invitation to salvation that unarguably reiterates what our Lord demands in this passage of Matthew:

But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you. (James 4:6-10)

12
The Danger of
Causing a Christian
to Sin
(18:5-9)

“And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea.

“Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes! And if your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out, and throw it from you. It is

better for you to enter life with one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into the fiery hell. (18:5-9)

I have four children who are precious to me. I love them deeply and am zealous for their welfare, especially their spiritual welfare. My deepest desire is that they continually grow into Christlikeness, conforming to the mind and will of the Lord. I feel an almost painful sense of responsibility and commitment to protect my children from every form of harm and danger. From time to time, when people and influences have come into their lives that I know would be harmful to them, I have done my best to shield them from those dangers. As any normal parent, I have great appreciation for those who help my children and great indignation for those who harm them.

Most parents are more grateful for what is done on behalf of and for the benefit of their children than for anything that could be done for themselves. Likewise, most parents find it easier to forgive an offense against themselves than one against their child. Parents are grateful to friends, teachers, and others who encourage, support, and build up their children. They are incensed, however, by a young man who makes their daughter pregnant, a supposed friend who induces their son to try drugs, or an unbelieving professor who tries to lead their son or daughter away from their Christian faith.

God is the perfect model of this kind of parental concern, because He has always been deeply concerned about the way His children are treated. It is of utmost importance to Him that they be protected and nurtured. He therefore promises blessing to those who treat His children well and gives dire warning to those who cause them harm.

This attitude of God toward His children goes all the way back to when He first called out a nation for Himself from the loins of Abraham and said of him and his descendants, "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse" (Gen. 12:3). The Lord has always demanded good treatment of His people, commanding unbelievers to treat them well and commanding them to treat each other well.

As Jesus continued to hold the young child in His arms, He taught a lesson about mutual caring among His children.

THE PRINCIPLE

And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me;
(18:5)

The basic truth of that verse is that it is impossible to separate Christ from His people and that, consequently, whatever affects believers, affects Him. Specifically, **whoever receives a child** of God in Christ's **name receives** Christ.

As is clear from the context, Jesus was using the **child** He held in His arms only as an illustration. **One such child** identifies the specific child being referred to in the context. This can only mean the one who spiritually becomes a little child, as described in verses 3-4. Jesus was not speaking of the toddler himself but was using him to represent the children of God. That physical **child** symbolized the spiritual **child** of God, who becomes childlike in his faith and who humbly accepts the gospel and is converted (v. 3). Such converted people are the "little ones who believe in Me," Jesus explained (v. 6). And no matter how lowly, unsophisticated, immature, or weak a believer is, he must be treated as the precious **child** of God he truly is. There is solidarity and unity between the Lord and all who share His life by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Christianity is not a system of religion but a redeemed people who are united with God, one with Him through His Son, Jesus Christ. Christians not only follow Jesus' teachings but Jesus Himself and are totally and intimately identified with Him. He is the Head and they are the Body (1 Cor. 12:27); He is the Vine and they are the branches (John 15:5); He is the Bridegroom and they are the bride (Rev. 21:2, 9).

In profound terms, Jesus affirmed this amazing reality to His disciples, "The one who listens to you listens to Me, and the one who

rejects you rejects Me; and the one who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me” (Luke 10:16; cf. John 13:20). When Saul was persecuting Christians, the Lord confronted him on the Damascus Road with the words, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:4). In his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul negatively confirmed the oneness between Christ and each believer when he strongly rebuked them for sexual immorality involving prostitutes. It was spiritually defiling in a unique way, because it made Christ Himself a kind of participant in the sin. Because the believer is spiritually united with Christ, when he sexually unites himself with a prostitute he involves the Lord in his sin. “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?” the apostle asked. “Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? May it never be!” (1 Cor. 6:15). It is not that Christ Himself is made impure by the impurity of His followers but that His name is stained. He is not personally contaminated by believers’ sins any more than sunlight is contaminated by shining on a garbage dump. But His name is maligned and His work is hindered when His people sin, just as His heart is blessed when His people are received.

Receives is from *dechomai*, which means to deliberately and readily take something or someone to oneself. The term was often used of welcoming honored guests and meeting their needs with special attention and kindness. Jesus’ primary point here is that the way a person, believer or unbeliever, treats Christians is the way he treats Jesus Christ. When anyone welcomes with an open heart a Christian as an honored guest and friend, he welcomes Christ as his guest and friend. When he treats any Christian with tenderness and kindness, he treats Christ in the same way.

Our Lord emphatically taught this unity between Himself and His people when He said, “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him,” Jesus said, “then He will sit on His glorious throne.” After placing believers, the sheep, on His right and unbelievers, the goats, on the left,

the King will say to those on His right, “Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the

foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.” Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” And the King will answer and say to them, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.” (Matt. 25:31-40)

Believers are to receive one another with tenderness, care, kindness, and love, opening up their hearts to welcome fellow believers no matter who they are. In so doing, they embrace the Lord Christ who lives in them. We are to care for each other like precious children. What a vital message to the church!

THE PERIL

but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea.

“Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes! (18:6-7)

Next Jesus presents the negative side of the previously mentioned truth: When a person mistreats a Christian he mistreats Christ. This side of the truth also applies to believers and unbelievers. Whether the person is the worst persecuting pagan who causes harm to a Christian or whether he is a believer who causes harm to a fellow Christian, the result is the same: Christ Himself is attacked.

It is obvious that our Lord is not referring to physical but to spiritual children. The phrase **these little ones who believe in Me** makes clear that He has in mind the children He had just spoken of in the phrase “one such child” (v. 5), which refers to the children mentioned in verses 3-4.

Jesus is speaking of moral and spiritual stumbling, that is, of sinning. The verb *skandalizō* (**to stumble**) literally means “to cause to fall,” and the Lord is therefore speaking of enticing, trapping, or influencing a believer in any way that leads him into sin or in any way makes it easier for him to sin. A person who is responsible for causing a Christian to sin commits an offense against Christ Himself as well as against the Christian.

In the most vivid and sobering language indicating the seriousness of such an act against one of God’s children, Jesus declared that a person who does such a thing would be better off dying a terrible death. It would be **better for him**, in fact, **that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea.**

Heavy millstone translates *mulos onikos*, which refers to the large upper millstone that was turned in a grinding process by a donkey and often weighed hundreds of pounds. The Romans sometimes practiced this form of execution by tying a heavy stone around a criminal’s neck and dropping him overboard in deep water. Such a pagan form of execution was unimaginably horrible to Jews, perhaps in some respects more fearful even than crucifixion. Yet Jesus said that suffering such a terrifying death would be better than causing even one of His people to sin.

The thought must have been especially sobering to the disciples, because they had just been indulging in a heated argument over who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. The dispute doubtlessly caused everyone’s anger and resentment to rise, as one after the other gave reasons he was due the honor. The Twelve not only were sinning because of their own pride and boasting but also because they were inciting each other to envy, jealousy, and anger.

Every believer is a child of God and, like all children, needs protection, care, and understanding. It is an enormous crime to harm even one of them by leading him to sin. To ruin the character of a

saint or to retard his spiritual growth is heinous in God's sight, because it amounts to attacking His beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

Zechariah declared that whoever harms God's people Israel "touches the apple of His eye" (Zech. 2:8). "The apple of the eye" was an ancient figure for the cornea, the most delicate and sensitive exposed part of the body. The idea is that whoever harms God's people pokes his finger in God's eye, causing serious irritation to the Sovereign.

One of the reasons the Bible speaks so forcefully against false teachers is that they not only believe and practice evil but also lure others, including God's saints, into their wicked beliefs and practices. People in the church who live ungodly lives and lure others into their sinful ways are sticking their finger in God's eye, as it were, and would be better off dead. How we treat fellow believers in the church is a matter of immense importance, and to lead them into sin, thus irritating Almighty God, is unthinkable.

There are many ways persons can be caused to **stumble** into sin. The most obvious way is by directly tempting them to sin, and Satan and the world can use even believers to tempt other believers to sin.

Eve provides the first and classic example of one who directly tempted another person to sin. After succumbing to Satan's temptation herself she immediately seduced Adam into joining her in disobeying God. Aaron, the first high priest of Israel, caused the whole nation to sin by molding and then worshiping the golden calf while Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the commandments from God. King Jeroboam was so flagrant in leading Israel into idolatry that his name became a byword for idolatrous rebellion against God. He was the supremely sinful king who set an example of wickedness into which other sinful kings followed and to whom they were thus compared by being described as walking "in the sins of Jeroboam" (see, e.g., 1 Kings 16:31; 2 Kings 3:3; 17:22).

Jesus charged the Jewish leaders not only with being hypocritical and sinful themselves but with leading others into sin through their man-made traditions. Although they were not guilty of adultery in the sense of having an extramarital affair, many of them became adulterers themselves and promoted adultery by others

through their tradition of permitting a husband to divorce his wife without legitimate cause. Whoever “divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity,” Jesus declared, “makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Matt. 5:32).

The church at Pergamum was indicted by the Lord because it tolerated members who held “the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit acts of immorality” (Rev. 2:14). The church at Thyatira had a similar sin, the toleration of “the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray, so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols” (2:20). Both churches tolerated the teaching of false doctrine and the practice of wicked standards of living.

A husband today may suggest to his wife, “Let’s add this deduction to our income tax return. It really doesn’t qualify, but no one will ever know, and besides everyone else does it.” In doing that he commits a double sin by inducing his wife to join him in the fraudulence. A person may talk a co-worker into joining him in inflating company expense reports and pocketing the difference. That person, too, commits the double sin Jesus is warning against here. A man may seduce a Christian woman or lead her to watch immoral entertainment while on a date.

Those examples and many more would qualify as ways of leading a child of God to sin. It is amazing how reluctant we are to expose our physical children to evil and how eager we are to protect them. But frequently we are not as eager to protect all other children in the Lord’s family.

God’s children can also be caused to stumble indirectly. That is the broad category of danger about which Paul specifically warns parents, saying, “Do not provoke your children to anger” (Eph. 6:4). By such things as showing favoritism, demanding unrealistic achievements, being critical, overprotective, or overpermissive, parents can frustrate and exasperate their children and drive them to angry reactions that are emotionally and even spiritually damaging. Not allowing children to make their own mistakes now and then,

neglecting them (sometimes because of church commitments), and showing little interest in their opinions and concerns can bring the same tragic result. In rebelling against their parents' attitudes and practices in such matters as those, children often rebel against their parents' beliefs and moral standards as well, siding against them on virtually every issue simply to vent their resentment and assert their independence. Spouses, friends, co-workers, and fellow church members can also be indirectly caused to stumble into sin by being treated in insensitive, unloving, and unkind ways.

A third manner of causing God's children to stumble is through sinful example. Without having a word said to them, believers can be led into sinful attitudes and practices simply by following the bad example of others. Here again, parents need to be on guard, because they are continually setting examples, both good and bad, for their children to follow.

The story is told of an alcoholic father who stole out of the house one winter night to go to his favorite tavern. He had not gone far when he heard a soft crunching noise in the snow behind him. He turned around to see his five-year-old boy a few yards behind him. When he asked his son what he was doing, the boy replied, "I'm trying to follow in your footsteps, Dad." According to the story, the man never took another drink.

Timothy succeeded Paul as leader of the church at Ephesus, and in the first letter to his successor the apostle admonished him that "in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity" he was to show himself "an example of those who believe" (1 Tim. 4:12). A church leader—whether pastor, youth worker, Sunday school teacher, or whatever—cannot escape being an example that, for better or worse, consciously or unconsciously, is going to be followed by those given into his care.

Even when a person himself is not sinning, it is possible for him to lead others into sin. By carelessly flaunting one's liberty in Christ by participating in an activity that is not itself a sin and is perfectly appropriate for a strong Christian, it is possible to cause weaker brothers and sisters **to stumble**. If they follow the mature believer's example while still being convicted in their own immature consciences that the practice is wrong, they are led into sin. Although the practice itself may not be sinful, it becomes sinful for the weaker

Christian because it is done against what he believes to be right, and therefore against his conscience.

Many believers in the early church came out of strict Judaism, in which the eating of pork in any form was forbidden. They were also used to observing numerous holy days, especially the Sabbath. After becoming Christians it was difficult to break with those Old Covenant ceremonial regulations that had been instilled in them as required by God, and many could not bring themselves to eat pork or to work on the Sabbath. Many other believers, on the other hand, came out of rank paganism, where demonic practices and the worst sorts of immorality were integral parts of their religion. For them, anything associated with those pagan rites was abhorrent and repulsive, and to eat a piece of meat that had once been offered on a pagan altar was unthinkable.

That is the issue Paul fully covers in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 (see the volume *1 Corinthians* in this commentary series), an issue compounded by judgmental self-righteousness on both sides. The Gentile believers criticized weaker Jewish believers for still refusing to touch pork or do any work at all on the Sabbath, emphasizing the truth that, in Christ, they had been freed from such ceremonial restrictions. The Jewish believers criticized weaker Gentile believers for refusing to eat meat offered to pagan idols, emphasizing the truth that they now knew those pagan deities were not gods at all and that, in any case, the meat itself could not be spiritually or morally contaminating.

The important concern, Paul told both sides, was neither eating or not eating certain foods nor observing or not observing certain days. More important by far were the consciences of their fellow believers. As long as someone believes a practice is wrong, for him it *is* wrong, because his intent is to do wrong, even though the practice might not be wrong in itself. Until his conscience grows to the place where he can honestly accept doing it, the practice should be avoided. Not only that, but those who do not share that particular inhibition should respect those who have it. Otherwise they may cause their brother to commit sin by going against his conscience. In fact, the stronger Christian should himself refrain from the practice if doing so would help protect the conscience of a weaker believer. In

summary Paul says, “All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles. The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:20-23; cf. 1 Cor. 8:1-13).

A weak Christian who is continually offered an activity that offends his conscience is likely either eventually to go along and do what he believes is wrong, and thus reveal a motive of disobedience and thereby go against his conscience, or to overreact against the activity and go deeper into legalism. In either case, he is caused **to stumble** spiritually, and anyone who contributes to his stumbling, Jesus says, would be better off dead.

Just as many in the last days will be surprised that they had served the Lord through serving His people, many others will be surprised that they had opposed the Lord by *not* serving His people. To the unbelieving goats on His left the Lord will say,

“Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.” Then they themselves also will answer, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?” Then He will answer them, saying, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment. (Matt. 25:41-46)

It is even possible to cause someone **to stumble** into sin by failing to lead them into righteousness. That may, in fact, be the most common way in which believers contribute to other believers’ sin. To

keep God's truth and goodness to ourselves and not share our spiritual insights and experiences is to withhold from others what can help them grow. It is tragic that many believers starve for spiritual food while living in a Christian family and attending an evangelical church.

Throughout the New Testament, believers are admonished to encourage each other in righteousness. They are called "to stimulate one another to love and good deeds" (Heb. 10:24). God leads His people away from sin and to righteousness, and that is what every Christian should seek for himself and for his fellow Christians. In His model prayer, Jesus calls us to ask our heavenly Father "not [to] lead us into temptation," knowing that He would never do such a thing, because it is His supreme desire to "deliver us from evil" (Matt. 6:13). James assures us that "God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone" (James 1:13). The person who lives a godly life follows God's example. Like God, he never leads others into sin but helps protect them from it and builds them up in holiness.

Instead of inducing others to sin, we should induce them to grow in righteousness. Instead of misusing our liberty for our own satisfaction, we should be willing to restrict our liberty whenever so doing might help a weaker brother. Instead of setting an evil example, we should set a Christlike example. Instead of provoking others to the point of anger and rebellion, we should stimulate them to love and good works.

William Barclay tells the story of an old man on his deathbed who was terribly distraught. When asked what was bothering him, he replied, "When we were boys at play, one day at a crossroads we reversed a signpost, and I've never ceased to wonder how many people were sent in the wrong direction by what we did." Such acts go on all the time in the life of the church as believers send other believers signals that lead them on the road to sin. This is extremely serious. Just how serious is seen in the next verse.

"Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks!" Jesus went on to warn. **"For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!"**

Woe was a word of cursing and condemnation. **The world** is under God's curse not only because of its own sinfulness but because

of the spiritual and moral **stumbling blocks** it puts in the paths of His children. There seems to be no end of books, magazines, movies, TV programs, and commonly accepted practices and attitudes to mislead and corrupt those who belong to God. The world is constantly setting sin traps, and its favorite victims are God's children.

That is characteristic of the world's fallenness, and **it is inevitable that such stumbling blocks come** and continue to come until the Lord returns. **But woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!** Jesus had already established the gravity of that offense by declaring it would be better for the guilty person to have been thrown into the sea and drowned. Better off dead than to lead one of the Lord's little ones astray. Now He adds that such offenses bring the judgment of God.

One of the young men in our church handicapped ministry came to me one Sunday and said he had done a bad thing. "I got drunk," he explained remorsefully. Upon questioning him, I discovered that, as a prank, his brother and some friends had forced alcoholic beverages down his throat until he was drunk. But the worst tragedy was not his drunkenness but the guilt he was made to suffer. He thought he was responsible for becoming drunk and had asked Jesus for forgiveness, but he was so ashamed that he wondered if the Lord would forgive him. I assured him that Jesus fully understood and had forgiven him, though, of course, the guilt was not his at all. And those who were guilty for his drunkenness and stricken conscience were in danger of God's judgment.

THE PREVENTION

And if your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out, and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into the fiery hell. (18:8-9)

The Lord is obviously speaking figuratively, because no part of our physical bodies causes us to sin, and removing any part of it would not keep us from sinning. The point was that a person should do whatever is necessary, no matter how extreme and painful it might be, to keep from sinning himself or to keep from causing others to sin. Nothing is worth keeping if, in any way, it leads to sin. And the implication here is that there is overcoming grace available for victory over temptation and sin.

This is a repetition, with slight alteration, of the exhortation our Lord gave in Matthew 5:29-30. In 5:29-30, the reference is to the right eye and then the hand and foot, whereas here it is reversed and no mention is made of which eye. And whereas 5:29-30 refers to hell, here Jesus adds the terms *fire* to show the nature of hell and *everlasting life* to show the contrast to hell. All those details fade when we focus on the intent of the words. My own comments on the Matthew 5:29-30 text are repeated here:

Here Jesus points the way to deliverance from heart sin. At first His advice seems incongruous with what He has just been saying. If the problem is in the heart, what good is plucking out an eye or cutting off a hand? If the right eye were lost, the left would continue to look lustfully, and if the right hand were cut off, the left would still remain to carry on sinful acts.

Obviously, Jesus is speaking figuratively of those things, physical or otherwise, that cause us to be tempted or make us more susceptible to temptation. In Jewish culture, the right eye and right hand represented a person's best and most precious faculties. The right eye represented one's best vision, and the right hand one's best skills. Jesus' point is that we should be willing to give up whatever is necessary, even the most cherished things we possess, if doing that will help protect us from evil. Nothing is so valuable as to be worth preserving at the expense of righteousness. This strong message is obviously not to be interpreted in a wooden, literal way so that the Lord appears to be advocating mutilation. Mutilation will not cleanse the heart. The intent of these words is simply to call for dramatic severing of the sinful impulses in us which push us to evil action (cf.

Matt. 18:8-9; John F. MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1985], p. 304.)

If any habit, situation, relationship, or anything else **causes you to stumble**, Jesus said, it should be permanently forsaken. Great danger often requires drastic measures. Even if a sacrifice causes a person to be figuratively **crippled** and to be blind in **one eye**—financially, socially, professionally, or in any other way—that is infinitely better than being **cast into the eternal fire of hell**.

This almost proverbial statement is a general exhortation calling for drastic action against sin. Although only unbelievers are in danger of hell, believers can understand from this statement the seriousness of sin and of leading others to sin. The best prevention against causing others to sin is making whatever sacrifice is necessary to protect *oneself* from sin. “I buffet my body and make it my slave,” Paul said, “lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:27). The person who deals decisively with his own temptations and sins will be in the least danger of causing others to sin. If he is genuinely and humbly concerned that he himself not **stumble** spiritually, he will also be prepared and motivated to help others not to stumble.

13
The Care of God's
Children
(18:10-14)

See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you, that their angels in heaven continually behold the face of My Father who is in heaven. [For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.] What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? And if it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. Thus it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish. (18:10-14)

An essential element in understanding the redemptive plan of God is the truth that only those who come to Him through Christ in childlike faith can enter His kingdom. Only those whom the Lord humbles in complete dependence on Him will become His children and therefore joint heirs with Jesus Christ (Matt. 18:4; Rom. 8:17; Eph. 1:11-14). That is why, as Paul points out to the Corinthians, the church does not include “many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong” (1 Cor. 1:26-27). It is not that those who have great fame, high position, wealth, intellect, or other human status or achievement *cannot* come to God but that, because of their worldly recognition and power, they are often inclined to think they have no need of Him.

The “wise according to the flesh” to whom Paul refers are the intelligentsia, those whose learning is far above that of the average person. The “mighty” includes those who have political, military, or financial power and who thereby exercise control over the lives of many other people. The “noble” are the social elite, those who have inherited or achieved elevated social status. Feeling proud, superior, and self-satisfied, most such people feel no need for God, especially if coming to Him would demand childlike humility and surrendering confidence in their human abilities, accomplishments, and positions.

It is tragic that many Christians are eager to win the rich, famous, and powerful to Christ, not so much for the Lord’s sake or for those persons’ own sakes as for the supposed boon their testimonies would give to the cause of evangelism. Yet it is not a person’s human greatness but his spiritual humility that the Lord honors and blesses. It is God’s power alone that draws and wins men to Himself, and the human instruments He desires to use in that work are not the great but the humble. A human witness who attracts attention to himself draws attention away from Christ.

Until a person is willing to become one of Christ’s **little ones** (Matt. 18:6, 10, 14), he can have no part in God’s kingdom or God’s work. That is why “the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God” (1 Cor. 1:28-29). And

that is why, as Isaiah prophesied, God anointed Jesus “to preach the gospel to the poor, . . . to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden” (Luke 4:18; cf. Isa. 61:1). It is not that the outcasts of the world—represented by the poor, the captive, the blind, and the downtrodden—are the only ones who have need of the gospel but that they are often the ones who are most willing to recognize their need.

As He continues to teach the disciples about caring for one another as believers, the Lord first states the rule and then the reasons for the rule.

THE RULE

See that you do not despise one of these little ones; (18:10a)

As explained in the previous chapter, **little ones** does not refer to physical children but to Christians, those who believe in Christ (v. 6). The young toddler whom Jesus perhaps still held in His arms (see v. 2) was a visual illustration of God’s spiritual children.

See that you do not despise is a warning, a negative command that strongly implies God’s displeasure with disobedience of it. The Greek use of the negative with a subjunctive verb intensifies the prohibition. Jesus had already made clear the seriousness of mistreating any of God’s **little ones**: It would be better for a person who commits such an offense to have “a heavy millstone . . . hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea” (v. 6).

Despise is from *kataphroneō*, which has the literal meaning of thinking down on. To **despise** someone is to look down on him as inferior and not worth consideration or care. It is to disdain a person and treat him with contempt as being worthless. To **despise one of these little ones** is therefore to treat one of God’s own precious and beloved children with disdain and contempt.

Little ones included the Twelve themselves. And in the context of what had just happened, Jesus was telling them that their bickering about who was greatest in the kingdom was a form of despising God's **little ones**, in this case each other. When one of them pushed himself up, it was at the expense of pushing the others down. Instead of their proud, self-seeking attitudes that created jealousy, envy, and resentment, they should have been showing concern for each other's welfare. They should have been building others up rather than themselves.

Paul exhorted the Philippian believers:

Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfish or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:2-8)

It is natural for the world to resent Christians and to look down on them. But it is not acceptable for Christians to look at each other in that way. Yet, still fearing the fallen flesh, the church has always been tempted to mimic the ways and attitudes of the world, which it does when any of God's people feel superior to others.

Christians **despise** each other in many different ways. We despise one another when we flaunt our liberty before weaker believers, causing them to go against their consciences or to overreact and fall deeper into legalism. "Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him" (Rom. 14:3). To use

one's liberty in Christ in such a callous way is to use it "as a covering for evil" instead of as a servant of God (1 Pet. 2:16).

Christians also **despise** one another when they show partiality. We are never to hold "faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism" (James 2:1). God loves and cares for His children equally. He "is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him" (Acts 10:34-35). That has always been the Lord's attitude and it has always been the attitude He expects of His people. The believer who pleases the Lord and who sincerely honors Him is the one who honors all others who belong to Him (Ps. 15:1-4). He never looks down on God's other children, however insignificant they might seem to be.

By the same token, the believer who pleases the Lord does not give special honor to a fellow Christian because of wealth, high position, or influence. That, too, has always been a temptation for Christians. James warned believers in the early church:

If a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law, according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. (James 2:2-8)

A third way believers **despise** fellow believers is by withholding help from those in need. When Paul confronted that problem in the Corinthian church he rebuked them with the words, “When you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God, and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you” (1 Cor. 11:20-22). That situation would correspond to a church today having a potluck supper before a Communion service, with those who brought food eating it all and not sharing with those who had none. To do such a thing is to show contempt for God’s church and for His poorer children.

The exhortations of James 2:15-16 and 1 John 3:17-18 are valuable additions to this same point, warning against withholding from fellow believers any basic necessity of life.

A fourth way believers **despise** fellow believers is by ridiculing their physical appearance. Such insensitive, heartless criticism was directed against Paul by some of the haughty, worldly members in the Corinthian church who said that “his letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive, and his speech contemptible” (2 Cor. 10:10). Although they admitted his teaching was sound, they had the meanness and stupidity to despise him merely because of his physical looks. Paul commended the Galatians for not despising or loathing his “bodily condition,” perhaps a serious eye infection related to malaria, when he first preached the gospel to them (Gal. 4:14). To mock another person because of physical, mental, or cultural deficiencies not only is contemptible in men’s sight but in God’s.

During one of Dwight L. Moody’s British campaigns he was repeatedly mocked in the press for his lack of proper English and his homey style. When asked to speak at Cambridge University, the epitome of British intellectualism and sophistication, Moody apparently decided to capitalize on that image in order to gain the attention of the audience. His comment no doubt also had the effect of pointing up the superficiality and irrelevance of the criticism of his

grammar. He opened his message with the words, “Don’t let nobody never tell you God don’t love you, cause He do.”

Believers **despise** other believers when they are indifferent to or judgmental of a fellow believer who spiritually stumbles. When a brother or sister falls into sin, especially if the sin is public and well known, there is a temptation to write them off, saying in effect, if not in words, “He knew better and he made his choice. Let him live with the consequences. Until he changes, I’ll stay at arm’s length.” But Paul’s counsel is otherwise. “Brethren,” he wrote the Galatians, “even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:1-2). Christ’s way for His followers is that they humbly help a sinning brother, realizing that they, too, could fall into the same or equally bad sin and that it is only by God’s grace if they do not.

Believers also **despise** other believers by resenting a fellow Christian who confronts their sinfulness. Instead of facing and repenting of a sin that is brought to their attention and being grateful to the one who confronts them, the old self often makes them strike back and charge the other person with being judgmental, self-righteous, legalistic, and hypocritical. Even when church discipline is carried out in careful conformity to Scripture and is done graciously and in love, it is often resented. Paul warned the Corinthian believers not to resent and despise Timothy if he came to them (1 Cor. 16:10-11), no doubt because he would confront them about many of the sins for which Paul had often, including in that letter, confronted them. The apostle also counselled Titus not to allow those under his care to disregard him for exhorting and reproofing them (Titus 2:15).

A seventh way believers **despise** other believers is by taking advantage of them for personal gain. Although Paul was referring specifically to sexual immorality, his warning to the Thessalonians applies to taking advantage of a fellow believer in any way—financially, socially, or any other. A Christian is not to “defraud his brother” in any regard, “because the Lord is the avenger in all these things” (1 Thess. 4:6).

THE REASONS

for I say to you, that their angels in heaven continually behold the face of My Father who is in heaven. [For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.] What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? And if it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. Thus it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish. (18:10b-14)

After stating the negative rule regarding care for God's children, Jesus gives three reasons for the rule: believers' relation to angels, their relation to Himself, and their relation to the Father.

BELIEVERS' RELATION TO ANGELS

for I say to you, that their angels in heaven continually behold the face of My Father who is in heaven. (18:10b)

The expression **I say to you** is emphatic, pointing up the importance of what the Lord is about to say. The idea is, "With all My authority I solemnly affirm to you." He then gives the first compelling reason Christians should never despise other Christians: their relation to **their angels in heaven**.

The writer of Hebrews explains that the holy, elect angels are "all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation" (Heb. 1:14). Their purpose is to serve God by attending to the care of His people. These **angels in heaven** live in the very presence of God, where they wait attentively for His

commands to serve the people of His love. “They **continually behold the face of My Father who is in heaven,**” Jesus said. The implication is that the holy angels never take their eyes off God, lest they miss some direction from Him regarding a task they are to perform on behalf of a believer.

Neither of these texts, however—nor any other Scripture—teaches the idea of an individual guardian angel for every believer, as Jewish tradition in Jesus’ day taught and as many people still believe and teach. When Peter knocked at the door of Mary’s house after he was miraculously released from prison, a servant girl named Rhoda answered. Upon seeing Peter she was so overjoyed she forgot to open the gate. When she reported his presence to the believers gathered inside, it was probably the notion of individual guardian angels that was behind their insistence that she had only seen “Peter’s angel” (Acts 12:12-15). But that superstitious belief is merely reflected in this text; it is neither taught nor substantiated here or anywhere else in Scripture.

In Matthew 18:10 Jesus speaks of believers and **their angels** in a collective sense. These angels, whether a distinct group or the whole body of holy angels, are responsible for the care of God’s **little ones**, those who believe in His Son (v. 6). It is in part because of these angels who live in the presence of the **Father who is in heaven** that believers are warned not to despise one another.

The fact that Almighty God is so concerned about the care of His beloved children that He has hosts of angels in His presence ready to be dispatched to their aid demonstrates clearly how valuable believers are and how unthinkably wicked it is to look with disdain on someone whom God so highly prizes.

As indicated by brackets in the NASB text, verse 11 (**For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost**) is not found in the best early manuscripts of this gospel. The almost identical phrase, however, is in Luke 19:10, where “to seek and” is added before **to save**. Because there is no question about the authenticity of the Luke text, there is no question that Matthew 18:11 teaches a genuinely scriptural truth. The phrase was probably picked up from Luke by a well-meaning copyist and added to Matthew. But because it is not a part of Matthew’s original gospel, it will not be discussed here.

BELIEVERS' RELATION TO CHRIST

What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying? And if it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. (18:12-13)

As implied, though not stated, in this passage, a second reason believers are not to despise each other is their relation to Jesus Christ. The Lord had just said that “whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me” (v. 5). Every true believer—no matter how young, immature, unfaithful, unattractive, or deprived—is one with Jesus Christ, purchased with His own precious blood. Therefore, to look down on any Christian and consider him to be worthless and useless is to despise Christ Himself. “The one who listens to you listens to Me,” Jesus told the seventy when He commissioned them, “and the one who rejects you rejects Me; and he who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me” (Luke 10:16).

The Pharisees and scribes considered the uneducated and lower classes to be morally and religiously inferior and worth little, if any, of their attention. Jesus, on the other hand, would not break off a battered reed or put out a smoldering wick (Matt. 12:20; cf. Isa.42:3), both of those figures being pictures of treatment given to afflicted and helpless humanity. He would not further break someone who was already broken and suffering, nor would He further quench someone whose remaining life and hope were already about to be extinguished. Throughout His earthly ministry Jesus demonstrated just the opposite concern as He fed the hungry, healed the sick, encouraged the hopeless, and offered forgiveness to sinners. He did “not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them” (Luke 9:56).

It is that gracious, divine concern that Jesus illustrates here in the parable of the lost sheep. **What do you think?** was a common

phrase used by teachers to get their students to ponder carefully about what was being taught.

Although none of the Twelve is identified as a shepherd by trade, every Palestinian Jew was familiar with shepherds and their ways. In this hypothetical story, Jesus told of a **man** who was a shepherd and who had **a hundred sheep**, one of which went **astray**. In the rugged terrain of Palestine there were many ravines, gullies, caves, and crevices into which a sheep could wander or fall. “When the shepherd discovers a sheep is missing,” Jesus asked, “**does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying?**”

The idea seems implied that the shepherd sensed the **straying** sheep’s absence without having to check the entire flock. The shepherd knew his sheep intimately, both as a flock and individually (cf. the analogy of John 10:1-18). He therefore instinctively knew when something was wrong or when one of them was missing. He was also an expert at tracking lost sheep, and love for his defenseless and utterly dependent flock would not allow him to give up until he had found and rescued the one that was missing. The loyal shepherd would fight off wolves, bears, lions, thieves, or any other threat to the sheep. When an errant animal was found, the shepherd would pour olive oil over any wounds or scratches and he would bind up a broken leg. He would then tenderly place the sheep on his shoulders and carry it back to the fold.

From this parable we see that Christ’s love, illustrated in that of the shepherd, is personal and individual. It does not matter which sheep goes astray. The Lord is equally concerned for any **one of them**. He is just as much aware and concerned when a poor believer in the slums wanders from Him as when a respected church leader stumbles into sin.

The parable also illustrates the truth that the Lord’s care for His people is patient. He is infinitely patient with their self-willed, sinful foolishness and He will not give up on a single one, even though that person might be the least promising and the least faithful of all His children.

We also see here God’s seeking care. He does not wait for a lost sheep to return on its own but personally goes as far into the

wilderness as necessary to find and rescue it. The Savior is infinitely more anxious and determined for restoration than is even the most repentant believer.

If a human shepherd can exhibit so much concern for each sheep under his care, how much more does the Lord Jesus Christ, “the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant” (Heb. 13:20), care when a single one of His people spiritually goes astray? And when He **finds it** and restores it to Himself, how much more heavenly rejoicing is there **over it. . . than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray?**

On another occasion, Jesus used the same parable to teach God’s concern for unbelievers. “I tell you,” He explained, “that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:3-7).

There is special joy expressed for the sheep that is found not because it is more valued or loved than the others but because its danger, hardship, and great need elicit special concern from the caring shepherd. In the same way, when one child in a family is ill, particularly if it is seriously ill, a mother will devote much more time and attention to him than to the other children, often more than to all the rest together. And when that child finally gets well, the mother does not rejoice for the children who have been healthy all along but for the one who was sick and suffering. And if the brothers and sisters are loving, they, too, will rejoice in the restoration of their sibling.

For several days in the fall of 1987, the whole world had its attention and compassion fixed on a little girl, not quite two years old, who was trapped in an abandoned well shaft in west Texas for three days. When, after much strenuous work, difficult drilling, and painstaking excavation, she was finally rescued, there was rejoicing all across the land, and she was sent thousands of cards and presents as she recuperated in the hospital. It was not that she was more precious or worthy than countless other little girls, but that her need at that time was so great.

Because the Lord Jesus has such tender compassion on all His needy little ones, so that their well-being brings Him great joy, we should find ourselves in holy fear of ever looking down on such ones.

BELIEVERS' RELATION TO THE FATHER

Thus it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish. (18:14)

A third reason believers are not to despise each other is their relation to their **Father who is in heaven**, who joins the Son and the angels in rejoicing over a believer who is restored.

Although *apollumi* (**perish**) often carried the idea of total destruction or death, it sometimes, as here, referred to nonpermanent ruin or loss. In Romans 14:15 the word parallels *lupeō*, which means to cause pain or grief: “For if because of food your brother is hurt (*lupeō*), you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy (*apollumi*) with your food him for whom Christ died” (cf. 1 Cor. 8:11).

The **perish** of which Jesus here speaks relates to spiritual progress in the Christian life. God the **Father** does not want a single one of His **little ones** to be spiritually wounded or marred, even for a brief time. When His children fall into sin it destroys their usefulness to Him and to the church and it undercuts their happiness and their right relationship to Him and to one another.

Peter tells believers that they should cast all their cares on God, because He graciously cares for them (1 Pet. 5:7). Like the shepherd who searches for the lost sheep until it is found, the **Father** individually cares for each person who comes to Him through the Son and will see to it that every one of them who becomes wayward eventually will be brought back into the fellowship of His family and kingdom.

William Arnot makes the beautiful observation that, “If it did not please [God] to get me back, my pleasure would be small.” It should be great comfort to stumbling believers to know that, when they repent and return, their angels, their Lord Jesus Christ, and their **Father who is in heaven** will all be overjoyed.

For one believer to wound another is to attack the will of God and set himself up as God's antagonist. The Lord seeks the spiritual

well-being of all His children, and we had better not do less.

This section of Matthew speaks powerfully to the church today. The Body of Christ is filled with believers who look down on their spiritual brothers and sisters, treating them with disdain, indifference, and rudeness because they consider them unworthy of special care and ministry. It is at that very point of the church's sin that it sets itself in opposition to the holy angels, to the Son of God, and to the Almighty Himself.

14
The Discipline of
God's Children
(18:15-20)

And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer. Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst. (18:15-20)

God's desire for His children here on earth is purity of life. It is impossible to study Scripture attentively and not be overwhelmingly convinced that God seeks above all else for His people to be holy and that He is grieved by sin of any kind. Directly quoting God's command to His Old Covenant people Israel, Peter wrote the same command to Christ's church: "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:16; cf. Lev. 11:44).

Because God is so concerned for the holiness of His people, they should be equally concerned. The church cannot preach and teach a message it does not live and have any integrity before God, or even before the world. Yet in many churches where there is no tolerance for sin in principle there is much tolerance for it in practice. And when preaching becomes separated from living, it becomes separated both from integrity and from spiritual and moral effectiveness. It promotes hypocrisy instead of holiness. Divorcing biblical teaching from daily living is compromise of the worst sort. It corrupts the church, grieves the Lord, and dishonors His Word and His name.

It is not surprising, therefore, that public discipline for sin is rare in the church today. Where there is little genuine desire for purity there will also be little desire to deal with impurity. The misinterpreted and misapplied statement of Jesus that we should not judge lest we be judged (Matt. 7:1) has been used to justify the tolerance of every sort of sin and false teaching. The ideas that every person's privacy is essentially to be protected and that each is responsible only to himself have engulfed much of the church. Under the guise of false love and spurious humility that refuse to hold others to account, many Christians are as dedicated as some unbelievers to the unbiblical notion of "live and let live." The church, however, is not nearly so careful not to gossip about someone's sinning as it is not to confront it and call for it to stop.

The church has always had need for confronting the sins of its people. During its early days many foreign visitors to Palestine were converted to Christ and decided to stay in or near Jerusalem in order to enjoy the fellowship of believers there. A large number of native Jewish converts were ostracized from their families and lost their jobs because of their new-found faith. To help support those needy

brothers and sisters, many of whom were virtually destitute, the believers who had property and possession sold them and gave the proceeds to the apostles, who “distributed to each, as any had need” (Acts 4:35). That practice was the spontaneous reaction of generous, Spirit-filled hearts to meet the practical needs of fellow Christians.

During that time, a couple named Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of their property and pledged to God that they would give all the proceeds to the apostles for use in the church. Somewhere in the process, however, they decided to keep back a portion of the pledged money for themselves. In order not to appear less generous than their fellow believers, however, they falsely reported that they were giving the full amount. When the Lord revealed the duplicity to Peter, he first confronted the husband. “Ananias,” he asked, “why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God.’ And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last.” Several hours later, Sapphira came to the apostles, not knowing what had happened to her husband. When Peter asked her if the property was sold for the price claimed by her husband, she confirmed his lie and suffered his fate. Not surprisingly, “great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard of these things” (Acts 5:1-11).

The selfishness of Ananias and Sapphira was deplorable, but their great sin was in lying about what they had done, not only to the church but to God. In this particular case in the early church, God took discipline directly into His own hands and demonstrated before all how sin is to be dealt with by removing the offenders from the church and from the earth! The purity of the church not only was protected by making God’s people more fearful of sin but also by helping to keep out of the fellowship those who were not true believers (v. 13).

Even in apostolic times, such direct and severe divine intervention in chastening apparently was rare, although Paul reports that some of the Corinthian believers became weak, ill, and even died as the result of gross immorality and disregard for the sacredness of

the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 11:30; cf. 1 John 5:16-17). God has not changed His attitude about sin or about purity. He is every bit as much concerned for the holiness of His people today as He was when the church was born. Sin has to be dealt with or it will destroy both those who practice it and those who tolerate it. God may still act in supernatural ways to purge the church, but He has primarily given that responsibility to the church itself. The church must be "self-policing" with regard to sin. The horrendous scandals that have tarnished the church recently reflect the abysmal failure of believers to confront sinning leaders and followers. The world often has had to expose what the church tried to cover up.

The Lord has always disciplined His people, and He has always instructed His people to discipline themselves. Old Testament believers were told not to "reject the discipline of the Lord, or loathe His reproof, for whom the Lord loves He reproveth, even as a father, the son in whom he delights" (Prov. 3:11-12). Just as human fathers discipline their children out of love in order to make them better, so God does with His children. Human parents know that instruction to their children without enforcement is futile. Children not only must be told what is right but must be led to do what is right, by correction, rebuke, and often punishment. "He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently" (Prov. 13:24). Contrary to much popular thinking, even among Christians, it is not love but indifference that causes parents to allow their children's misbehavior to go uncorrected. "Discipline your son while there is hope," the writer of Proverbs wisely advises (19:18; cf. 22:15; 23:13).

After quoting the proverb (3:11-12) mentioned above, the writer of Hebrews says,

It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of Spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He

disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. (Heb. 12:7-11)

It is an illusion to think that the church can take a strong verbal stand against sin without enforcing that stand among its own members and at the same time expect them to conform to God's standards of holiness. Physical children do not respond to that approach in discipline, and neither do spiritual children. Because of the remaining sinfulness of the flesh, Christians still have a strong bent toward disobedience. Without enforcement of its standards, holiness will never flourish. That is why discipline is so essential to the spiritual well-being of a church.

The foolish, pretentious, and sometimes immoral actions of a few highly visible figures in the evangelical church today have caused evangelicalism to become a byword among many liberal Christians and in the world at large. Such lack of integrity is often rightly depicted as the epitome of religious superficiality, self-indulgence, and hypocrisy.

It is with the church's responsibility to keep itself pure that Jesus deals in Matthew 18:15-20. He is still teaching about the childlikeness of believers, illustrated by the young child He had called to Himself and set before the Twelve (v.2). He had declared that a person enters and is considered great in the kingdom by becoming like a little child (vv. 3-4) and that, once in the kingdom, believers are to be protected like little children (vv. 5-9) and cared for like little children (vv. 10-14). He now declares that they must also be disciplined like little children.

In verses 15-20 Jesus presents five elements involved in godly discipline of sinning believers: the person who receives discipline, the person who initiates it, the purpose of it, the process and place for it, and the authority for it.

THE PERSON WHO RECEIVES DISCIPLINE

And if your brother sins, (18:15a)

The person to be disciplined is a **brother** who **sins**. In this context, as in many other places in Scripture, **brother** refers to any fellow believer, whether male or female. The candidate for confrontational discipline is any Christian who **sins**. The implication is that it is a sin that continues in one's life and is unconfessed.

The general, unqualified reference to **your brother** is absolutely inclusive, allowing for no exceptions. *Every* child of God, whether young or old, man or woman, educated or uneducated, wealthy or poor, leader or follower, is to be confronted when he or she **sins**.

Sins is from *hamartanō*, which has the literal meaning of “missing the mark” and is the basic New Testament verb for sin, missing the mark of God's standards. Just as the category of the sinner is inclusive, so is the category of sin. Any sin, by any believer, requires discipline from the church. All sin is an offense against God's holiness and corrupts the holiness of His people. It mars a believer's fellowship with God and his fellowship with other believers.

As reflected in the King James Version and several other translations, some of the most reliable ancient manuscripts of Matthew's gospel add the phrase “against you” after **sins**, indicating an offense committed directly against a fellow Christian. Peter's question in verse 21 regarding forgiveness of those who sin against us gives support to the inclusion of “against you,” as does the Lord's teaching about rebuking and forgiving in Luke 17:3-4.

In either case, however, the basic responsibility is the same, because a person can be sinned against both directly and indirectly. If he is maligned, abused, deceived, cheated, or the like, the sin against him is direct and obvious. In such a case, the offending brother or sister is not only to be rebuked by the one who is offended but also forgiven if he repents. The one who is sinned against should approach

the offender in a spirit of humility and meekness, and his motive for rebuke should be the restoration of the brother or sister to holiness. It should never come from a spirit of vindictiveness. He should manifest a spirit of love and forgiveness even while he is rebuking, and he should be deeply concerned about the spiritual damage being suffered by the brother who sinned and have a genuine desire for him to be restored to holiness and its consequent blessing.

Rebuke of a sinning brother should be undertaken as soon as the offense is known, in order to turn the sinning believer from his sin as soon as possible and also to help head off resentment and bitterness by the one offended. Those destructive emotions are also sins, and they tend to fester as long as a break in relationship remains unresolved. The longer sin continues, the more difficult it becomes to be forsaken by the sinner and to be forgiven by the one sinned against. God calls His children always to “be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven” them (Eph. 4:32).

But in a broader sense, believers are sinned against by any sin committed by any other believer. Whenever a believer commits a sin, all other believers are indirectly sinned against. “A little leaven” does affect all (see 1 Cor. 5:6). That Jesus here included indirect offenses seems clear from the fact that He makes no mention of forgiveness. The focus is solely on repentance and restoration.

Some years ago a man in our church told me he had invited an attorney friend of his to attend the church. But when he told the friend the church’s name, the friend said, “I’d never go there. That’s where the most crooked attorney in Los Angeles attends.” That man’s sin indirectly affected everyone in our congregation and tarnished the whole cause of Christ.

Every sin by a believer stains the entire fellowship of believers. Whether it is slander, stealing, gossip, sexual immorality, dishonesty, doctrinal error, lack of submission, cruelty, blasphemy, profanity, drunkenness, or anything else, every sin not dealt with by the offending child of God must be dealt with by the church.

THE PERSON WHO INITIATES DISCIPLINE

go and reprove him in private; (18:15b)

The understood subjects of **go and reprove** are indicated by the plural pronouns “you” and “your” (vv. 15-16). Jesus was giving general instruction to His followers, and therefore this category is also inclusive. The person responsible for initiating discipline is any believer who is aware of another believer’s sin. Discipline is not simply the responsibility of church officials but of every member.

Reprove is from *elenchō*, which has the root meaning of bringing to light or exposing. The Greek verb is in the aorist imperative, suggesting that the brother is to be shown his sin in such a way that he cannot escape recognizing it for what it is.

The first confrontation of a sinning brother must be **in private**, one on one. If the erring person confesses and repents, no further discipline is necessary and no one else need ever be brought into the matter. The more a person’s sin is known and discussed by others, no matter how well-meaning they may be, the easier it is for him to become resentful and the harder it may be for repentance and restoration. When he is corrected **in private**, and in a spirit of humility and love, his change of heart is much more likely. And if he does repent, a unique and marvelous bond of intimacy is established between the two believers, indicated by the phrase **you have gained your brother**.

When Peter was intimidated by the Judaizers in Antioch and began to separate himself from Gentile believers, Paul “opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned” (Gal. 2:11). Peter admitted his sin and repented, and years later he wrote of his “beloved brother Paul” (2 Pet. 3:15). Their deepened friendship no doubt was due in no small measure to Paul’s caring enough to rebuke his fellow apostle and turn him back to the purity of the gospel of grace.

A Christian who is not deeply concerned about bringing a fellow Christian back from his sin needs spiritual help himself. Smug indifference, not to mention self-righteous contempt, has no part in the life of a spiritual Christian, nor do sentimentality or cowardice that hide behind false humility. The spiritual Christian neither

condemns nor justifies a sinning brother. His concern is for the holiness and blessing of the offending brother, the purity and integrity of the church, and the honor and glory of God.

At least three things are necessary for effectively undertaking the private first step of confronting a fellow Christian about sin. First is the obvious requirement of willingness **to go and reprove** the sinning brother **in private**. If he does not listen, we must then be willing to take one or two more believers with us and confront him again (v. 16). And if he still refuses to listen, we must be willing to report his impenitence to the whole church (v. 17).

God does not mock His children by demanding of them anything which, by His power, He does not enable them to do. No Christian, therefore, has an excuse for not initiating church discipline when it is necessary, because God will provide the necessary wisdom, insight, and boldness when a sincere desire is present.

Not every believer is given the gift of preaching or teaching or evangelism or helps. But every believer is given the command to **go and reprove** a brother or sister who is sinning. That is part of God's work, and it is a ministry as surely as any other. In our day it is a much-needed and much-neglected ministry. The absence of it may well be the most severe and debilitating problem in the church of this century. All believers are called in this way to be ministers of holiness, helping guard the purity and integrity of Christ's Body. When they minister discipline in a spirit of love, gentleness, and humility, they can be effective weapons in God's hands for purifying the church and restoring His fallen children.

The Lord commanded Israel, "You shall not go about as a slanderer among your people, and you are not to act against the life of your neighbor; I am the Lord. You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart." But, the Lord went on to say, "you may surely reprove your neighbor" (Lev. 19:16-17). Unwillingness to reprove a sinning believer is a form of hatred of him, not loving him enough to warn him of his spiritual danger. Not to reprove a sinning brother can do him more harm than slandering him. Terrible as it is, slander affects primarily the other person's reputation and his feelings. Failing to help him confront and confess his sin, however, contributes to his spiritual downfall. The person who claims to be too

loving to rebuke his brother or sister in Christ is simply deceived. He is not too loving but too uncaring. The loving Christian, like the loving heavenly Father and loving earthly fathers, desires the proper discipline of those he loves (see Heb. 12:5-11).

In the eyes of much of the world and even in the eyes of many immature believers, such action is considered unloving. But discipline given in the right way expresses the deepest kind of love, love that refuses to do nothing to rescue a brother from unrepentant sin and its consequences. Love that winks at sin or that is more concerned for superficial calm in the church than for its spiritual purity is not God's kind of love. Love that tolerates sin is not love at all but worldly and selfish sentimentality.

To preach love apart from God's holiness is to teach something other than God's love. No awakening or revival of the church has ever occurred apart from strong preaching of God's holiness and the corresponding call for believers to forsake sin and return to the Lord's standards of purity and righteousness. No church that tolerates known sin in its membership will have spiritual growth or effective evangelism. In spite of that truth, however, such tolerance is standard in the church today—at all levels.

History has seen excesses in preaching what is commonly known as hell fire and damnation, but that is not the church's danger today. Beginning in the nineteenth century, there has been a drift away from forceful preaching of the holiness of God and His demand for holiness in men. Even in many evangelical churches and organizations emphasis has shifted to the almost exclusive preaching of God's love, with little, if any, reference to His wrath and judgment.

Commenting on the contemporary church, Richard Lovelace writes:

The whole church was . . . avoiding the biblical portrait of the sovereign and holy God who was angry with the wicked every day and whose anger remains upon those who will not receive His Son. Walling off this image into an unvisited corner of its consciousness, the church substituted a new god who was the projection of grandmotherly kindness mixed with the gentleness and winsomeness

of a Jesus who hardly needed to die for our sins. Many American congregations were, in effect, paying their ministers to protect them from the real God. . . . It is partially responsible not only for the general spiritual collapse of the church in this century but also for a great deal of [evangelistic] weakness; for in a world in which the sovereign and holy God regularly employs plagues, famines, wars, disease, and death as instruments to punish sin and bring mankind to repentance, the idolatrous image of God as pure benevolence cannot really be believed, let alone feared and worshiped in the manner prescribed by both the Old Testament and New Testament. (*Dynamics of Spiritual Life* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1979], pp. 83-84)

Belief in a God who is all love and no wrath, all grace and no justice, all forgiveness and no condemnation is idolatry (worship of a false god invented by men), and it inevitably leads to universalism—which, of course, is what many liberal churches have been preaching for generations. Salvation becomes meaningless, because sin that God overlooks does not need to be forgiven. Christ's sacrifice on the cross becomes a travesty, because He gave His life for no redemptive purpose. Not only that, but it becomes apologetically impossible to explain the common question about why a loving God allows pain, suffering, disease, and tragedy. Removing God's holy hatred of sin emasculates the gospel and hinders rather than helps evangelism.

Profoundly aware of the danger of mistaking emotional stimulation for spiritual awakening, in his *Treatise on Religious Affections* Jonathan Edwards observed:

Fallen human nature is fertile ground for a fleshly religiosity which is impiously “spiritual” but ultimately rooted in self-love. High emotional experiences, effusive religious talk, and even praising God and experiencing love for God and man can be self-centered and self-motivated. In contrast to this, experiences of renewal which are genuinely from the Holy Spirit are God-centered in character and based on worship, an appreciation of God's worth and grandeur divorced from self-interest. Such genuine experiences create humility in the convert rather than pride and issue in a new creation and a new

spirit of meekness, gentleness, forgiveness, and mercy. They leave the believer hungry and thirsting for righteousness instead of satiated with self-congratulation.

True evangelism and revival have nothing to do with building self-esteem, self-acceptance, and feeling good about oneself. They have nothing to do with gaining health, wealth, and fleshly happiness. They have much to do with acknowledging one's sinfulness, unworthiness, weakness, and helplessness and much to do with humble gratitude for God's infinite patience, mercy, and grace.

Richard Lovelace again observes that "most congregations of professing Christians today are saturated with a kind of dead goodness and ethical respectability, which has its motivational roots in the flesh rather than in the Holy Spirit. Surface righteousness does not spring from faith and the spiritual renewing action but from religious pride and conditioned conformity to tradition as a form of godliness which denies its power." He describes such religion as "counterfeit piety."

Over and over in the gospels Jesus proclaimed that He came to earth solely to do the will of His heavenly Father (see, e.g., John 5:19, 30; 6:38; 7:16). And the will of the Father can be reduced to the declaration quoted at the beginning of this chapter: "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:16; cf. Lev. 11:44). Above all, God wants His people to be holy.

Speaking to believers, James wrote, "Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you" (James 4:8-10). It is God's will that His people be holy, and the purpose of discipline is to promote holiness by purging and purifying the church. The Word, the Spirit, and God's people join in working for the purity of the church. Believers act in Christ's behalf when, with humility and according to scriptural guidelines, they discipline fellow members who persist in sin.

A second requirement for effective discipline is zeal. When Jesus came to Jerusalem for the Passover and found merchants in the

Temple exploiting the people and desecrating God's house by selling animals and changing money, "He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the moneychangers, and overturned their tables; and to those who were selling the doves He said, 'Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a house of merchandise'" (John 2:13-16). Jesus' holy zeal for the purity of His Father's house would not allow Him to stand by and watch it being desecrated. Willingness to confront sin in the church is manifested in righteous zeal to uphold God's name and holiness and in a corresponding unwillingness for them to be stained and dishonored.

A third requirement for effective discipline is personal purity. A believer who is not concerned about his own purity will have no obedient willingness or righteous zeal to help protect the purity of the church. Nor can he be effectively used by the Lord in helping others deal with their sin if he is unwilling to deal with his own. His concern about other Christians' sins might be strong, but it will be judgmental and censorious, not humble and loving. To such believers the Lord says, "Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matt. 7:3-5).

When a church sincerely and humbly moves out to enforce holiness and purity within its membership, by virtue of that very movement it is in the process of self-purification, because believers who genuinely desire the purity of the church will first confront sin in their own lives and determine for the Lord to bring purity there. Christians can become ministers of holiness only as they themselves are holy

THE PURPOSE OF DISCIPLINE

if he listens to you, you have won your brother. (18:15c)

The purpose of discipline is the spiritual restoration of fallen members and the consequent strengthening of the church and glorifying of the Lord. When a sinning **brother** is rebuked and he turns from his sin and is forgiven, he is **won** back to fellowship with the Body and with its head, Jesus Christ.

The goal of discipline is not to throw people out of the church or to feed the self-righteous pride of those who administer the discipline. It is to bring the sinning **brother** back. “He who is wise wins souls,” the writer of Proverbs declared (11:30). Paul admonishes Christians, “If a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted” (Gal. 6:1). “My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back,” James says, “let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins” (James 5:19-20). In some cases, as in that of the James passage, you may be confronting a professing Christian who is not even saved. Enacting discipline has often, in my experience, led to the admission by the sinner that he had never been saved and then to his desire for true conversion.

Won is from *kerdainō*, which was originally a term of commerce referring to financial gain or profit. Here it refers to the gaining back of something of value that is lost, namely, an erring **brother**. As Jesus had just taught in the parable of the lost sheep, God highly values every one of His children, and when one of them goes astray He will not rest until the lost child is found and returned to the fold. It is not His will “that one of these little ones perish” (v. 14). Nor should it be the will of Christians that even one of their brothers or sisters in the faith perishes. When they are lost to the fellowship, a valuable treasure is lost, and, like our heavenly Father, we should not be content until they are restored. Every person who has become one with the great Shepherd should himself reflect that Shepherd’s heart.

When a church member falls into sin, the fellowship as a whole and each of the other members individually suffers loss, because no individual believer in the Body is reproducible. Each believer is a unique individual and is uniquely gifted. People go to great lengths to regain material wealth that is lost. To how much

greater lengths should Christians go to regain a spiritual treasure more valuable than any earthly possession?

Churches as well as individual Christians are tempted to say of a sinning brother, in effect if not in words, “We have no business getting involved. It’s his life, his decision, and his responsibility. He’s accountable to God, and what he is and does is only between him and the Lord.” That attitude may sound loving and spiritual on the surface, but it does not square with Scripture. It reflects ungodly indifference, not loving concern for the brother who has fallen.

THE PROCESS AND THE PLACE FOR DISCIPLINE

But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer. (18:16-17)

As already noted, the process of discipline begins with an individual believer going privately to a sinning brother and rebuking him (v. 15). The three subsequent steps are mentioned in verses 16-17.

If a sinning brother **does not listen** to the one who has rebuked him privately, the next step in the discipline process is to **take one or two more** believers along, **so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed**. This basic procedure for confirming facts in a dispute or in an allegation of wrongdoing had been set forth by Moses (Deut. 19:15) and was therefore familiar to every Jew. To guard against a person’s being slanderously or spitefully accused of a sin, crime, or other offense he did not commit, the Mosaic law required that at least **two or three witnesses** must corroborate any charge brought against someone. That was an important protection against the false accusation of an innocent person.

In the context of Jesus' instruction here, however, if the testimony of the **two or three witnesses** becomes necessary, it is not only to confirm that the sin was committed but, in addition, to confirm that the sinning believer was properly rebuked and that he has or has not repented. It should be hoped that the **one or two** who are brought along to confront the sinner will not have to become public **witnesses** against him before the rest of the church but that their added rebuke will be sufficient to induce a change of heart in the offending brother that the initial rebuke did not cause.

The guards against abuse and unjust accusation in discipline are to protect church leaders as well as other believers. "Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses," Paul charged Timothy. But "those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful of sinning" (1 Tim. 5:19-20).

If the second stage of the discipline process fails to bring repentance, **if he does not listen** to the two or three, then they are to **tell it to the church**. The first rebuke is to be completely private and the second semi-private, but the third is to be public, before the **church**. The brother or sister is to be brought before the whole congregation to be further rebuked and encouraged to repent. The whole church is responsible to call that person back to holiness.

It has been the custom in our church, upon enacting this third step, to clearly indicate to the congregation that they are to pursue the person aggressively and plead with him to repent before the fourth step becomes necessary. That crucial and potent procedure often draws the sinner to repentance and obedience.

This great passage also indicates that the place for discipline is *within the church*. *Ekklēsia* (**church**) is here used in its basic, nontechnical meaning of a congregation or assembly. In secular Greek literature it was used of town meetings, local gatherings of citizens called together by their rulers to hear official announcements or witness government ceremonies. In the context of Jesus' teaching at this point in His ministry, **church** refers to any group of redeemed people who assemble in His name (v. 20).

Some commentators maintain that Jesus was referring to the Jewish synagogue, which also has the root meaning of assembly or

congregation. But Jesus always used another term (*sunagōgē*) when referring to a synagogue, which, in any case, would never have gathered in His name. And although He frequently taught in synagogues and called the worshipers there to believe in Him, His purpose was not to revise or reform the synagogue but to establish His own *ekklēsia*, **the church**.

No organizational structure is mentioned or intimated here. The reference is not to a committee, board, or other group of leaders, but to the entire body. There is no higher court beyond the local congregation in which discipline is to be administered. No bishop, cardinal, synod, conference, or council has the responsibility for discipline. To delegate discipline to an individual or group beyond the local church is to go beyond the Word of God. Whether a local **church** is composed of a handful of believers or of several thousand members, whether it is a highly organized urban congregation or an informal group of five or six believers on a remote mission field, that is where, and only where, discipline is to be administered.

Even less justified is taking church discipline or grievances to a secular court for resolution. Paul strongly indicted Corinthian Christians who did that. “Does any one of you,” he wrote, “when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, matters of this life?” (1 Cor. 6:1-3).

The fourth and final step in church discipline is ostracism. If a sinning believer **refuses to listen even to the church**, he is to be ostracized from the fellowship. **Let him be to you, Jesus said, as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer.** Both were seen as despised outcasts.

A non-Jew who worshiped the true God and who became identified with Judaism was commonly called a God-fearer (cf. Acts 10:1, 22), whereas the term **Gentile** was primarily used of non-Jews who held to their traditional paganism. Such a **Gentile** had no part in the covenant, worship, or social life of Jews. Because he was a traitor to his own people, however, a **tax-gatherer** was in many ways more despised than Gentiles. He was not an outcast by birth but by choice.

Jesus was not appealing to Jewish prejudice. He came to save all men, and among His most ardent and faithful followers were former tax-gatherers such as Matthew and Zaccheus and Gentiles such as the centurion who asked Him to heal his paralyzed servant. Jesus' point was that a believer who persists in impenitence is to be put out of the church and treated as an unbelieving, unrepentant outsider.

When a man in the Corinthian church refused to forsake an incestuous relationship with his stepmother, Paul commanded that he be removed from their midst (1 Cor. 5:1-2). Tolerance of his sin had reached the point of arrogance. Although none of the other members apparently engaged in that particular immorality, their perverted sense of liberty led them to defend the man's right to continue in the sin. "In the name of our Lord Jesus," Paul went on to say, "when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?" (vv. 4-6). That man's evil influence, described by Paul as leaven, had corrupted the moral sensitivity of the entire church.

Persistently unrepentant believers are to be totally ostracized from the fellowship of the church. They are no longer to know the blessedness of the church's company and encouragement. Because they willingly reject the standards of the gospel, they make shipwreck of their faith. When Hymenaeus and Alexander would not forsake their profane use of the Lord's name, Paul "delivered [them] over to Satan, so that they may be taught not to blaspheme" (1 Tim. 1:20). Such people are to be given the choice of repenting and staying with God's people or of holding on to their sin and being given over to the world and the devil.

The final step in discipline is not optional. **Let him be** translates a present imperative and is therefore a command. Paul gave a similar command to the Thessalonians: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us" (2 Thess. 3:6). A few verses

later he says, “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame” (v. 14).

When a church has done everything it can, but without success, to bring a sinning member back to purity of life, that brother is to be left to his sin and his shame. If he is truly a Christian, God will not cast Him away, but He may have to allow him to sink still deeper before he becomes desperate enough to turn from his evil.

As Paul explained to the Corinthian church, separation from a sinning believer is to be more radical than separation from sinful unbelievers.

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters; for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves. (1 Cor. 5:9-13)

But putting an unrepentant member out the fellowship is not the end of the discipline process. It should not end until the brother has either repented or died. As far as the welfare of the church is concerned, the purpose of putting the brother out is to protect the purity of the fellowship and to give a testimony of righteousness to the watching world. But as far as the welfare of the brother himself is concerned, the purpose of the ostracism is not to punish but to awaken, and it must therefore be done in humble love and never in a spirit of self-righteous superiority. “Do not regard him as an enemy,” Paul says, “but admonish him as a brother” (2 Thess. 3:15).

Not to have fellowship or even social contact with the unrepentant brother does not exclude all contact. When there is opportunity to admonish him and try to call him back, the opportunity

should be taken. In fact, such opportunities should be sought. But the contact should be for the purpose of admonishment and no other.

The fourth step in the discipline process is therefore to put out and to call back—to keep the sinning brother out of fellowship until he repents, but also to keep calling him back in the hope that he will.

Administering discipline is never the prerogative of a single person in a church, no matter what his position or qualifications. One of the early churches had such a self-appointed disciplinarian named Diotrephes, whom John described as one “who loves to be first.” “For this reason, if I come,” the apostle said, “I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, neither does he himself receive the brethren, and he forbids those who desire to do so, and puts them out of the church” (3 John 9-10). Autocratic self-righteousness has no part in Christ’s plan for His church and can never be successful in purifying it. Only the local body of believers has the right to put a member out of its fellowship, and that only after the first three steps of discipline have failed.

A man was apparently put out of the church at Corinth after having caused great sorrow to Paul and the others there because of his sin. But “sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority,” Paul said, “so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, lest somehow such a one be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him” (2 Cor. 2:5-8). When a believer repents, he is to be welcomed back into the fellowship and not held at arm’s length as a second-class member. He is to be forgiven and embraced, just as the Savior forgave and embraced the prodigal Peter when he returned from his disobedience (John 21:15-22).

THE AUTHORITY FOR DISCIPLINE

Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth

about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst. (18:18-20)

To emphasize the absolute trustworthiness of what He was about to say, Jesus declared, **“Truly I say to you.”** That phrase, which the Lord often used, should always be noted with special care, because it introduces a teaching of unusual importance.

The work of discipline should be undertaken with the greatest care. Done in the wrong way or in the wrong spirit it can do great damage by fostering self-righteousness and legalism, just as discipline not done at all causes great damage by allowing sin’s influence to spread like leaven.

Jesus’ promises in verses 18 and 19 have suffered serious misinterpretation throughout the history of the church, the most extreme being the Roman Catholic doctrine that the church has the divine authority to forgive sin. Many charismatics use these promises—along with others, such as those of Matthew 7:7 and 21:22—to claim from God every imaginable blessing and privilege just for the asking.

But in light of the context of what Jesus had just said, in the light of common rabbinical expressions of that day, and in light of the grammatical construction of the text, it is clear that He was not teaching that God’s power can be bent to men’s will. He was not saying that men can force heaven to do things. Quite to the contrary, His promise was that when His people bend their wills to His, He will endorse and empower their act of obedience. (See comments on Matthew 16:19, in chapter 4 of this volume.)

Jesus was here continuing His instruction about church discipline. He was not speaking about petitioning God for special blessings or privileges, and even less was He teaching that the church or any of its leaders has power to absolve the sins of its members. He was declaring that the church has a divine mandate to discipline its members when they refuse to repent.

The rabbis sometimes spoke of a principle or action as being **bound in heaven** or **loosed in heaven** to indicate, respectively, that it

was forbidden or permitted in light of God's revealed Word. A Jew of that day would have understood that Jesus did not mean that men could bend heaven's will to their own but that God (here called **heaven**, a common Jewish substitute for God's covenant name, Yahweh, or Jehovah) had an expressed principle with which the church must conform.

The grammatical construction in the passage also clarifies its meaning. As in Matthew 16:19, **shall be bound** and **shall be loosed** translate future perfect passives and are more accurately rendered "will have been bound" and "will have been loosed." The idea is not that God is compelled to conform to the church's decisions but that, when the church follows Christ's pattern for discipline, it conforms its decisions to what God has already done and thereby receives heaven's approval and authority.

Perfect passives are also used in John 20:23 in regard to forgiving or retaining sins. Believers have authority to declare that sins are either forgiven or not forgiven when that declaration is based on the teaching of God's Word. If a person has received Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, the church can tell him with perfect confidence that his sins are **loosed**, that is, forgiven, because he has met God's condition for forgiveness, namely, trust in His Son. If, on the other hand, a person refuses to receive Christ as Savior and acknowledge Him as Lord, the church can tell him with equal confidence that his sins are **bound**, that is, *not* forgiven, because he has not met God's condition for forgiveness.

Some years ago a man told me he believed he was going to heaven because he was following the religious system prescribed by a popular cult. Because the bizarre beliefs of that group were utterly contrary to the gospel, I told him that he was lost, was still in his sins, and could not possibly be destined for heaven. On the basis of his own confession matched against God's Word, the man could not have been saved. To tell him that he was still bound in his sins was not to judge his heart supernaturally nor sovereignly condemn him but simply to affirm what God's own Word clearly says about him and about every person who hopes to come to God by any other path than trust in His Son.

Obviously, this is a serious ministry in the church and one that may be approached with great reluctance. “Who are we to do such work?” we ask. “What authority do we have for such strong dealings with fellow believers? We’re sinful, too.” But when the church administers discipline according to the pattern of Matthew 18:15-17, it can have perfect confidence that it acts in the authority and power of heaven, as promised in verses 18-20.

The Lord gives no command without giving the necessary power and authority to obey it. In these three climaxing verses in Jesus’ instruction about church discipline we learn that, when the Lord’s people sincerely seek to purify His church in His way, they have the energy, approval, and authority both of the Father and of the Son.

Jesus first assures His people that the Father acts with them when they work to purify the church: **Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth** (referring back to the two witnesses of v. 16) **about anything that they may ask** (in seeking the purity of the church) **it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven.** When the church acts in God’s behalf and in accordance with His Word in matters dealing with sin, He acts in their behalf by confirming and empowering their faithful decisions and actions.

Agree is from *sumphōneō*, which literally means to sound together and is the term from which we get *symphony*. If even **two** of Jesus’ followers are in agreement with each other that a sinning believer has either repented or refused to repent, they can be sure they are also in agreement with the **Father who is in heaven.**

As already mentioned, to interpret this verse as promising believers a blank check for anything they might agree to ask God for not only does not fit the context of church discipline but does violence to the rest of Scripture. Such an interpretation is tantamount to magic, in which God is automatically bound to grant the most foolish or sinful request, simply because two of His children conspire to ask Him for it. The idea flies in the face of God’s sovereignty and completely undercuts the countless scriptural commands for believers’ obedient submission to His will.

Jesus also assures His people that He Himself acts with them when they work to purify the church: **For where two or three have**

gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst. Not only does the Father confirm discipline when it is administered according to His Word, but the Son adds His own divine confirmation.

This verse is also frequently misinterpreted, though not with such serious error as in the misinterpretations of the two previous verses. To use this statement to claim the Lord's presence at a small worship service or prayer meeting does not fit the context of church discipline and is superfluous. Christ is always present with His people, even with a lone believer totally separated from fellow Christians by prison walls or by hundreds of miles.

The context demands that the **two or three** are witnesses in the process of discipline. To ask or to do anything in God's **name** is not to utter His name but to ask and to work according to His divine will and character. For the witnesses to **have gathered in His name** is therefore for them to have faithfully performed their work of verifying the repentance or impenitence of a sinning brother or sister on the Lord's behalf. When the church gathers in the Lord's name and for His cause and glory, it must be engaged in self-purifying ministry under His power and authority, and with His heavenly confirmation and partnership.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian of rather liberal persuasion who was caught in the terrors of Nazi Germany, wrote a book entitled *Life Together*. In it he gives some profound insights into the need for restoring a sinning brother to the fellowship of the church.

Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person. This can happen even in the midst of a pious community. In confession, the light of the gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart. The sin must be brought into the light. The unexpressed must be openly spoken and acknowledged. All that is secret and hidden is made

manifest. It is a hard struggle until the sin is openly admitted, but God breaks gates of brass and bars of iron (Ps. 107:16).

Since the confession of sin is made in the presence of a Christian brother, the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned. The sinner surrenders; he gives up all his evil. He gives his heart to God, and he finds the forgiveness of all his sin in the fellowship of Jesus Christ and his brother. The expressed, acknowledged sin has lost all its power. It has been revealed and judged as sin. It can no longer tear the fellowship asunder. Now the fellowship bears the sin of the brother. He is no longer alone with his evil for he has cast off his sin from him. Now he stands in the fellowship of sinners who live by the grace of God and the cross of Jesus Christ. . . . The sin concealed separated him from the fellowship, made all his apparent fellowship a sham; the sin confessed has helped him define true fellowship with the brethren in Jesus Christ. ([New York: Harper & Row, 1954], 112-13)

15

Learning to Forgive

(18:21-35)

Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. And when he had begun to settle them, there was brought to him one who owed him ten thousand talents. But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. The slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.’ And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him,

saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ So his fellow slave fell down and began to entreat him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ He was unwilling however, but went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?’ And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.” (18:21-35)

Forgiveness is not natural to man. Because it is so foreign to fleshly human nature, people find it very difficult to forgive others. King Louis XII of France articulated the feeling of many people when he said, “Nothing smells so sweet as the dead body of your enemy.”

Yet nothing so characterizes the new nature of Christians as forgiveness, because nothing so characterizes the nature of their Lord. Jesus’ most striking and humanly incomprehensible words from the cross were, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). After being betrayed, falsely convicted, beaten, spat upon, and unjustly nailed to a cross to die an agonizing death, the Son of God harbored no hatred for His tormentors but instead offered them forgiveness. Following his Lord’s example, Stephen’s last words were, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” (Acts 7:60). He was at that moment being pummelled to death by stones for having committed no greater crime than preaching the gospel, yet his heart was not filled with bitterness but with compassion for his executioners. Forgiveness is the stuff of true godliness.

It is not difficult to forgive children, and most people, especially their parents, do it almost instinctively. We understand that children are uninformed, inexperienced, and immature. We expect them to do some things that are inconsiderate, but we tend to tolerate those things and forgive them, even when they hurt us deeply. It is

hard to hold a grudge against a child. That analogy also should be true in a spiritual sense, because all believers are children, as Jesus repeatedly points out in Matthew 18.

Although Joseph had been terribly wronged by his jealous brothers when they sold him into slavery, he held no grudge. Years later, when they were in the midst of a great famine and he was the only person who could help them, he was quick to offer his forgiveness, to embrace them in love, to provide the food they needed, and even to give them the lush region of Goshen to live in. When they had begged his forgiveness and fallen down before him, he “said to them, ‘Do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place? And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.’ So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them” (Gen. 50:19-21).

One of the reasons David was a man after God’s own heart was his own forgiving and merciful heart. Although King Saul repeatedly tried to kill David with a javelin and pursued him relentlessly in the hills of Judah with his army, David not only refused to harm Saul because he was the Lord’s anointed but even refused to harbor any hatred against him (see 1 Sam. 24:6, 12; 26:11). In another example, although David was at first enraged by Nabal’s ungrateful refusal to give food and provisions to David’s men who had helped protect Nabal, he was persuaded by Nabal’s wife, Abigail, to withhold revenge. David did not punish Nabal and was grateful to Abigail for bringing him to his senses. “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me,” he said to her, “and blessed be your discernment, and blessed be you, who have kept me this day from bloodshed, and from avenging myself by my own hand” (1 Sam. 25:32-33). When Shimei asked David’s forgiveness for having cursed and thrown stones at him, David was quick to show him mercy, despite the insistence of his officers that the man deserved to be put to death (2 Sam. 19:22-23; cf. 16:5-6).

Forgiveness reflects the highest human virtue, because it so clearly reflects the character of God. A person who forgives is a person who emulates godly character. Nothing so much demonstrates

God's love as His forgiveness. A person who does not forgive is therefore a person lacking in godly character and without Christlike love, no matter how orthodox his theology or how outwardly impeccable his morals appear to be. A Christian who will not relinquish a hateful, resentful attitude toward someone who has wronged him is a person who knows neither the true glory of his redeemed humanity nor the true glory of God's gracious divinity. An unforgiving Christian is a living contradiction of His new nature in Christ. It is central to the heart of God to forgive, and only the Christian who radiates forgiveness radiates true godliness.

Considering forgiveness from another direction, Christians need to forgive because they themselves need forgiveness. They are spiritual children and, like all children, are ignorant, weak, selfish, disobedient, and regularly in need of forgiveness, both from God and from each other. Forgiving is a give-and-take issue of life.

Forgiveness is therefore the key to spiritual unity in the church, because it is the key to love and the key to all meaningful relationships. Only forgiveness can break down the barriers that sin continually and inevitably erects between people, including God's people. "A man's discretion makes him slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook a transgression" (prov. 19:11). Christians are at their best when they are forgiving. Because they themselves have been forgiven so much by God, they, of all people, should be most forgiving of others, especially of fellow believers. Christians are most like their Lord when they forgive "each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven" them (Eph. 4:32). Paul declared the same truth to the Colossians, telling them to bear with one another and forgive one another, "just as the Lord forgave you" (Col. 3:13). Because they have been forgiven every sin by Christ, believers should be willing and eager to forgive each other in everything.

In this closing part of His teaching about believers as children (Matt. 18), Jesus gives a powerful and sobering declaration of the need for believers to be forgiving. Just as a person enters and is considered great in the kingdom only by becoming like a little child (vv. 3-4) and, once in the kingdom, is to be protected like a little child (vv. 5-9), cared for like a little child (vv. 10-14), and disciplined like a little child (vv. 15-20), so also, Jesus now says, must he be forgiven

like a little child. In verses 21-35 we first see Peter's inquiry about forgiveness and then Jesus' teaching about the extent of God's forgiveness of believers and a negative example of their duty to forgive each other.

THE INQUIRY ABOUT FORGIVENESS

Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" (18:21)

Peter knew human nature and how many times people need forgiveness, often for the same offense. He understood the human tendency to commit a sin, be forgiven, and then before long commit the same sin or some other equally as bad.

In light of Jesus' teaching about discipline in the church, Peter wondered how many times Christians as a body and as individuals were obliged to forgive fellow believers who persisted in wrongdoing. How many times should they be allowed to repent and be restored to fellowship?

As pointed out in the previous chapter, Jesus' teaching about discipline includes both direct and indirect offenses. Believers are to rebuke a sinning brother or sister for *any* sin. And they are to bring the offender before the church if that becomes necessary, because every sin not only is directly against God but is also either directly or indirectly against the church and every individual believer. "Be on your guard," Jesus said on another occasion. "If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him" (Luke 17:3). The commands to rebuke and to forgive cover any sin a fellow believer may commit, not just those committed directly against us.

Commendably **Peter** personalized Jesus' teaching, and his primary concern at this time was about his own responsibility. He therefore asked, **"Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?"**

Throughout the discourse of chapter 18, Jesus was speaking about believers, whom He refers to as little ones, children, sheep, and brothers (vv. 3-6, 10, 12, 14, 15). From His reference to **my brother**, it is clear that Peter also was thinking about a believer, represented by himself, forgiving other believers.

We are greatly indebted to Peter for many things, one of which was his penchant for asking questions. He wanted to be sure he understood what Jesus' words and actions meant, and his inquisitive mind elicited much wonderful teaching from the Lord. God blesses those who ask sincere questions of Him, because He blesses those who sincerely seek to know Him and His truth. "You will seek Me and find Me," he said through Jeremiah, "when you search for Me with all your heart" (Jer. 29:13).

Peter's question was: "Does forgiveness have a limit? Granted that a person who commits an offense and repents should be forgiven and restored a few times. But what if he continually falls into sin, over and over again? **How often must I forgive him?**"

Perhaps to demonstrate how magnanimous he thought he was, Peter suggested a limit of **seven times**, which was more than twice that allowed by Jewish tradition. Using references in the book of Amos (see 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; cf. Job 33:29), the rabbis had taken a repeated statement by God against neighboring enemies of Israel and made it into a universal rule for limiting God's forgiveness and, by extension, also man's. If God forgives men only three times, they spuriously reasoned, it is unnecessary and even presumptuous for men to forgive each other more times than that. Rabbi Jose ben Hanina, for instance, said, "He who begs forgiveness from his neighbor must not do so more than three times." Rabbi Jose ben Jehuda said, "If a man commits an offense once, they forgive him; if he commits an offense a second time, they forgive him; if he commits an offense a third time, they forgive him; the fourth time they do not forgive him."

Peter therefore probably thought Jesus would be impressed with the seemingly generous suggestion of **up to seven times**. Compared to Jewish tradition, it *was* generous and no doubt was based on Peter's growing understanding of Jesus' teaching and personal example of compassion and mercy. Realizing that the Lord's

graciousness was in marked contrast to the self-centered legalism of the scribes and Pharisees, Peter doubled their narrow limit for forgiveness and added one more time for good measure.

THE EXTENT OF FORGIVENESS

Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.” (18:21b-22)

Peter was still thinking like the scribes and Pharisees and like fallen human nature is always inclined to think. He was thinking in the measurable and limited terms of law, not the immeasurable and unlimited terms of grace. Law keeps count; grace does not. Therefore **Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.”**

The Lord was not extending the legal limit of forgiveness. He was not speaking of law or limits at all. By **seventy times seven** He did not mean 490. He simply picked up on Peter’s number and multiplied it by itself and then by ten, indicating a number that, for all practical purposes, was beyond counting. Record keeping is not to be considered, and a Christian with a forgiving heart thinks nothing about it. He forgives the hundredth offense or the thousandth just as readily and graciously as the first—because that is the way he is forgiven by God.

Perhaps Jesus had in mind Lamech’s arrogant boast that “if Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold” (Gen. 4:24). The inclination of sinful man is to return evil for evil without limit. God’s standard is just the opposite; Jesus said to return good for evil without limit.

Even if a brother “sins against you seven times a day,” the Lord said on another occasion, “and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him” (Luke 17:4). Jesus was not setting a daily limit, but rather the opposite. He was speaking of repeated, regular sinning that is committed many times a day, day after day, and

of corresponding repeated forgiveness. He was saying that even if a fellow Christian sins against you every day for seven times each day, you should be ready and willing to forgive him that often. The faithful, godly Christian will never allow his own forgiveness to be surpassed by a brother's sin. Reflecting his heavenly Father's nature, where sin against him increases, so does his gracious forgiveness (cf. Rom. 5:20).

Of that paralleling extent of forgiveness, Paul declared that Christians are to be "forgiving [of] each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32). Commenting on the rarity of such grace among believers, John Wesley wrote, "If this be Christianity, where do Christians live?"

THE EXAMPLE OF FORGIVENESS

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. And when he had begun to settle them, there was brought to him one who owed him ten thousand talents. But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. The slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.' And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' So his fellow slave fell down and began to entreat him, saying 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' He was unwilling however, but went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that

debt because you entreated me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?’ And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.” (18:23-35)

This parable is so severe that many people conclude that the principle Jesus teaches through it could not possibly apply to believers. But just as it is sometimes necessary for a parent to deal harshly with a persistently disobedient child, it is also sometimes necessary for the Lord to deal harshly with His disobedient family. The writer of Hebrews reminded his readers of what the Lord had taught His people almost a thousand years earlier: “Those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives” (Heb. 12:6; cf. Prov. 3:12). Some of the Corinthian believers had become so immoral and impenitent that God put them on sickbeds and even caused some to die (1 Cor. 11:30). He struck Ananias and Sapphira dead for lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-10). The Lord is sometimes stringent with His errant children because that is sometimes the only way He can correct their disobedience and protect the purity and holiness of His church.

Jesus introduces the parable by specifically stating that it is about **the kingdom of heaven**, whose true citizenship includes only believers. Not only that, but He tells the parable **for this reason**, that is, as a direct response to Peter’s question about forgiving a brother (v. 21), which in turn was a response to His teaching about discipline within the church (vv. 15-20). Peter himself obviously was a believer, and his reference to “brother” indicates a fellow believer, especially in light of the fact that chapter 18 focuses on believers, the Lord’s “little ones who believe in [Him]” (v. 6; cf. v. 10). Jesus is illustrating the need for believers to forgive each other.

As already seen in Matthew 13, much of the Lord’s teaching about **the kingdom of heaven** was given in the form of parables. In the present parable Jesus presents the attitude of God, the **certain king**, concerning forgiveness of and by His subjects, the **slaves**. The

citizens of God's kingdom are also children in His heavenly family, and the parable speaks of Him both as Lord, represented by the **king**, and as heavenly Father (v. 35).

Slaves is here used in the broadest sense of those in submission to a sovereign, as all subjects of ancient monarchies were, regardless of their rank or wealth. All citizens of an ancient kingdom were slaves in the sense that they owed total allegiance to the **king**, who typically had life and death power over them. In that sense, noblemen were as much the king's **slaves** as were the most menial servants. Those extremes are suggested in the parable, indicating that its truth applies to every believer, every citizen of **the kingdom of heaven**. The first slave was obviously of high rank and probably possessed considerable personal wealth, whereas the fellow slave whom he refused to forgive the debt was perhaps relatively poor.

A **king** usually appointed governors, or satraps, over the various provinces of his kingdom, and their primary responsibility was to collect taxes on his behalf. It was probably in regard to such taxes that the **king . . . wished to settle accounts**, and the man **who owed** the king **ten thousand talents** was probably such a tax-collecting official. In any case, he was a person with great responsibility who **owed** a great amount of money to the king.

The occasion was perhaps the regular, periodic time that the **king** had established **to settle accounts** with His governors. The idea of an ultimate end-of-life accounting, representing God's final judgment, does not correspond to the way a ruler normally collected taxes from his officials. Nor does it fit the fact that the forgiven man went on with normal relationships with other men. The accounting could not represent God's final judgment, because, after he was judged, the man would have had no more opportunity either to forgive or to be forgiven.

Just as "seventy times seven" (v. 22) represents a limitless number of times, **ten thousand talents** represents a limitless amount of money. Because monetary values change so widely from one point in history to another, it is never possible to calculate accurately how much a given coin of an ancient society would be worth in modern currency. And that is not necessary to make the point. But historical

records give considerable light on the immense value that **ten thousand talents** would have had in Jesus' day.

From historical documents of the time it has been determined that the total annual revenue collected by the Roman government from Idumea, Judea, Samaria, and Galilee was about 900 talents. Based on those figures, **ten thousand talents** amounted to more than eleven years of taxes from those four provinces. From the Old Testament we learn that the total amount of gold given for use in the Temple was just over 8,000 talents (1 Chron. 29:4, 7) and that "the weight of gold which came in to Solomon in one year was 666 talents of gold" (1 Kings 10:14).

Although *urias* literally means **ten thousand**, because it was the largest numerical term in the Greek language it was also used figuratively to represent a vast, uncountable number. In that sense it has the same connotation as the English *myriad*, which is derived from it. *Murias* is therefore sometimes translated "countless" (1 Cor. 4:15) or "myriads" (Rev 5:11). Jesus' point in this parable, therefore, was that the man who owed the king **ten thousand talents** owed an incalculable and unpayable debt.

That incalculable, unpayable debt represents the debt for sin that every man owes God. When the Holy Spirit convicts a person of his sin (John 16:8), that person is faced with the fact that the extent of his sin is beyond comprehension and humanly unpayable. Like Paul when he saw his sin in the clear light of God's law, every convicted sinner has a glimpse of the utter sinfulness of sin (Rom. 7:13). It is such a glimpse that Job had of himself and that caused him to "repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6), and it is such a glimpse that Ezra had of himself and his fellow Israelites that caused him to pray, "O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to Thee, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads, and our guilt has grown even to the heavens" (Ezra 9:6).

Life is a stewardship from God to be used for His glory. Unbelievers take life from God, and, rather than returning it to Him wisely invested for His glory and making the most of what used to be called "gospel privilege," they squander it on themselves. They are like the prodigal son and the slave who buried his talent in the

ground, both of whom Jesus used to illustrate wasted “gospel privilege.”

Regardless of how much harm a sin does to other people, it is first of all an offense against God. In his great penitential psalm David declared, “Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in Thy sight” (Ps. 51:4). Every sin ever committed is committed against God. And every sin is committed in His sight, just as surely as if it were committed, were that possible, before His very throne in heaven.

The **slave**, then, represents the unbeliever who has been given the knowledge of God (Rom. 1:18ff.), life from God (Acts 17:25), and the opportunity to give God what is due Him (cf. Rom. 11:36; Col. 1:16) but squanders God’s property in sin.

Because the man in Jesus’ parable **did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made.** The man not only embezzled what belonged to the king but consumed it on himself until nothing was left. That is the state of the bankrupt sinner! The **payment to be made** from the proceeds of selling his family into servitude and redeeming all his personal possessions would not have paid a fraction of the debt, but it was exacted as a punishment and so the king could get at least a portion of what he was due.

Just as the unpayable amount of money in the parable is a picture of man’s unpayable debt for sin, the punishment mentioned here makes one think of hell, where condemned men will spend eternity paying for the unpayable. The glory stolen from God by man cannot be repaid by man, and therefore, even after spending an eon in hell, a person would be no nearer paying his debt and being fit for heaven than when he entered. The utter spiritual bankruptcy of every child of Adam makes it impossible for him to pay the limitless debt he has incurred because of his sin.

By the standards of that day the king in the parable had been gracious just by his not demanding an accounting earlier. In an infinitely greater way God is gracious to the most hardened sinner just in allowing him to go on living. Life itself is a great gift of divine mercy.

But there will be a day, and often many days, when every man faces the King to give account for what he is doing with his life. This is not a picture of a final judgment day but of a time of conviction when men are made to face their sin and the need for salvation. It depicts the times when the gospel is preached or the Scripture is read or a personal witness is given to them. They are faced with the reality that they have to give God an accounting for their sinful life.

Realizing his inexcusable guilt and sensing the king's goodness, **the slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him.** His falling down and prostrating himself was more than the usual homage given a king. It was an act of total submission, of throwing himself completely on the monarch's mercy. The man was guilty, condemned, devastated, and genuinely penitent. He had no defense and offered none.

In the same way, the sinner confronted by the Holy Spirit with the gospel and the conviction of his sin should acknowledge that he stands guilty and condemned before God. And in the same way his only hope is to humble himself, confess his sin, and cast himself upon God's mercy in Jesus Christ. Every sinner should be overwhelmed by his sin as that man was overwhelmed by his debt. He should have the attitude of the tax collector who "was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'" (Luke 18:13). The Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12) express the contrite attitude of this repentant sinner, who in spiritual bankruptcy mourns over his sin and cries out for the righteousness of salvation.

As the man lay broken at the feet of the king, he did not realize that he could never have repaid the debt no matter how long and hard he worked. But his terrible plight prompted the desperate plea, **"Have patience with me,"** and then the unrealistic promise, **"I will repay you everything."** Impossible as the prospect was, he nevertheless begged for a chance to make good on his debt. His understanding was faulty, but his attitude was right.

When first convicted of their sin, people are often inclined to make promises to God similar to the one the man gave to the king. A person under conviction will sometimes say, "I've got to shape up my life and be a better person. I must turn over a new leaf, make some

resolutions, and reform myself.” He acknowledges his sin and sincerely wants to make amends, not yet realizing that he cannot.

Commenting on the servant in this parable, Martin Luther wrote,

Before the king drew him to account, he had no conscience, does not feel the debt, and would have gone right along, made more debt, and cared nothing about it. But now that the king reckons with him, he begins to feel the debt. So it is with us. The greater part does not concern itself about sin, goes on securely, fears not the wrath of God. Such people cannot come to the forgiveness of sin, for they do not come to realize that they have sins. They say, indeed, with the mouth that they have sin; but if they were serious about it they would speak far otherwise. This servant, too, says, before the king reckons with him, so much I owe to my lord, namely ten thousand talents; . . . But now that the reckoning is held, and his lord orders him, his wife, his children, and everything to be sold, now he feels it. So, too, we feel in earnest when our sins are revealed in the heart, when the record of our debts is held before us. . . . Then we exclaim: I am the most miserable man, there is none as unfortunate as I on the earth! Such knowledge makes a real humble man, works contrition, so that one can come to the forgiveness of sins.

The king well knew that, despite his good intentions, the servant could never do what he promised; but he did not chide the man for his foolish and worthless offer. Rather, **the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.**

Here is an extraordinary picture of God’s compassionate love for the genuinely repentant sinner who throws himself on His mercy. The man only asked for patience so that he might try to repay the king, but instead the king **released him and forgave him the debt.** That is what God does with the sin debt of those who come to Him in humble and sincere penitence.

It must be noted that this parable is not intended to present every aspect of salvation. Obviously the Person and work of Christ

and the essence of saving faith in that work are not portrayed. The purpose of our Lord here was to illustrate the matter of forgiveness between believers, and the story is limited to that idea. It simply depicts a man with an unpayable debt, who sought mercy and was given it abundantly.

Daneion (**debt**) literally means “loan,” implying that in his graciousness the king considered the embezzled fortune a loan and then **forgave** it. Even more graciously does God forgive the sinner who confesses his sin and trusts in Jesus Christ. The moment a person acknowledges the sinfulness of his sin and turns to the only Savior from sin, his mountain of debt to God is paid in full forever.

It was not until the prodigal son reached the absolute bottom of life that he faced up to his wicked foolishness. He had forsaken his father and his family and lived an utterly selfish and debauched life in a foreign and pagan land. And when his money was gone, so were his high living and his supposed friends. The only work he could find was the most demeaning conceivable for a Jew, slopping pigs. While in the pigpen he “came to his senses” and said to himself, “How many of my father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.’” But even before the son spoke those words to his father, “while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him.” The father did not chide or rebuke him, nor did he accept the son’s offer to be only a hired hand. Rather he commanded “his slaves, ‘Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found’” (Luke 15:11-24).

One commentator suggests that when the father ran out to meet his son he must have had to gather up his long robe under his arms and thereby expose his undergarments, a great shame for an older, dignified man of that day. But the father had no concern but to be reunited with his beloved son whom he had given up for dead.

In an infinitely greater way, God allowed Himself to be humiliated as He came to earth, emptying “Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant” (Phil. 2:7). To redeem fallen men back to Himself, He willingly and lovingly “endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb. 12:2).

What happens next in the parable seems inconceivable—until we realize that each one of us is guilty, in various ways, of doing what that forgiven slave did. He **went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, “Pay back what you owe.”**

The implication is that the first thing the forgiven slave did after he left the king’s presence was to search out a **fellow** slave who owed him some money and violently demand repayment of a mere pittance compared to the vast amount he himself had just been forgiven.

The second man’s being described as **one of his fellow slaves** suggests that he represents a fellow believer and that the principle Jesus teaches here primarily relates to believers’ treatment of each other. Although Christians should be forgiving of everyone, they should be especially forgiving of one another, because they are **fellow slaves** who serve the same King.

A **hundred denarii** represented a hundred days’ wages for a common laborer in New Testament times, an infinitesimal sum compared to ten thousand talents, which, as already noted, amounted to some eleven years of Roman taxes from the provinces of Idumea, Judea, Samaria, and Galilee combined.

Although the second debt was extremely small by comparison to the first, it was nevertheless a real debt and represents a real offense committed by one believer against another. If the offense were not real, it would need no forgiveness. Jesus was not teaching that sins against fellow believers or against anyone else are insignificant but that they are minute compared to the offenses every one of us has committed against God and for which He has freely and completely forgiven us.

The power of the sinful flesh that remains in a transformed believer is seen in the first servant’s hardheartedness against his fellow servant, who perhaps was a low echelon official responsible

for collecting taxes from a small village within the province governed by the first servant. Even so, the first man was much further removed from the king in status than he was from the other servant, and the amount of debt he had been forgiven by the king was immeasurably greater than the amount he refused to forgive his fellow servant. Those two facts should have made the man not only especially grateful but especially merciful. His inclination should have been to search out his fellow slave to forgive him rather than condemn him. There is no indication, however, that his own experience of mercy made him grateful, and it clearly did not make him merciful. Instead, he became proud, presumptuous, and hardhearted.

Unfortunately, as Christians we sometimes reflect a similar arrogance and insensitivity. Although we have been totally and forever forgiven of all offenses before God, on the basis of His grace, we often act as if we were forgiven on the basis of our own merit. We may even look down on our brothers and sisters in Christ with disdain and a sense of superiority.

Instead of reflecting the king's compassion, the first servant became angry at the thought that he himself was still owed some money. When he found his debtor, **he seized him and began to choke him, saying, "Pay me back what you owe."** According to ancient Roman writers, it was not uncommon for a creditor to actually wrench a debtor's neck until blood ran from his nose.

This kind of behavior seems unthinkable, even bizarre, and it is hard to believe someone could act in such a way. And that is exactly the Lord's point to Peter and the other disciples. For Christians to be unwilling to forgive one another is unthinkable and bizarre.

The self-deceptive nature of the flesh is such that sometimes anger and vengeance override even greed, and self-will overshadows even self-interest. A person who is severely strangled or beaten, not to mention imprisoned, is put in a poor position to earn money to repay a debt. Even from a purely practical standpoint, such debt-collecting practices are foolish and counterproductive, but they have persisted throughout history and even into modern times.

The subordinate official made his plea with exactly the same words his creditor had used before the king: **"Have patience with me**

and I will repay you” (cf. v. 26). That should have shocked the forgiven slave’s memory into a right response, but those familiar words evoked no sympathetic reaction in him, even though the debt he had been forgiven would have been unrepayable in a lifetime, whereas the debt owed to him was payable by a few months’ work.

With unimaginable callousness, the forgiven slave **was unwilling however, but went and threw** his subordinate **in prison until he should pay back what was owed**. Even to ask for repayment after he himself had been forgiven so much was grossly insensitive; to abuse and imprison his debtor for failure to repay so little was, in the words of one commentator, a “moral monstrosity,” to say nothing of foolishness, because in prison the man could not earn money to pay his debt. Such unforgiveness not only is morally unthinkable and bizarre but irrational.

Yet as both Scripture and personal experience make clear, that is the way Christians sometimes treat each other. The parable is an unflattering picture of the sinful flesh that still resides in every believer and that has caused great conflict and damage within the church since its birth.

The church at Corinth was not typical of early congregations, but it shows clearly the extremes to which the flesh can lead those who belong to Christ and who possess His own nature and Spirit. The wealthier members there had no sensitivity for their poorer brethren, eating their own food at the Lord’s Supper and leaving nothing for and embarrassing those who had nothing (1 Cor. 11:22). And rather than resolving their differences among themselves, they brought each other before pagan courts (6:1).

Paul instructed Titus to remind the believers under his care “to malign no one, to be uncontentious, gentle, showing every consideration for all men.” He then gives the reason God commands those virtues of His children:

For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on

the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that being justified by His grace we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:2-7)

Jesus' point in the parable is the same as Paul's here: Those who have been graciously, totally, and permanently forgiven by God for their immeasurable sins against Him are to act like the divine children and heirs they have become by reflecting the love and compassion of their heavenly Father. They are to "be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven [them]" (Eph.4:32).

Believers still have the capacity to give way to the sinful, spiteful ways of their unredeemed humanness, but "even so," Paul says, "consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts" (Rom. 6:11-12).

Knowing of the great debt the first slave had been forgiven by the king and his subsequent treatment of his indebted slave, the **fellow slaves** were understandably indignant that this man would, in effect, place himself above the king by acting as if he had a right to be less gracious and merciful than his sovereign. Therefore, when they **saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened.**

Christians should be **deeply grieved** when a fellow believer is unforgiving, because his hardness of heart not only tends to drive the offender deeper into sin but also causes dissention and division within the church, tarnishes its testimony before the world, and deeply grieves the Lord Himself.

The other slaves went to the king with the awful story, expecting that proper action would be taken against the unforgiving creditor. This feature of the parable forms an interesting insight into the believer's responsibility not only to go through the steps of disciplining a sinning brother but to petition the Lord Himself to act in chastening and purging the ungracious sinning child of God.

As would be expected, the king was incensed when he heard the news, and **summoning him, his lord said to him, “You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?”**

When a Christian allows remaining sin to control an attitude or action, he is being **wicked**, because sin is always sin, whether committed by a believer or unbeliever. The sin of unforgiveness is in some ways even more **wicked** in a believer, because he has infinitely greater motivation and power to be forgiving than does a person who has never experienced God’s redeeming grace. How can a person accept God’s mercy for all his sin, an unpayable debt, and then not forgive some small offense committed against himself?

It is not that the king expected the first slave to give his subordinate a chance to repay the debt but that he expected him to **have had mercy on his fellow slave** and to forgive his debt entirely, **even as** the king had **had mercy on** the forgiven slave and had forgiven his debt entirely. Again, the principle of Ephesians 4:32 is directly parallel.

And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. On the earlier occasion, the first slave’s plea for patience had moved the king to compassion and forgiveness. Now the man’s refusal to forgive his fellow servant **moved** the king to **anger**.

Because He is holy and just, God is always **moved with anger** at sin, including the sin of His children. Paul expressed something of this kind of righteous anger toward unrepentant church members at Corinth when he asked them if they were going to continue in sin and make him come to them with a rod (1 Cor. 4:21).

God has holy indignation whenever a Christian sins (cf. Ps. 6; Acts 5:1-10). As chastening for his sin, the unforgiving slave was **handed over to the torturers** (not executioners) **until he should repay all that was owed him**, that is, until he had a change of heart and forgave his offending brother, which is what the king wanted him to **repay**. Lord Herbert once said, “He who cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass.”

Some commentators contend that the first slave was reencumbered with the debt he had been forgiven and became obligated to pay it all back. But that interpretation hopelessly convolutes the parable by making either the salvation temporary or the forgiveness conditional on one's subsequent behavior. Both views are undesirable. Furthermore, the original debt was said to be unpayable and the man was still without resources, so it would make no sense to reassign him the debt with the provision that it must be paid in full. It is much better to see the repayment simply as the proper duty a believer owes the Lord. In this case, it would mean forgiving your brother any offense.

God does not chasten His children out of hatred but out of love. "Those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives" (Heb. 12:6). He does not chasten them to drive them away but to bring them back to Himself and to His righteousness. "He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness" (v. 10). Every Christian feels the Lord's scourging at some time or another, because every Christian deserves His discipline occasionally. It is natural that God's "discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (v. 11).

When believers forget their own divine forgiveness by God and refuse to extend human forgiveness to fellow believers, the Lord puts them under such **torturers** (the word can refer to inquisitors) as stress, hardship, pressure, or other difficulties until the sin is confessed and forgiveness is granted. As James tells us, "Judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy" (James 2:13).

That is what Jesus unmistakably declared to be the parable's point: **So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.** The unforgiving believer (**you**) will satisfy God only by offering his own forgiveness to those who sin against him, most especially **his brother** in Christ.

Jesus is not speaking here of the forgiveness that brings salvation, saying that God only saves those who are forgiving. That would be works righteousness. He is speaking of people forgiving each other after they have experienced His free grace. Those who are

saved, transformed, given a new nature in Christ, and have the indwelling Holy Spirit generally will manifest that changed life by having a forgiving attitude (see Matt. 6:14-15). But there will be times when we fall into the sin of unforgiveness, and this instruction is for those times.

As mentioned earlier, if the first man does not represent a Christian, a person who has been forgiven by God for his immeasurable debt of sin, the instruction in the context of the parable completely breaks down. Jesus was speaking to the Twelve, who not only were believers but apostles. All believers, no matter what their position or accomplishments in the church might be, are held accountable to forgive every offense against them committed by fellow believers, for the very reason that they themselves have already been forgiven an incalculable debt by God. They are expected to *reflect* God's forgiveness because they have *experienced* God's forgiveness.

Believers experience two kinds of forgiveness by God. The first is once and for all and is permanent. When a person trusts in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, all of his sins—past, present, and future—are judicially forgiven, totally and eternally. But because believers are still subject to the temptations and weaknesses of the flesh, they fall into sin even after they are saved. For that sin they need God's daily forgiveness and cleansing, not to preserve their salvation but to restore the broken relationship with the Lord that the sin causes. Jesus had these two aspects of forgiveness in mind when He said, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean" (John 13:10).

Believers' forgiveness of each other has no power to absolve or cleanse sin as God's forgiveness has absolved and continues to cleanse theirs. Nevertheless their forgiveness of each other should reflect the two kinds of forgiveness they receive from God. They are to have in their hearts an internal, general spirit of forgiveness that is ready to forgive even before they know of a sin committed against them and whether or not the person has asked or ever asks for forgiveness. That forgiveness should be constant and unchanging, reflecting a divinely empowered love that Peter says "covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8). If and when the offending person

repents, then relational forgiveness is readily given and the broken relationship is fully restored.

Christians are to be marked as forgiving people, because they have been forgiven as no others on earth. When they are not forgiving, they are living in opposition to their new nature in Christ. When they refuse to forgive fellow Christians they cut themselves off from God's relational forgiveness that cleanses them of the sins they continue to commit. They also forfeit the inner peace, power, and depth of spiritual life that only close communion with the Lord can produce. When a believer falls into a time of spiritual shallowness and indifference, the cause is often a heart that is unforgiving because it has allowed the flesh to vault itself into prominence.

An anonymous saint of long ago wrote,

Revenge, indeed, seems often sweet to men; but, oh, it is only sugared poison, only sweetened gall, and its aftertaste is bitter as hell. Forgiving, enduring love alone is sweet and blissful; it enjoys peace and the consciousness of God's favour. By forgiving, it gives away and annihilates the injury. It treats the injurer as if he had not injured, and therefore feels no more the smart and sting that he had inflicted. Forgiveness is a shield from which all the fiery darts of the wicked one harmless rebound. Forgiveness brings heaven to earth, and heaven's peace into the sinful heart. Forgiveness is the image of God, the forgiving Father, and an advancement of Christ's kingdom in the world.

"Blessed are the merciful," Jesus said, "for they shall receive mercy" (Matt. 5:7). If we want mercy and cleansing from the Lord for our repeated sins against Him, we must be willing, **from our heart**, to offer mercy to fellow Christians even for repeated offenses against us. Then we can pray with confidence, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12).

Genuine forgiveness that is **from your heart** is trusting forgiveness, forgiveness that sees the offending brother just as he was before he sinned. If we truly forgive a person, we trust him just as we

trusted him before. We do not hold the offense over his head or even in our minds, thinking that he will likely sin again.

Although sin against God, the church, and a fellow brother in Christ can bring long-lasting pain and suffering, and sometimes even permanent loss of a once-cherished intimacy, the road to full restoration can be paved with generosity and trust. For example, to entrust a forgiven person with something that is dear and important to you is perhaps the surest evidence that the forgiveness is genuinely **from the heart**. If the offense was stealing, the offender can again be entrusted with something precious. If the offense was shirking responsibility, he can be given other important work to do. Even if the offense was slander, he again can be trusted with your reputation and become a friend who is fully loved and fully trusted.

To forgive is not necessarily to forget. Although the truly forgiving person will refuse to dwell on an offense, there are sometimes continual reminders of it that we cannot control. Nor does forgiveness involve excusing a sinful offense. Sin is always sin, and true love and mercy never try to make sin anything but what it is. But forgiveness does involve ending the bitterness, anger, and resentment that not only do not remove a sin but rather add to it.

Heart forgiveness is not possible for the believer in his own power. Genuine forgiveness is not natural but supernatural and is possible only as the indwelling Holy Spirit empowers. Only as we “walk by the Spirit” are we able not to “carry out the desire of the flesh,” which, among other things, is to hold a grudge rather than forgive. “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please” (Gal. 5:16-17).

The great commentator William Arnot told the following account to illustrate how believers are enabled to obey the command to forgive each other. After fording a river, a traveler in Burma discovered that his body was covered with small leeches, busily sucking his blood. His first impulse was to pull them off, but his servant warned him against it, explaining that to do that would leave part of the leeches buried in the skin and cause serious infection. The native prepared a warm bath for the man and added certain herbs to the water that irritated but did not kill the leeches. One by one they

voluntarily dropped off. “Each unforgiven injury rankling in the heart is like a leech sucking the life-blood,” Arnot goes on to explain. “Mere human determination to have done with it will not cast the evil thing away. You must bathe your whole being in God’s pardoning mercy; and those venomous creatures will instantly let go their hold.”

When someone says or does something against us that seems unforgivable, it is helpful to offer a prayer such as this: “O God, put in me the heart of forgiveness, so that I may commune with You in the fullness of fellowship and joy and not experience the chastening that comes when You don’t forgive me because I won’t forgive a brother or sister in Christ. May I remember that for everyone who sins against me I have multiplied times sinned against You, and You have always forgiven me. At no time has any of my sin caused me to forfeit my eternal life; therefore, no one else’s sin should cause them to forfeit my love and my mercy toward them.”

16
Jesus' Teaching on
Divorce
(19:1-12)

And it came about that when Jesus had finished these words, He departed from Galilee, and came into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan; and great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there.

And some Pharisees came to Him, testing Him, and saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?" And He answered and said, "Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh'? Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate and divorce her?" He said to them, "Because of your

hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” The disciples said to Him, “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.” But He said to them, “Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it.” (19:1-12)

Some years ago a journalist for a national news magazine asked rhetorically, “Are there any persons left in the land who have not heard a friend or a child or a parent describe the agony of divorce?” Divorce has become pandemic, to the point that hardly a person can be found who has not been affected by it either directly or indirectly. Many marriages, including a tragic number of Christian marriages, seem to be little more than a socially recognized battleground where warfare between the spouses is the rule and harmony the exception.

Each year in the United States there are well over one million divorces, and beneath the rubble of those numbing statistics lie the crushed lives of men, women, and children. For every million divorces, there are two million adults and several more million children who are directly involved. None of them escapes suffering and damage, no matter how amicable the divorce may be. Nearly every state has enacted “no fault” divorce laws, making divorce almost as easy as marriage. It is not surprising that the largest caseloads in civil courts today relate to family disputes.

In past years in this nation the vast majority of marriages held together, and divorce was difficult and rare. The reasons for that stability are not hard to find. First was the family moral force. Not only the immediate family but the extended family of grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins was the center of personal loyalty and

activity and usually had a tradition of moral and religious convictions. It was these intimate loved ones that all family members, adults as well as children, knew they could depend on for help, comfort, encouragement, and security. But as moral permissiveness, feminism, humanism, easier mobility, and the disruptive and worldly influences of television, movies, and other media began to undermine the family, divorce rapidly increased. The number of single adults living apart from any close family relationship has also increased dramatically, adding to the decrease of family support, encouragement, and influence.

The second reason for family stability in the past was community expectation. Society in general, and the legal system in particular, recognized and strongly supported and protected the primacy of the family as well as a biblically-based morality. Strict laws made divorce difficult, and community ethics and peer pressure made the stigma of it severe.

The third and strongest of forces that helped maintain family stability was the teaching of the church. Until modern times, every branch of Christendom—Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—strongly supported family life and just as strongly opposed divorce. But as their constituencies pled for more concessions to worldly standards and practices, church bodies acquiesced, and the family has suffered the bitter consequences of those compromises.

In the name of Christian love, some individuals and groups not only condone divorce but insist that it is sometimes God's will. A well-known entertainer claimed that her divorce was justified because her husband was a detriment to her career. She claimed that she did not believe her divorce related to her religious beliefs in any significant way and that, even if the divorce were wrong, God loved her in spite of it. In other words, it made no real difference to God. The final evidence given to justify the divorce was the fact that she and her husband would be happier as divorced friends than as married enemies.

Even when Christians go to Scripture for guidance concerning divorce and remarriage, they often do so with preconceptions and predispositions that make responsible interpretation impossible. Some people consult Scripture solely to find justification for views

they already hold. Others fall into the trap either of adding to or taking from what it teaches. To justify divorce, some people lower the biblical standard in the name of love. To try to stem the tide of divorce and promote spirituality, others raise the standard higher than the Bible teaches. But that which is contrary to Scripture can never be either loving or spiritual. A human standard may be more lenient or more restrictive than Scripture, but it can never be better. When God's Word is ignored or perverted in any area, tragedy is always the consequence. The matter of marriage and divorce standards is no exception.

The first sin of mankind was not marital, but it was committed within the framework of marriage. God created man and woman equal in many ways, but He gave them clearly different roles. Man was to be the provider and leader and woman his helper in a perfect, balanced, and majestic coregency over all the earth (Gen. 1:27-28). The man's headship and the woman's submission were blended in a loving interdependence that allowed them to multiply and fill the earth together, subdue the earth together, and rule the earth together. But because Eve did not consult Adam, her head and protector, when temptation came she easily succumbed to Satan's wiles. And when Adam forfeited his role of headship and willingly followed her lead, he also succumbed to sin.

As a consequence of that sin, God cursed Eve and all other women to pain in childbirth and cursed Adam and all other men to the hardship of laboring for their food and sustenance (Gen. 3:16-19). In addition to that, because the God-given harmony between man and woman had been broken, God also placed a curse upon their relationship to each other. Because they reversed their roles, with Eve usurping the place of leadership and Adam submitting to the place of follower, God destined them to continual conflict.

God declared to Eve, "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16*b*). The desire spoken of here does not refer to her original God-given desire for loving submission and companionship, which she already had before the Fall. Her desire would no longer be to submit to his rule but to usurp it. The use of the Hebrew word translated "desire" in this text relates to seeking control and dominance. It is the same term used in the next chapter in the

same way to describe sin's personified desire to corrupt and gain control over Cain (4:7).

Just as the fallen woman's role of submission was subverted, so was the fallen man's role of headship. His rule over her would no longer be benevolent and selfless but overbearing and selfish. It was at the Fall that both feminism and male chauvinism were born, when women began to seek supremacy and men began to be suppressive.

Because men are naturally stronger, male chauvinism has been the dominant of those two perversions throughout history. In many ancient cultures, including Jewish, women were frequently treated more like animals than human beings, and wives were treated more like possessions to be bought and traded than partners to be loved and cherished.

But God did not change His standard because men changed theirs. "I, the Lord, do not change," He declared (Mal. 3:6). Just prior to that declaration God had given a stinging rebuke to Jewish men who "dealt treacherously" with their wives. He Himself was witness between husband and wife when they made their marital covenant, as the One who ordains all marriage and every marriage. Therefore "'I hate divorce,' says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'and him who covers his garment with wrong'" (Mal. 2:14-16).

The prophet Hosea pictured the epitome of God-ordained and God-empowered marital love. He was a living illustration of God's undying love for His people Israel. The prophet married a woman named Gomer, who became an adulterous prostitute. He had children by her and continued to love, care for, and protect her despite her persistent unfaithfulness. He even bought her back from the slave market after she had sunk to the pits of immorality. His life with Gomer was surely not without times of anger and resentment, but he forgave her and did whatever was necessary to bring her back to himself. His love for Gomer and his commitment to her as his wife, like God's love for and covenant with His people Israel, was exceedingly gracious and forgiving.

By the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, God expects His redeemed people in Christ to exemplify the original beauty and mutuality of the marriage relationship as well as the grace of forgiveness. "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the

Lord,” Paul declares. “For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.” The divinely ordained and exemplified responsibility of the husband is just as clear: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her” (Eph. 5:18, 22-25).

The two key attitudes in a successful marriage are self-denial and self-giving, both of which are contrary to human nature but made possible to Christians through the Holy Spirit. The husband and wife who are walking in the Spirit will be walking in unselfish humility and forgiving, restoring love that always puts the other first.

In Matthew 19:1-12 Jesus gives a clear discourse on God’s revelation about marriage and divorce.

THE BACKGROUND AND SETTING

And it came about that when Jesus had finished these words, He departed from Galilee, and came into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan; and great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there. (19:1-2)

These two verses mark an especially significant transition in Jesus’ ministry. For about two years He had been preaching, teaching, and healing in Galilee in northern Palestine. For the last two months He had concentrated almost entirely on private instruction to the Twelve.

To mark the end of each of Jesus’ major discourses Matthew used a phrase such as **when Jesus had finished these words** (cf. 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 26:1). In the present passage, the phrase **these words** refers to the Lord’s discourse on childlikeness recorded in chapter 18 and given to the disciples just before He left Capernaum. At the end of that discourse, **He departed from Galilee.**

As Jesus had already announced to the Twelve, it was necessary that He “go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day” (16:21). He would not, however, go directly south to Jerusalem but rather east and then south by way of **the region of Judea beyond the Jordan** and Jericho (20:29).

This **region** later came to be called Perea, a name taken from the Greek *peran*, which means **beyond**. Lying to the east of **the Jordan** River, this territory which had long been sparsely populated was now well settled. Because the Passover time was nearing, Jesus would be able to minister not only to the residents of Perea but also to the many Jews traveling through there as they also made their annual Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

As Jesus preached and taught in Perea (see Mark 10:1), **great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there**. His ministry in that region is recorded in Matthew 19-20, and as always, by demonstrating His power and His compassion, Jesus’ healing miracles attested to His divine, messianic credentials.

THE ATTACK

And some Pharisees came to Him, testing Him, and saying, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?” (19:3)

Almost from the beginning of His ministry (see Matt. 9:11), Jesus had been criticized by the **Pharisees**, who even before this time had become His arch-enemies and planned to kill Him (12:14). They were the largest and most influential party in the Jewish religious establishment, whose unbiblical traditions and hypocritical lifestyles were the antithesis of true righteousness (5:20). They despised Jesus because He undermined their false teaching and exposed their deceitful living.

Therefore when they **came to Him**, this group of religious leaders obviously was asking questions **testing Him** in the hope that He would fail publicly. They wanted to discredit Him in the eyes of the people so that He would lose His popularity and be easier for them to destroy. This time their test question was well thought out, carefully calculated to place Him at odds with Moses, the great giver of God's law

For many centuries divorce had been a volatile issue for debate among the Jews. As women came to be treated almost like merchandise to be bought, sold, or traded, divorce inevitably became common. Because of their spurious, self-serving interpretations of the Mosaic law to justify their lusts for other women, the **Pharisees** had become the leading exponents of easy divorce. They were known for frequently divorcing their wives **for any cause at all** to marry another woman and for teaching that the practice not only was permissible but sometimes mandatory.

At the other extreme was an opposing and much less influential faction of rabbis, represented by a certain Shammai, who maintained that divorce was never permissible. That narrow-minded, hard-line view not only was unpopular but, like the liberal position of the Pharisees, was also unscriptural.

Representing the liberal Pharisaic view was rabbi Hillel, who had died only about twenty years before Jesus began His ministry. He taught that a man could divorce his wife for the most trivial of reasons, for such things as taking her hair down in public or talking to other men and even for burning the bread or putting too much salt in the food. For her to speak ill of her mother-in-law or to be infertile were more than sufficient grounds for divorce.

From His previous teaching, the Pharisees knew Jesus did not hold to such a liberalized view of divorce. They had heard Him say that "everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (Matt. 5:32). They now expected Him to take the same stand and thereby alienate and intimidate the many other Jews besides themselves who accepted the idea of divorce **for any cause at all**. They hoped to discredit Him by identifying Him

in the minds of the people with the narrow and intolerant view of the Shammai school.

Ultimately, of course, they wanted to destroy Him. The clever Pharisees were well aware that Perea, where Jesus now ministered, was under the rule of Herod Antipas. He was the tetrarch who had John the Baptist imprisoned and eventually beheaded for condemning his unlawful marriage to Herodias, whom he had seduced away from his brother Philip (see Matt. 14:3-12). No doubt the Pharisees hoped that, by denouncing divorce **for any cause at all**, Jesus would thereby publicly condemn Herod's adulterous relationship just as John had done—and suffer John's fate.

THE ANSWER

And He answered and said, "Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh'? Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." (19:4-6)

Instead of giving a direct yes or no, Jesus went back beyond rabbinical tradition, and even further back than the law of Moses, all the way to God's creation of man.

Jesus' opening words had nothing directly to do with the question of divorce but were a sarcastic and biting rebuke to the learned Pharisees, who prided themselves on their great knowledge of Scripture. Responding to their question with a question of His own, Jesus was in effect asking, **"Have you not read** the book of Genesis? Are you not aware of what God Himself declared at the very creation? Don't you know the very first thing God said about marriage? Don't you recall **that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two**

shall become one flesh?” By quoting from Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, Jesus was saying, “Your argument is not with Me, but with God.” His words must have stung the proud, self-righteous Pharisees, who considered themselves to be the supreme authorities on Scripture.

From those two verses, taken from the first two chapters of Scripture, the Lord presented four reasons why divorce was never in God’s plan. First, He said, God **created them from the beginning . . . male and female**. In the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:27, both **male** and **female** are in the emphatic position, giving the sense of “the one male and the one female.” In other words, God did not create a group of males and females who could pick and choose mates as it suited them. There were no spares or options. There was no provision, or even possibility, for multiple or alternate spouses. There were only one man and one woman in the beginning, and for that very obvious reason, divorce and remarriage was not an option.

Second, Jesus said, “**For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife.**” Since Adam and Eve had no parents to leave, the leaving of **father and mother** was a principle to be projected into and applied to all future generations.

The Hebrew word (*dābaq*) behind **cleave** refers to a strong bonding together of objects and often was used to represent gluing or cementing. Job used the word when he spoke of his bones clinging to his skin and flesh (Job 19:20; cf. Ps. 102:5). It could also have the connotation of following closely. The two ideas were, in fact, sometimes carried together, as in Ruth’s clinging to Naomi (Ruth (1:14) and the men of Judah remaining steadfast to David (2 Sam. 20:2). Several times the term is used of the Israelites’ holding to the Lord in love and obedience (Deut. 10:20; 11:22; 13:4; Josh. 22:5; 23:8).

The idea of close bonding and interrelationship is seen in the modern Hebrew word for marriage, *kiddushin*, a word closely related to the terms for holy and sanctified, which have the basic meaning of being set apart and consecrated. This meaningful word for marriage beautifully expresses the consecration of husband and wife to each other as well as to God. Marriage as God has always intended it to be involves the total commitment and consecration of husbands and

wives to each other and to Him as the divine author of their union and witness to their covenant.

The third reason Jesus gives for divorce not being in God's plan is that, in marriage, **the two . . . become one flesh**. As Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 7:4, spouses belong to each other in the physical relationship of marriage: "The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does."

"Consequently" Jesus said, "when a man and woman are joined in marriage **they are no longer two, but one flesh**." They are therefore indivisible and inseparable, except through death. In God's eyes they become the total possession of each other, one in mind and spirit, in goals and direction, in emotion and will. When they have a child it becomes the perfect emblem and demonstration of their oneness, because that child is a unique product of the fusion of two people into **one flesh** and carries the combined traits of both parents.

But it is not, as some foolishly argue, that becoming **one flesh** in the sex act is what constitutes marriage. If that were true, there would be no such thing as fornication, because as soon as an unmarried man and woman engaged in the sex act they would be automatically married, rather than guilty of wickedness. Under the Mosaic law, the act of fornication obligated the man to marry the woman or pay compensation to her father (Ex. 22:16-17), further indicating that the sexual act itself is not the equivalent of marriage.

On the other hand, the act of adultery, shattering as it is to the marriage relationship, does not in itself dissolve a marriage. Marriage is a mutual covenant, a God-ordained obligation between a man and a woman to lifelong companionship. When rebuking the Israelites for their adultery and frequent divorces, the Lord declared that by divorcing his wife a man "dealt treacherously" with her, "though she is your companion and your wife by covenant" (Mal. 2:14-16). In God's eyes, *every* wife is a "wife by covenant," never merely a wife by fornication, convenience, or whim.

The fourth reason Jesus gives for divorce not being in God's perfect design is that, in the creative sense, every marriage is made in heaven. From the very first marriage of Adam and Eve, **God has**

joined together every husband and wife. Marriage is first of all God's institution and God's doing, regardless of how men may corrupt it and deny or disregard His part in it. Whether it is between faithful believers or between rank pagans or atheists, or whether it was arranged by the parents or by the mutual desire and consent of the bride and groom, marriage as a general social relationship is above all the plan and work of God for the procreation, pleasure, and preservation of the race. Whether it is entered into wisely or foolishly, sincerely or insincerely, selfishly or unselfishly, with great or little commitment, God's design for every marriage is that it be permanent until the death of one of the spouses.

God engineered man and woman to complement, support, and give joy to each other through the mutual commitment of the marriage bond. It is by His divine hand that they are created to fulfill each other, encourage each other, strengthen each other, and produce children as fruit of their love for each other. Whether they recognize it or not, every couple who has enjoyed the companionship, happiness, and fulfillment of marriage has experienced the miraculous blessing of God. There is no good thing in marriage that is not derived from Him.

No child can be conceived by the procreative act of a man and woman who is not first conceived by the creative act of God. Every marriage and every child is a creation of God, and therefore divorce and abortion share this tragically evil common denominator: they kill a creation of God.

To destroy a marriage is to destroy a creation of Almighty God. **“What therefore God has joined together,”** Jesus warned, **“let no man separate.”** The word **separate** is from *chōrizō*, which in the context of marriage always carried the idea of divorce, not simply temporary separation. It is translated “leave” in 1 Corinthians 7:10, where Paul is clearly speaking of divorce.

Jesus' point is that marriage is always the work of **God**, whereas divorce is always the work of **man**, and that no **man**—whoever he is or wherever he is or for whatever reason he may have—has the right to **separate** what **God has joined together**. A pagan husband and wife who divorce break God's law just as surely as believers who divorce. In the ultimate sense, every marriage is

ordained of God and every divorce is not. At best, divorce and remarriage is only permitted by the Lord, never commended and certainly never commanded, as some of Jesus' contemporary rabbis taught. Jesus said that God permits it only on the basis of sexual immorality and even then as a gracious concession to man's sinfulness (vv. 8-9). To claim, as some professing Christians do, that the Lord led them out of a marriage is to lie and to make God a liar.

Although Jesus here mentions only Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, the Old Testament is replete with other teachings about the divine sanctity and permanence of marriage. Two of the Ten Commandments—the one against the physical act of adultery (Ex. 20:14) and the one against coveting a neighbor's wife (v. 17), which is the mental act of adultery (Matt. 5:28)—specifically protect the sanctity of marriage. Adultery was such a heinous sin that its punishment was death (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22-24). God made no legal provision for divorce. Adultery could bring the end of a marriage, but by execution, not divorce.

THE ARGUMENT

They said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate and divorce her?” (19:7)

No doubt anticipating Jesus' appeal to Scripture, the Pharisees were prepared with what they considered to be a scriptural rebuttal. They were so intent on defending their own fleshly standards and on trying to discredit and destroy Jesus that they totally disregarded what He had just said. They were not interested in the divine standard for marriage God had established at creation but in defending their own low, self-centered standards. They were classic examples of the natural man looking for moral and spiritual loopholes to accommodate his sin.

To give the appearance of divine support for their liberal divorce customs, they appealed to **Moses**, seeking to pit Jesus against

God's great law giver. Because it is the only passage in the five books of **Moses** that mentions any grounds for divorce, the passage to which the Pharisees referred had to be Deuteronomy 24:1-4. But that passage clearly does not **command** divorce, as the Pharisees claimed. And all the other Pentateuch passages that mention divorce simply acknowledge its existence (see Lev 21:7, 14; Deut. 22:19, 29).

A careful reading of the Deuteronomy 24 text shows that, far from commanding divorce, the passage does not teach about divorce at all. **Moses** was giving a command with regard to a particular case of remarriage. That passage neither commends nor condemns the reason and procedure for the divorce mentioned there. It states that the reason was "indecent," without detailing what that might involve, and it then mentions the giving of a certificate of divorce, without commenting on the propriety of that procedure. The only **command** in the passage relates to the issue of remarriage, not divorce. The **command** is simply that, if a divorced woman remarries and that husband divorces her or dies, her first "former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled" (v. 4). It is to that commandment regarding remarriage, not a commandment to divorce, as some have supposed, that Jesus refers here and in Mark 10:5.

Because the penalty for adultery was death, the indecency mentioned here obviously referred to some kind of sexual looseness or lewdness that came short of adultery. And it was because such indecency, vile as it might have been, was *not* sufficient grounds for divorce that the divorced wife was defiled by remarriage and could not be taken back by her first husband. Because her divorce to her first husband had no sufficient grounds and thus was invalid, she became an adulteress, and therefore defiled, when she married again. That is why John the Baptist declared that Herod and Herodias were living in adultery. In God's sight, she was still "the wife of his brother Philip" (Matt. 14:3-4). For the first husband to take back a defiled woman would be unholy.

THE AFFIRMATION

He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” (19:8-9)

After clarifying that the Mosaic law did not commend, much less command, divorce, Jesus affirmed that it **permitted** divorce under certain conditions. Speaking to them as representatives of their fleshly forefathers, Jesus told the Pharisees that it was only because of **your hardness of heart** that **Moses permitted you to divorce your wives.**

As noted above, even the scriptural permission for divorce is implied rather than explicitly taught. In no Old Testament passage, including the Deuteronomy 24:1-4 text to which the Pharisees no doubt were referring, is specific permission for divorce given. One reason is not hard to surmise. If the Israelites so abused implied permission for divorce, how much more would they have abused explicit permission?

Because of His loving grace God did not always exact the death penalty for adultery under the Mosaic covenant. Israel’s later history is replete with instances of adultery that did not lead to execution. David was strongly rebuked and severely punished for his adultery with Bathsheba, but he was not put to death. Because of his hundreds of wives and concubines, Solomon lived in virtual unremitting adultery on the basis of the one-man, one-woman standard of Genesis 1-2. Yet, like his father David, he did not suffer the death penalty.

When the Jewish exiles returned from the seventy years of captivity in Babylon and were seeking to restore the Temple and to begin living according to God’s Word, they were brought face to face with the problem of their many intermarriages with pagan women. Consequently, under Ezra they decided they would put away their unbelieving wives and the children born of those marriages, based on

“the commandment of our God” and “according to the law” (Ezra 10:3).

There is no record that this action was specifically approved by God, but lack of any condemnation implies that the resulting divorces were **permitted** by Him. And the historical context supports the idea that those divorces were on the grounds of adultery. Not only were all pagans of that day idolatrous, which Scripture repeatedly refers to as spiritual adultery (see, e.g., Jer. 3:8; 13:27; Ezek. 16:32), but most pagan religious systems involved gross immorality as an integral part of their rites and ceremonies. It is therefore likely that most, if not all, of the foreign wives the Israelite men had married were both physical and spiritual adulterers, thereby giving their husbands legitimate grounds for divorce.

God had taken Israel as a wife, and like Hosea’s Gomer, she too was unfaithful. Through Isaiah the Lord rebuked Israel for her spiritual adultery in worshiping pagan deities. “Where is the certificate of divorce,” He asks them rhetorically, “by which I have sent your mother away?” (Isa. 50:1). The answer, of course, was that God had not given such a certificate, because, just as Hosea with Gomer, God was not ready to put Israel away, despite her constant spiritual adultery committed against Him. She had no freedom from her relationship to God that would allow her to consummate relations with other gods.

Finally, however, by the time of Jeremiah, after pleading with His people for some 700 years to forsake idolatry and return to Him, God did something startling. “Have you seen what faithless Israel did?” He asked the prophet. “She went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and she was a harlot there. And I thought, ‘After she has done all these things, she will return to Me’; but she did not return.” Because of her unrelenting hardness of heart in persisting with her unfaithfulness, “I had sent her away,” the Lord said, “and given her a writ of divorce” (Jer. 3:6-8). It was on the basis of her spiritual adultery that God, as it were, finally gave Israel a certificate of divorce.

It is remarkable that, since the Exile and even to our present day, no significant number of Jews has been involved in idolatry. Because His people have not “married” the false gods with whom

they commit spiritual adultery, just as Gomer had not married any of her lovers, God predicts that one day He will take Israel back to Himself:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” (Jer. 31:31-33)

In light of God’s spiritual divorce and eventual remarriage to Israel, it is surely not possible to claim that Scripture recognizes no grounds at all for divorce and remarriage, as some ancient rabbis claimed and as some Christians still claim today. God does not give us illustrations of His own righteous behavior that we cannot follow. If He finally divorced idolatrous and unrepentant Israel, after long years of forgiveness and mercy, it cannot be wrong for a man or woman to divorce a continually adulterous and unrepentant partner after long years of tolerance.

Before Joseph realized that Mary “was with child by the Holy Spirit, . . . being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her, [he] desired to put her away secretly” (Matt. 1:18-19). Had his assumption about her been correct, that is, that she was pregnant by another man and therefore an adulteress, Joseph, who was only engaged to her, knew he had legitimate grounds for divorce. The engagement was by a legal and binding contract, though the union was not yet physically consummated. The context suggests that, because he was “a righteous man,” he felt he was obligated to divorce her. To protect her reputation, however, not to mention her life, he planned to do it privately.

Hardness of heart suggests the condition where adultery was prolonged and the sinning spouse was unrepentant, making

reconciliation and a normal marriage relationship impossible. When an adulterous husband or wife became totally insensitive to marital fidelity, God through **Moses** indirectly and reluctantly **permitted . . . divorce.**

Reminding His adversaries again of the Genesis teaching about God's plan for marriage, Jesus then declared that **from the beginning it has not been this way.** Divorce was never in God's original, ideal design for mankind and will never be.

When a man obtains a divorce for any reason **except immorality, and marries another woman, he commits adultery.** When giving the same basic teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus emphasized that the divorced wife and her new husband would be led to commit adultery. The man "who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity," He said, "makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (Matt. 5:32). In other words, the message Jesus wanted to get across to those exponents of easy divorce and remarriage is that illegitimate divorce followed by remarriage makes adulterers of everyone involved.

Porneia, here translated **immorality**, is a broad term that encompasses all illicit sexual activity. In the context of marriage it always constituted **adultery**, which, by definition, is illicit sex by a married person. The verb form of the term is used by Paul to describe the immorality for which 23,000 (of the total of 24,000) Israelites were killed by a plague in one day (1 Cor. 10:8; cf. Num. 25:9). Because the majority, if not all, of those slain were probably married, *porneia* clearly includes **adultery.**

Although in this passage and in Matthew 5:32 Jesus spoke only of a man who divorces his wife, the same principle applies to a woman who divorces her husband. That situation is not mentioned by the Lord because it was virtually unheard of. Although a Jewish man could divorce his wife on the most trivial grounds, "for any cause at all" (Matt. 19:3), a Jewish woman could rarely divorce her husband even on the most serious grounds.

A divorce on any other grounds than **immorality**, that is, adultery by one of the spouses, is always illegitimate, regardless of which one initiates the divorce. Jesus here uses **immorality** and

adultery synonymously. He was saying that divorce that does not result *from* adultery results *in* **adultery** if there is remarriage.

If God is gracious to the sinning spouse by tolerating divorce instead of requiring execution, He would surely also be gracious to the innocent spouse by permitting remarriage, which was permissible when a spouse died (cf. Rom. 7:2-3). The purpose of permitting divorce is to show mercy to the sinning spouse, not to condemn the innocent one to a lifetime of singleness and loneliness that would not be required if the Lord had the sinning partner executed. Should His grace to the sinner penalize the innocent? The Lord allows divorce in order that the adulterer might have opportunity to repent rather than be put to death. And both here and in Matthew 5:32 Jesus specifically allows remarriage by the innocent spouse in order that he or she might have opportunity to enjoy again the blessings of marriage that were destroyed by the other partner's adultery. The qualification **except for immorality** clearly permits the innocent party who **marries another** to do so *without* committing **adultery**.

Jesus' declaration here not only reinforced His previous teaching about divorce and remarriage but was a devastating indictment of the Pharisees who were then trying to devastate Him. During the Sermon on the Mount, and in the context of contrasting God's true righteousness with the false and hypocritical righteousness typified by the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5:20), Jesus had declared that even looking on a woman lustfully constituted adultery (v. 28). Very shortly after that statement, as in the present text, Jesus then declared that divorce on any grounds but **immorality** also resulted in **adultery** when there was remarriage, as was almost always the case. The strong implication of that statement, which the self-righteous Pharisees could not have missed, was that they themselves were guilty of proliferating **adultery**.

It should be noted that the Holy Spirit adds one other gracious concession by also allowing divorce and remarriage as an option for a believer who is deserted by an unbeliever. (For a full treatment of this issue, see the author's *1 Corinthians* [Chicago: Moody 1984], pp. 153-86.)

THE APPROPRIATION

The disciples said to Him, “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.” But He said to them, “Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it.” (19:10-12)

By this time the Pharisees had disappeared. They doubtlessly were thoroughly enraged, both because they had not succeeded in making Jesus contradict Moses and because, on the contrary, Jesus had succeeded in showing that they themselves were condemned by Moses in their illegitimate divorces and consequent adulteries.

Jesus was now alone in a house with **the disciples** (Mark 10:10), where they felt free to comment on what He had just been saying. They may have discussed divorce and remarriage with the Lord at some length before finally saying to Him, **“If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.”**

Because they had grown up in a culture where divorce was rampant, largely due to that rabbinical teaching which not only permitted but even required divorce for virtually any reason, the Twelve were more than a little perplexed by what Jesus taught. Many Jews considered divorce a virtue almost on a par with marriage itself. Among the Talmudic writings of the rabbis is the statement, “A bad wife is like leprosy to her husband. What is the remedy? Let him divorce her and be cured of his leprosy.” Another rabbi wrote, “If a man has a bad wife, it is a religious duty to divorce her.”

The difference between what the disciples had been taught all their lives and what Jesus was teaching was so radical that they were completely nonplussed. It is probable that they had looked on marriage like most of their Jewish male counterparts—and like many

people today—believing that if things did not work out, there was always divorce as an out. But if adultery is the only justification for divorce, they concluded, **it is better not to marry.**

Although their response was not well thought out, it shows that they rightly understood what Jesus was saying. They realized that the Lord was declaring that marriage is a lifetime commitment that can legitimately be broken only by death or adultery, and that even adultery does not *require* divorce. The idea of “for better or worse” was more than they could accept. **Better**, they thought, **not to marry** at all.

They had difficulty accepting the idea of lifelong marital commitment because of the existing shallow and unbiblical view of marriage. Had they paid more attention to God’s Word than to the traditions of the rabbinical elders (cf. Matt. 15:6), they would have realized that God instituted marriage as the epitome of pleasant, joyful, and fulfilling human relationships. “Let your fountain be blessed,” the writer of Proverbs said, “and rejoice in the wife of your youth, as a loving hind and a graceful doe” (Prov. 5:18-19). In the same book they could read, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the Lord” (18:22) and “House and wealth are an inheritance from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the Lord” (19:14).

Like most people of both sexes today, many Jewish men in New Testament times looked on marriage only as a means of gratifying their own lusts and of fulfilling their own purposes. Marriage was the accepted means of sexual indulgence and of procreating children, and it also provided a convenient cook and housekeeper. Unlike modern people, however, most Jewish men appear to have been little concerned about romance.

Romance can be a beautiful part of marriage that lasts even through old age. But romantic feelings cannot be the basis for a sound and enduring marriage, because they are largely composed of pleasant sensations toward the other person that are easily subject to change. A sound marriage is based on permanent, unconditional commitment to one’s spouse, even if romantic feelings flicker or are extinguished altogether. If romantic feelings are the basis of a marriage, when a spouse begins to lose attractiveness, the other’s

attention is turned to someone else who seems more promising and exciting. When one romantic fling after another is pursued, emotional burnout is inevitable. Such a superficial relationship cannot last long and never achieves the expected fulfillment. Each successive failure brings less satisfaction and more disappointment, disillusionment, and emptiness. The collective result, as seen so dramatically and tragically in modern society, is a generation of disoriented, lonely, isolated, untrustworthy, untrusting, and emotionally bankrupt misfits looking for the next arousing sensation.

Some years ago I heard the story of an elderly minister who had been married for fifty years. One morning at breakfast his wife slumped over the table, unconscious. By the time her husband got her to the hospital she was dead. After the funeral he said to his sons, "This is a good day, a wonderful day." When they asked what he meant, he explained, "Well, I know she is with the Lord now. And I am glad she went first. That's the way I wanted it to be, because I didn't want her to have the grief of burying me and of having to live alone."

Some years later that minister was asked to speak at a feminist meeting on the subject of marriage. He recounted his wife's death and his gratitude that she had died first. "Listen," he told them, "anybody who knows the meaning of true love always wants the other person to go first, because they don't want them to endure the pain and the sorrow and the anxiety and loneliness of burying the one they've loved. I daresay that the modern romantic relationships that try to pass for love are a far cry from that kind of feeling and that kind of reality." He was right.

Most people, including many Christians, know little of the self-giving, self-committing, and self-sacrificing love that knits two souls together for a lifetime of sharing and happiness. Instead of the rich, deepening, meaningful, and thrilling friendship that only such love can bring, they settle for a cheap, shallow substitute that fluctuates with every mood and that is doomed from the beginning to be disappointing and short-lived. A relationship that is built only on pleasant emotions and good feelings will soon die, because those emotions and feelings are built on circumstances and on superficial and selfish expectations. But amazingly, a relationship that is built on

loving commitment and self-giving concern for the other person will produce emotions and feelings that not only do not die but grow richer and more satisfying with every year. Feelings are a poor foundation for marriage, but they can be a wonderful, glorious by-product.

The committed marriage is the only happy and enduring marriage. When two Christians love each other for the other's sake rather than their own and live their lives in humble submission to God's Word and to each other, a bond is formed that can withstand every temptation, disappointment, and failure that Satan and the world can hurl against them. They become lovers and friends in a way that the unbeliever and the disobedient Christian can never know. In sharing everything together, they forge a friendship that knows no limitations, no bounds, no secrets, and no conditions.

Like the disciples, some Christians today seem afraid that lifelong, unconditional commitment would destine them to a life of boredom and frustrating restrictions. They conclude with the Twelve that it is therefore simply **better not to marry**. But God planned and designed marital commitment to bring just the opposite. No marriage can be happy and satisfying, much less enduring, without it. God blesses a committed union in ways that a single person, or an uncommitted husband and wife, can never experience and hardly imagine. Far from being a reason to avoid marriage, lifelong and loving commitment is the very thing that makes it most fulfilling and desirable.

Obviously a Christian's marriage partner should be chosen carefully and with much prayer. Marriage commitment should only be given to a person who shares one's spiritual values and commitments. But there is no human joy or fulfillment that can measure up to that which is experienced by a husband and wife who love Jesus Christ and each other and who live together in obedience to His Word and in the power of His Spirit.

There was a certain truth to what the disciples had just said about it being better not to marry, but the context suggests that it was not that truth they had in mind. Their view of marriage, like that of their fellow Jews, focused primarily on selfish, shallow satisfaction and fulfillment. From a purely practical standpoint they therefore

concluded that lonely singleness is preferable to risky marriage. (For a detailed discussion of Paul's statement about the benefits of singleness, see the author's *1 Corinthians*, pp. 153-86.)

Jesus reminded them that **not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given**. Singleness has its own problems and temptations, and not every Christian is capable of living a godly single life. Paul said that it is good to remain single for spiritual purposes, but that it was "better to marry than to burn" with lust (1 Cor. 7:8-9).

Accept is from *chōreō*, which has the basic idea of making room or space for something. Metaphorically it means to completely embrace an idea or principle with the heart and mind so that it becomes part of one's very nature. Singleness cannot be wholeheartedly accepted simply by human willpower or sincerity. Nor can it be successfully lived out simply by applying the right biblical principles. Celibate singleness is a kind of spiritual gift (1 Cor. 7:7), and **only those to whom it has been given** can hope to spiritually survive in it, much less find happiness and be effective in the Lord's service.

Many single Christians endure continual frustration, temptations, and unnecessary loneliness because, for one reason or another, they intentionally avoid marriage. Some perhaps are more concerned about a mate's looks than character. Some do not want anyone around who may invade and disrupt their selfish world. Others may be looking for the perfect mate, someone who measures up in every detail to their vision of the perfect husband or wife. Others, like certain religious orders, have the mistaken belief that there is spiritual merit in celibacy and choose singleness as a means of gaining God's favor through self-sacrifice. But singleness based on any such reasons dooms one to a life of disappointment and unfulfillment.

Jesus proceeds to mention the only three categories where there can be successful singleness. First **are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb**. These are people who are born with congenital deformities that involve undeveloped sexual capacity. Second **are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men**, such as were male harem guards of that day. In some ancient religions, castration

was considered a way of pleasing and serving a pagan deity, and parents sometimes even had their infant sons castrated for that purpose. Obviously, castrated men do not have normal desires for a woman.

Third are **eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven**. Unlike the other two forms, this one is not physical. Mutilation of the flesh in order to please God is a purely pagan idea. Jesus is speaking of the voluntary celibacy of those to whom that gift has been granted by God (v. 11). In that case, celibacy can indeed be **for the sake of the kingdom of God** and be pleasing to Him and used by Him.

Paul had the gift of celibacy and strongly exhorted others who had the gift to be content with it and to use its obvious advantages for God's glory. "One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord," he said; "but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband" (1 Cor. 7:32-34).

He who is able to accept this, let him accept it, Jesus said. In the narrowest and most specific sense the Lord was saying that those who by God's gift are **able to accept** a life of celibate singleness should **accept it** as God's will for them. But He seems also to have been speaking more broadly about the disciples' accepting everything He had just taught about marriage, divorce, remarriage, and singleness. They were to put aside the false ideas and practices they had inherited from the humanly-devised and unscriptural rabbinical traditions. In other words, **accept** what I have been teaching as God's Word and live accordingly.

The unsaved person cannot **accept** Jesus' standards for marriage and divorce, and would not have the resources to live up to those standards if he did accept them. The idea of self-giving, unconditional, and lifelong commitment in any area of life, including marriage, runs completely against the grain of fallen human nature.

God's truth has no authority in an unredeemed life because God Himself has no place in that life.

Even the worldly believer has great difficulty accepting the idea of total, unconditional commitment, because he has lost his first love and has turned his interests back on himself. Only those who truly honor Jesus as Lord and Savior can truly **accept** His teachings. Even then His teachings become fully acceptable only in the life walked in the Spirit, who alone can keep believers from carrying out the natural "desire of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16), which is committed to self rather than to God, one's life partner, or others.

For further study of what God's Word says about divorce and remarriage, see the author's *The Family* (Chicago: Moody, 1982).

17
Jesus Loves the
Little Children
(19:13-15)

Then some children were brought to Him so that He might lay His hands on them and pray; and the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, “Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” And after laying His hands on them, He departed from there. (19:13-15)

All children raised in a Christian home or who have attended Sunday school when they were young, long remember singing such songs as “Jesus Loves Me” and “Jesus Loves the Little Children.” Those lovely sentiments are based on clear biblical truth. Jesus *does* love little children, as this text from Matthew attests. The parents of

these children wanted Jesus to touch them and bless them, and He was more than willing to accommodate that desire.

Some years ago, a family in our church experienced a great tragedy. The mother and the two daughters were planning to fly the next day to New Zealand to join the husband and father, who was on a preaching mission there. As the wife was learning some new crotchet stitches to use on the long flight, the girls went outside to play. A few moments later the mother heard the screeching of automobile tires, but since there was no sound of a crash she thought little of it—until her older daughter came running into the house crying that her sister, Tanya, had been hit by a car.

The girl was unconscious but showed no sign of serious injury. While the mother bent over her, Tanya breathed a heavy sigh and turned her head to the side. At the hospital the neurosurgeon told the mother that the girl had suffered massive brain damage and had little chance of surviving. Relatives and friends prayed fervently and the mother kept a vigil with her precious daughter throughout the night, praying with great intensity that God would spare and restore her daughter. But she also prayed that, above all, God's will be done, even if it meant taking Tanya to be with Himself.

A relative who was a doctor explained that Tanya's breathing and heartbeat were functioning at the hospital solely by artificial means. "Her body is being kept working," he said, "but Tanya isn't there anymore. She is with the Lord." With a radiant face her mother said to the Lord, "Have thy will, not mine." To her friends and loved ones she explained, "I shall not forsake my Lord; because if I did, I would be saying Tanya is gone forever. I [will] do as King David in the Old Testament had done when his child was taken. He washed his face, changed his clothes, and went about his business, satisfied that God knew best."

At that moment she determined there would be no more begging God to bring her little girl back. Tanya was in the Lord's care, and her mother believed she had entered His presence when, lying unconscious on the street, she sighed and turned her head. The mother testifies that she was filled with an inner strength that was foreign to her. She recalled that for several months previously Tanya had prayed, "Lord, I want to go and be with You while I'm young."

When her mother asked why she made that request, Tanya smiled and replied, “Because I want to sit on Jesus’ lap when I get there; and I don’t want to be too big.” On remembering those words, said the mother, “New assurance and peace surged through my sorrowful soul. I was refreshed with a joy that we were all in good hands and that God hadn’t forsaken us for an instant.”

That mother and the rest of the family could rejoice even in the death of that beloved little girl because they knew where she had gone. Because she had been led to the Savior, she was now gathered into His arms, where she had longed to be.

Every Christian parent should take deeply to heart Paul’s admonition to bring up their children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). If the children die, parents know where they are. If the children live, parents know to Whom they belong and for Whom they live.

Perhaps only a short while after Jesus had finished teaching the Twelve about marriage, divorce, remarriage, and singleness (Matt. 19:3-12), another group of people **then** came seeking His ministry. At that time **some children were brought to Him**, doubtlessly by their parents. Both Mark and Luke use the imperfect tense (“they were bringing”), indicating a continuing process and likely an extended period of time (Mark 10:13; Luke 18:15). When word spread that Jesus was in the area, parents were drawn to this Teacher whose love of **children** had become known throughout Palestine (cf. 17:18; 18:2-3; John 4:50).

The Greek word used here for **children** was *paidia*, a term referring to young children from infancy through perhaps toddler age. In his parallel passage, Luke tells us “they were bringing even their babies” (18:15).

But **the disciples** resented the intrusion into their private time with Jesus, and they **rebuked** the parents. The Greek verb behind **rebuked** could carry the idea of threatening, and its being in the imperfect suggests that the rebuke was as continuous as the bringing. As more and more parents brought their children to Jesus, **the disciples** continued to try to repulse them. Obviously the Twelve, who had spent the better part of two years living with Jesus and hearing

every word He spoke and observing everything He did, did not yet fully share His mind and heartbeat.

Only a few days earlier Jesus had taken a young child in His arms in the disciples' presence. Specifically for the sake of the disciples, who were in the midst of a dispute about who was the greatest in the kingdom, He had declared, "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:1-4). No doubt at countless other times the Twelve had witnessed similar expressions of Jesus' tenderness and gentleness and His great patience with those who came to Him for help. They had seen His compassion pour out in an endless flow of healing, encouragement, and comfort.

They also knew that the Talmud taught Jewish parents to bring their children to respected rabbis for blessings and prayer. A father would customarily bring his infant child to the synagogue and pray for the child himself. He would then hand it to the elders, who would each hold it and pray for God's blessing on the young life. Many churches today follow a somewhat similar pattern in prayerfully dedicating small children to the Lord.

Following in that tradition, those Jewish parents in Perea, "the region of Judea beyond the Jordan" (v. 1), brought their children to Jesus to be blessed. He not only was a popular, if controversial, rabbi known for His miracle working power but was also known for His compassion and His willingness to meet the needs of even the lowliest and most helpless people of society. If He were indeed the Messiah, as He claimed to be, those parents saw a marvelous opportunity to have their children blessed by the Lord's own Anointed One, the Deliverer of Israel.

Because Jesus did not rebuke the parents or resist blessing their children, it is obvious that their motives were pure. They did not comprehend Jesus' true greatness, and probably few if any, of them had put their trust in Him as Lord and Savior. But they recognized Him as a genuine teacher from God who loved them and who cared for their precious little ones. They therefore sought His intercession with God on their children's behalf, in the hope that they might grow up as the Talmud admonished: strong in the law, faithful in marriage, and known by good works.

Jesus was not naively sentimental about children. Having created them, He well knew they are born with a sinful nature. Children have a certain innocence, but they are not sinless. He knew that they did not have to be taught to do wrong, that their little hearts were naturally bent toward evil. But He loved them with a special compassion and, because of their natural openness and trustfulness, He held them up as examples of the attitude required for kingdom citizenship (Matt. 18:3-5).

Those who share the mind of Christ share His concern and love for children. No church or Christian movement has prospered spiritually that has disregarded or neglected the care and training of its children. The heart that is warm toward the Lord will inevitably be warm toward children.

One writer has made this beautiful observation:

As the flower in the garden stretches toward the light of the sun, so there is in the child a mysterious inclination toward the eternal light. Have you ever noticed this mysterious thing that, when you tell the smallest child about God, it never asks with strangeness and wonder, “What or who is God? I have never seen Him”—but listens with shining face to the words as though they were soft loving sounds from the land of home? Or when you teach a child to fold its little hands in prayer, it does this as though it were a matter of course, as though there were opening for it that world of which it had been dreaming with longing and anticipation. Or tell them, these little ones, the stories of the Savior, show them the pictures with scenes and personages of the Bible [and] see how their pure eyes shine, how their little hearts beat. (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943], p. 743)

Jesus therefore **said** to the Twelve, and still says to His disciples today: **“Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me.** The Greek verb behind **let . . . alone** is in the aorist tense, whereas the verb behind **do not hinder** is in the present tense with a negative, indicating a call to stop something. The Lord

was therefore saying, “**Let the children alone**, beginning immediately, **and stop hindering them from coming to Me.**”

From Mark we learn that Jesus was greatly indignant with the disciples (10:14). They frequently frustrated and disappointed the Lord by their insensitivity and selfishness, but this is one of only two or three occasions on which He actually became angry with them.

It is likely there were a number of reasons He was angry with them. He was angry because He loved little children with great affection, and He no doubt felt special compassion for them because of the sinful, painful, corrupt world into which they had been born and whose evils they would progressively have to face as they grew up. He was angry because He also loved parents and understood the special longings and anxieties they have for their children. He realized that loving little children was a way to their parents’ hearts. He was angry because no one, not even the tiniest infant, is outside the care and love of God. He was angry because of the disciples’ persistent spiritual dullness and hardness. And He doubtlessly was angry because the disciples presumed to determine who could and could not approach Him, the Christ and Son of God. It was neither within their prerogative nor their competency to make such choices. It was rank presumption for them **to hinder** the parents and their children **from coming** to Jesus. Specifically, He was angry because **the kingdom of heaven belongs to**, that is, it encompasses and is characterized by, children **such as these**.

There is nothing in the text to indicate that, as some claim, Jesus was isolating **these** supposedly elect children from others who were nonelect. Furthermore, He makes no mention of baptism, parental covenant, parental faith, or ecclesiastical rite. Nor does He mention personal faith on the part of the children, who were probably too young to have exercised such belief. The Lord was simply saying that those children, representative of all children, were a picture of the humility, dependency, and trust of those of any age who enter His **kingdom**.

The kingdom of heaven is the sphere of God’s rule in Christ through gracious salvation. For those who have reached the age when personal saving faith can be exercised, the kingdom is entered only by a divinely illuminated understanding of what it means to trust in

Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The implication of **such as these** is that for those who, because of young age or mental deficiency, are incapable of exercising saving faith, God grants them, in the event of death, entrance into **the kingdom** by the sovereign operation of His grace. When children die before they reach the age of decision, they go into the presence of Jesus Christ, because they are under the special protection of the sovereign King.

It was that glorious and comforting truth that David expressed when he lost his infant son born to Bathsheba. "I shall go to him," David said, "but he will not return to me" (2 Sam. 12:23). While that statement may indicate little more than a resignation to their both entering the realm of the dead, the personal pronouns *I* and *him*, as well as David's confident belief in the life to come (see Acts 2:25-28; Ps. 16:8-11), lend credence to the idea that he was confident of personal consciousness and identity in the life to come. David knew that he himself belonged to God and would one day enter His presence, and he had equal confidence that, when he entered the Lord's presence he would meet the little son who had preceded him there.

It is not that small children are regenerate and then lose their salvation if they do not later receive Christ as Lord and Savior. It is rather that His atoning death is applied on their behalf if they die before they are able to choose on their own. It may be that the infant mortality rate is so high in many countries where the gospel has not yet penetrated because the Lord is taking those little ones to Himself before they can grow up in a culture where it is so difficult to encounter the gospel and believe.

But what an awesome responsibility faces Christian parents to make sure that their children are taught about Christ and are led to receive Him as Savior when they are able to exercise saving faith.

Just as the children's parents requested, Jesus laid **His hands on them** and blessed them. In Mark's account of this incident (10:16), the Greek form behind "blessing" is intensive, indicating a passionate fervency. Jesus must have smiled with infinite kindness as He looked into the faces of those tiny children. We do not know the specific nature of His blessing, but we can surmise that He promised the

provision of God on their behalf and the care of God over each one of them.

Luke reports that Jesus then declared, as He had a short while earlier, “Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it at all” (Luke 18:17; cf. Matt. 18:3). In other words, the kingdom is populated by only two kinds of subjects, those who die while little children and those who come in the trusting and humble attitude of little children. Only those enter God’s kingdom who come to Him in the simplicity, openness, dependency, lack of pretension, and lack of hypocrisy of little children. As John Calvin commented, “The passage broadens to give kingdom citizenship to both children and those who are like them.”

Some years ago a young Hindu man from southern India named Paul Pillai was converted to Christ and received a call to reach the northern part of his country for Christ. After attending seminary in the United States, he returned to India and founded Grace Bible College, dedicated solely to training young men called to the ministry.

After graduation, students are helped by the school for a period of some six months in establishing a local church in a village or city. One of their most effective means of winning converts, however, is a children’s home. Orphaned and abandoned children are taken to the home, where they are fed, clothed, and sheltered. They attend public schools in order to keep identity with their own culture, but they are also given concentrated study in God’s Word. Although adult Hindus and Muslims are extremely difficult to evangelize, those young children are open to the gospel, and many of them confess Christ as Lord and Savior. A large percentage of the boys from that home go on to attend the Bible college and become effective evangelists and pastors. Because they were reached with the gospel at an early age, they were open and responsive to the claims of Christ.

Five key words can prove helpful in giving guidance to parents and Christian workers in leading children to Christ. The first word is *remember*. We should remember that every child is created by God and, in that sense, already belongs to Him. “Thou didst form my inward parts,” the psalmist declared, “Thou didst weave me in my mother’s womb. . . . I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps.

139:13-14). All “children are a gift of the Lord; the fruit of the womb is a reward,” given to parents as gracious blessings (Ps. 127:3). It is God’s plan and desire that every child be returned to Him for His use. “Train up a child in the way he should go,” we are told in Proverbs, and “even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6).

A second key word is *teach*. Christian parents have the high calling of bringing up their children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). Timothy became especially useful to the Lord and to the apostle Paul in part because from childhood his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois, had taught him “the sacred writings which are able to give . . . the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15; cf. 1:5).

That pattern for godly instruction was set forth early in Israel’s history. Through Moses, God commanded His people to believe in and worship in the right way: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!” (Deut. 6:4). He also commanded them to personally and sincerely accept that truth with uncompromising conviction and devotion: “And you shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart” (vv. 5-6). More than that, they were commanded to teach godly truth and obedience to their children, talking about those things at home and in the community, from the time they arose until the time they went to bed (v. 7). God’s Word was to be taught to their children and exemplified before them.

As important as special times of family Bible study and prayer are, only consistent godly living by parents will clarify and cement God’s Word in their children’s minds, hearts, and lives. Parents should also provide visual reminders of God’s Word. Just as Israelites were to bind God’s Word on their hands and foreheads and write it on the their doorposts and gates (Deut. 6:8-9), so Christian parents can have Bible verses and plaques throughout the house to reinforce scriptural truths. When Bible stories and truths are sung, further reinforcement is given.

In that Deuteronomy passage God gave ancient Israel a final warning not to forget Him and His Word after they had come into the

Promised Land and were surfeited with material blessings, “lest you forget the Lord who brought you from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” and “follow other gods, any of the gods of the people who surround you” (6:12, 14). Like their parents, children need to beware of the many false idols by which the world lures them away from the Lord.

A third key word is *model*. Children not only need godly precepts but godly patterns. Eli the priest was a negative example to his two sons. Following the ungodly model of their father’s life, they went even to further extremes of immorality and sacrilege. When Eli rebuked them they paid no attention, partly because his rebuke was halfhearted and far too mild and partly because they had no respect for him due to his own compromised living (1 Sam. 2:12-25).

In a similar way, even the great David failed to be a godly example to his sons. His son Absalom was so wicked and rebellious that he sought to kill his father and usurp his throne. His son Solomon took hundreds of wives and concubines, including many foreigners whose pagan ways turned him from loyalty to the Lord. Not only was Solomon’s family shattered but also the kingdom. King Hezekiah disobeyed God’s instruction by showing the royal jewels to the king of Babylon, and his son Manasseh surpassed his father’s compromise and totally abandoned God’s law.

Writing in *Eternity* magazine (May 1979, p. 35), Tom Cowan observed,

Parents must be aware of the personal value of truth for their own sakes and not just for the sakes of their children. We cannot simply make a child believe in a truth because it’s good for them. Their perceptive spirits will sense when we are doing something to engineer or manipulate a certain response. Instead it is the authenticity of parental commitment to truth apart from the lives of children that brings the freedom to share and to pass on that truth to them. In other words, a mature motive for passing on truth is that as a parent I hold that truth to have value for my life, independent of my children and their response to it.

A fourth key word is *love*, so obviously imperative that little needs to be said about it. Only parents who lovingly weep with their children, rejoice with them, hurt with them, unselfishly serve them, show them genuine affection, and sacrifice for them will effectively influence them in the things of the Lord.

A final key word is *trust*. After parents have done everything humanly possible to raise their children in the way of the Lord, they must ultimately trust Him to make those efforts fruitful. Only the Holy Spirit can reach into the human heart, including the heart of a child, and only His power can give spiritual life and empower spiritual faithfulness.

18
How to Obtain
Eternal Life
(19:16-22)

And behold, one came to Him and said, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?” And He said to him, “Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” He said to Him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not commit murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; and You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The young man said to Him, “All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?” Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieved; for he was one who owned much property. (19:16-22)

At first one might wonder what kind of message Jesus was trying to give this man who came to Him. The truth is summarized in Jesus' statement on another occasion: "So therefore, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions" (Luke 14:33).

Some years ago the young man in the seat next to me on an airplane asked, "Sir, you wouldn't know how I could have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, would you?" Taken somewhat by surprise by his openness and seeming readiness for salvation, I told him that he needed to receive Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. He said, "I'd like to do that," and we prayed together and rejoiced in his decision. He was on his way to a new job near our church, so he was baptized and began attending services. But some months later I was extremely disappointed to discover that he had developed no interest at all in the things of the Lord and was living in such a way that it was apparent he had not been transformed. He soon disappeared from the church and has never returned.

Anyone who has done much personal witnessing has encountered persons who make a profession of faith in Christ but whose subsequent lives show no change in attitudes or behavior. And when they indicate no love for God and Christ, no interest in the Bible, in prayer, or in the fellowship of God's people, there is no good reason to believe they were ever saved.

Our Lord gave this young man a test. He had to make a choice between Christ and his possessions and sin, and he failed the test. No matter what he may have believed, because he was unwilling to forsake all, he could not be a disciple of Christ. Salvation is for those who are willing to forsake everything.

The incident recorded in Matthew 19:16-22 gives insight into how some people who show great interest in the gospel never come to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. This young man went away from Christ not because he heard the wrong message or because he did not believe but because he was unwilling to admit his sin, forsake all that he had, and obey Christ as Lord.

THE REQUEST TO JESUS

And behold, one came to Him and said, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?” (19:16)

From verse 20 we learn that the **one** who **came to Him** was a young man, and from verse 22 that he was wealthy. Luke informs us that he was also a ruler (18:18), probably a ruler in the synagogue, an especially honored position for a young man. He was a religious leader—devout, honest, wealthy, prominent, and influential. He had it all. **Behold** suggests how unusual and unexpected it was that he would admit he lacked eternal life and come to Jesus to find it.

Several factors are clear as we analyze this unique encounter. First, He came genuinely seeking **eternal life**, motivated by his sense of need for a true spiritual hope. The term *eternal life* is used some 50 times in Scripture, and always refers primarily to quality rather than quantity. Although **eternal life** obviously carries the idea of being an everlasting reality, it does not refer simply to unending existence. Even ancient pagans knew that mere unending existence would not necessarily be desirable. According to Greek mythology, Aurora, goddess of the dawn, fell in love with a young mortal named Tithonus. When Zeus offered to provide anything she wished for her human lover, she asked that he might never die. The wish was granted, but because she had not asked that Tithonus remain forever young, he continued to grow older and more decrepit. Instead of being blessed, he was cursed to perpetual degeneration.

If, as William Hendriksen insightfully observes, “‘life’ means active response to one’s environment,” then **eternal life** must mean active response to that which is eternal, namely God’s heavenly realm. Just as physical life is the ability to live and move and respond in the physical world, **eternal life** is the ability to live and move and respond in the heavenly world.

Eternal life is first of all a quality of existence, the divinely-endowed ability to be alive to God and the things of God. The Jews saw it as that which fills the heart with hope of life after death. The unsaved person is spiritually alive only to sin. But when he receives Christ as Lord and Savior, he becomes alive to God and to

righteousness (Rom. 6:1-13). That is the essence of **eternal life**, the **life** of God's own Son dwelling within.

The young ruler could not have understood the full meaning of what he asked for, but he realized there was an important dimension to his present life, religious and prestigious as it was, that was missing. Despite his high standing in men's eyes, he knew he did not have the God-given peace, rest, hope, assurance, and joy of which the psalmists and the prophets spoke. He may have sensed that he needed a closer relationship to God than he had. Simply by asking that question of Jesus he showed himself to be beyond the hypocritical religiosity of the scribes and Pharisees. He recognized a deep spiritual need that, for all his religious efforts, was unfulfilled. He knew he did not possess the life of God that satisfies here and now and gives hope for the life to come.

The fact that he came to Jesus publicly and asked such a personal and revealing question shows the man's sincerity. He was not haughty or presumptuous, but was humbly determined to find satisfaction for the overwhelming need he felt in his life, and he was oblivious to what people around him may have thought.

The young ruler not only knew his need but deeply felt that need, and he was desperate. Many people who admit they do not have **eternal life** nevertheless feel no need for it. They know they are not alive to God and do not care. They know there is no divine dimension to their lives but consider that fact irrelevant and unimportant. They have no hope for the life to come but are perfectly content to remain as they are.

The young ruler felt his need so keenly that, when he heard Jesus was in the vicinity, he "ran up to Him and knelt before Him" (Mark 10:17). He could not wait to ask this great Teacher how to find the answer to his deep longing. He was not embarrassed by the fact that he was known and respected by most of the people who crowded around Jesus. He did not mind the risk of losing face with those who probably considered him already to be religiously fulfilled and specially favored by God.

Although he was probably in the midst of the multitude of parents who had brought their young children to be blessed, this man was not ashamed to request a blessing for himself. He was saying to

Jesus, in effect, “I need your help just as much as these little children.” Just as the children submitted to Jesus by being taken in His arms, the rich young ruler submitted by kneeling down before Him. He prostrated himself before the Lord in a position of humility. He appeared serious, sincere, highly motivated, and anxious.

This young ruler came seeking for the right thing—eternal life—and he came to the only One who could give it. **Him**, of course, refers to Jesus, who not only is the way to **eternal life** but is Himself that life. “God has given us eternal life,” John declares, “and this life is in His Son,” who “is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:11, 20). There was nothing wrong with his motivation, because it certainly is good to desire eternal life.

By addressing Jesus as **Teacher** (*didaskalos*), the young man acknowledged Him to be a respected rabbi, an authority on the Old Testament, a teacher of divine truth. Although the two other synoptic gospels report that the man also called Jesus “good” (Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18), there is no reason to believe he considered **Him** to be the promised Messiah and Son of God. But he obviously considered Jesus to have a stature of righteous character above the typical rabbi. The authority of Jesus’ teaching and the power of His miracles surely qualified Him as someone who knew the way to **eternal life**. Even though he did not acknowledge that Jesus was Messiah and God in the flesh, he had come to the right person (cf. Acts 4:12).

Not only did the young man come to the right source but he asked the right question: “**What good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?**” Many interpreters have criticized the man for asking about what he must **do**, suggesting that his question was works oriented. Doubtlessly he was steeped in the Pharisaic legal system that had come to dominate Judaism and was trained to think that doing religious things was the way to gain divine favor. But taken at face value, his question was legitimate. There is something one must do in order to come to God. When the multitude near Capernaum asked Jesus, “What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?” He replied, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent” (John 6:28-29).

The main point of the question was to discover how to **obtain eternal life**, and that is the most crucial question a person can ask.

The entire purpose of evangelism is to bring lost people to Jesus Christ in order that they may **obtain eternal life**. The very purpose and meaning of salvation is to bring **eternal life** to those who, because of sin, face eternal death (Rom. 6:23).

The issue on this occasion was the man's salvation, not some higher level of discipleship subsequent to salvation. Most of the work of evangelism is to bring people to the point where they sense their need for salvation, but this young man was already there. He was ready to sign the card, raise his hand, walk the aisle, or whatever. He was ripe and eager—what many modern evangelists would consider a “hot prospect.”

THE RESPONSE BY JESUS

And He said to him, “Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” He said to Him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not commit murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; and You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (19:17-19)

Jesus' response is even more amazing than the young man's request. **He said to him, “Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.”**

Instead of taking the young man at face value and asking him to “make a decision for Christ,” Jesus went much deeper in searching out the state of his heart and tested his true purpose and motivation. Instead of rejoicing that the man was apparently willing to receive eternal life and encouraging him to simply pray a prayer or affirm his faith, Jesus asked him a question in return that was immensely disconcerting.

The Lord's abrupt and seemingly evasive words, "**Why are you asking Me about what is good?**" reveal that He could read the man's heart. He had asked about eternal life verbally, and his heart was longing to know what good work could bring him that life. Jesus' comment that "**there is only One who is good**" was perhaps a means of prying out of the man just who he thought Jesus was. Did he realize that the One whom he was asking **about what is good** was Himself **the One who is good**, namely, God? Had he come to Jesus for divine help because he believed Jesus Himself to be divine? Because the man made no response concerning the **only One who is good**, it seems certain that he viewed Jesus as no more than an especially gifted human teacher. He had indeed come to the right source for the answer to his question and the fulfillment of his need, but he did not recognize that Source for who He really was.

Jesus did not respond by immediately showing the way of salvation because the man was missing an essential quality. He lacked the sense of his own sinfulness, and Jesus had to point that out.

Jesus' next comment, "**If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments,**" was more than familiar to the man. Jews were taught all their lives that the way **into life** was through obedience to God's **commandments**. Leviticus 18:5 clearly refers to such a truth: "So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the Lord" (cf. Ezek. 20:11). Perhaps Jesus was simply saying to the man, "You know what to do. Why are you asking Me? I haven't taught anything that is not already written in the Scriptures. You are a learned and devoted Jew and you know what God's law requires. Go do it."

Judged by the principles and strategy of much contemporary evangelism, Jesus seems to have made a serious and insensitive mistake. He not only did not take advantage of the man's obvious readiness to make a decision but He even seemed to be teaching righteousness by works.

But Jesus knew this man's heart was not ready to believe in Him, just as the hearts of many people who express great interest in Him are not ready to believe. The man had a deep longing for something important in his life that he knew was missing. He doubtlessly had anxiety and frustration and longed for peace, joy,

hope, and assurance. He wanted all the inner blessings the Old Testament associated with spiritual life. He longed for God's blessings, but he did not long for God. He wanted to know what **good** things he should do, but he did not want to know **the only One who is good**.

Throughout history, and certainly in our own day, the church has witnessed many questionable principles and methods of evangelism, often exercised with sincerity and good intent. Undue emphasis on such external acts as raised hands, cards signed, and verbal decisions can lead many people—Christian workers and professed converts alike—into believing salvation has occurred when it has not. A premature and incomplete decision is not a decision Christ recognizes as valid.

The gospel is not a means of adding something better to what one already has, a means of supplementing human effort by divine. Nor is it simply a means of fulfilling psychological needs, no matter how real and significant they may be. Jesus did not die simply to make people feel better by relieving their frustrations and anxieties. And relief from such feelings is no certain evidence of salvation.

Many people are simply looking for solutions to their felt needs, but that is not enough to bring them to legitimate salvation. Jesus therefore did not offer any relief for the young man's felt needs. Instead, He gave an answer designed to confront him with the fact that he was a living offense to Holy God. Proper evangelism must lead a sinner to measure himself against the perfect law of God so he can see his deficiency. Salvation is for those who hate their sin.

The young ruler must have sounded more than a little perplexed as he asked, almost rhetorically, "**Which ones?**" The implication seems to be, "I have read the commandments many times. I memorized them when I was a small boy, and I have carefully kept them ever since. How could I have missed any? **Which ones** could you possibly have in mind?"

Jesus responded by quoting five of the Ten Commandments: to **not commit murder**, to **not commit adultery**, to **not steal**, to **not bear false witness**, and to **honor your father and mother** (see Ex. 20:12-16). He then added the second greatest commandment: **You shall love your neighbor as yourself** (Lev. 19:18; cf. Matt. 22:39).

No words of Scripture would have been more familiar to the young ruler than those. But again he missed Jesus' point. Just as he failed to recognize that the One to whom he spoke was Himself God and the source of eternal life, he also failed to see that those well-known commandments, and all the other commandments, could not provide the life to which they pointed. If a person were able to perfectly keep all the commandments throughout his entire life, he would indeed have life, just as Jesus had said (v. 17). What He was trying to show the man, however, is that no one is able to keep all the commandments perfectly, not even one of them.

The Lord did not mention the first four of the Ten Commandments, which center on man's attitude toward God (Ex. 20:3-11), or the first and greatest commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5; cf. Matt. 22:38). Those commandments are even more impossible to keep than the ones Jesus quoted. The Lord therefore challenged the young ruler against the least impossible of the commandments, as it were.

THE RESPONSE TO JESUS

The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?" Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieved; for he was one who owned much property. (19:20-22)

The man's response—"All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?"—was probably sincere but it was far from true. Like most of the scribes and Pharisees, he was convinced in his own mind that he had **kept** all of God's law. He told Jesus, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up" (Mark 10:20). Because the commandments concerning attitudes toward God were just as

familiar to the man as the one's Jesus quoted, he obviously thought he had fulfilled those as well. His view of the law was completely superficial, external, and man-oriented. Because he had not committed physical adultery or murder, because he was not a liar or a thief, and because he did not blaspheme the Lord's name or worship idols, he looked on himself as being virtually perfect in God's eyes.

By asking, **“What am I still lacking?”** he implied that there either must have been a commandment of which he had never heard or that something in addition to keeping the law was required to obtain eternal life. It simply did not occur to him that he fell short in obedience to any part of God's known law. Because his outward, humanly observed life was upright and religious, he never suspected that his inner, divinely observed life was “full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness” (Matt. 23:27). He would not admit to himself that lust is a form of adultery, that hate is a form of murder, or that swearing by anything in heaven or on earth is a form of taking the Lord's name in vain (Matt. 5:22, 28, 34-35). And it certainly never occurred to him that “whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, . . . has become guilty of all” (James 2:10).

Like most of his Jewish contemporaries, he totally failed to see that the Mosaic commands were not given as means for humanly achieving God's standard of righteousness but were given as pictures of His righteousness. The law was also given to show men how impossible it is for them to live up to His standards of righteousness in their own power. Obedience to the law is always imperfect because the human heart is imperfect.

One of sin's greatest curses is the spiritual and moral blindness it produces. It would not seem to require special revelation from God for men to realize that even the commandments concerning their relationship to other men are impossible to keep perfectly. What truly honest person would claim he has never told a single falsehood of any sort, never coveted anything that belongs to someone else, and always treated his parents with respect and honor—much less that he had always loved his neighbors as much as he loved himself? But one of Satan's chief strategies is to blind sinners to their sin; and because pride is at the heart of all sin, there is a natural inclination toward self-deceit. And nothing is more effective in producing self-deceit

than works righteousness, which is the basis of every man-made religion, including the God-given but humanly corrupted religion of first-century Judaism.

The young ruler was aware of what he *did not have* and needed to receive, namely eternal life. But he was not willing to admit what he *did have* and needed to be rid of, namely sin. He had too much spiritual pride to acknowledge that he was sinful by nature and that his whole life fell short of God's holiness and was an offense to Him. His desire for eternal life was centered entirely in his own felt needs and longings.

He had no hatred for sins that needed forgiving and no admission of a heart that needed cleansing. He was therefore not looking for what God needed to do for him but for what he still needed to do for God. Like most Jews of his day, and like most people in all times and cultures, he believed his destiny was in his own hands and that if his lot were to improve it would have to be by his own efforts. All he wanted from Jesus was another commandment, another formula, another rite or ceremony by which he could complete his religious obligations and make himself acceptable to God.

But salvation is for people who despair of their own efforts, who realize that, in themselves and by themselves, they are hopelessly sinful and incapable of improving. Salvation is for those who see themselves as living violations of His holiness and who confess and turn from their sin and throw themselves on God's mercy. It is for those who recognize they have absolutely nothing good to give God, that anything good they receive or accomplish can be only by His sovereign, gracious provision in Jesus Christ.

Paul spends three full chapters of Romans declaring the sinfulness of man before he ever discusses the way of salvation. John 1:17 declares, "The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ." Law always precedes grace; it is the tutor that leads to Christ (Gal. 3:24).

Jesus took the focus off the young man's felt religious and psychological needs and placed it on God. He tried to show the man that the real problem in his life was not his feeling of emptiness and incompleteness, legitimate and important as those feelings were. His great problem, from which those felt needs arose, was his separation

from God and his total inability to reconcile himself with God. Scripture says, “God is angry with the wicked every day” (Ps. 7:11 KJV). In himself this man not only fell far short of God’s righteous standards but was, in fact, an enemy of God and under His wrath (Rom. 5:10; Eph. 2:3). And God will not save those who try to come to Him harboring sin.

Evangelism or personal witnessing that does not confront people with their utter sinfulness and helplessness is not faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ, no matter how much His name and His Word may be invoked. A profession of Christ that does not include confession and repentance of sin does not bring salvation, no matter how much pleasant emotion may result. To tell an unbeliever that God has a wonderful plan for his life can be seriously misleading. If the unbeliever turns to Christ and is saved, God does indeed have a wonderful plan for him. But if he does not turn to Christ, God’s only plan for him is damnation. In the same way it is misleading and dangerous to tell an unbeliever only that God loves him, without telling him that, in spite of that love, he is under God’s wrath and sentenced to hell.

God’s grace cannot be faithfully preached to unbelievers until His law is preached and man’s corrupt nature is exposed. It is impossible for a person to fully realize his need for God’s grace until he sees how terribly he has failed the standards of God’s law. It is impossible for him to realize his need for mercy until he realizes the magnitude of his guilt. As Samuel Bolton wisely commented, “When you see that men have been wounded by the law, then it is time to pour in the gospel oil.”

Instead of being wounded by the law, however, the rich young ruler was self-satisfied in regard to the law. He diligently sought eternal life, but he sought it on his own terms and in his own power. He would not confess his sin and admit his spiritual poverty. Confession of sin and repentance from sin are utterly essential to salvation. John the Baptist began his ministry preaching repentance (Matt. 3:2), Jesus began His ministry preaching repentance (4:17), and both Peter and Paul began their ministries preaching repentance (Acts 2:38; 26:20). Peter even used repentance as a synonym for salvation when he wrote that “the Lord . . . is patient toward you, not

wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

True conviction, confession, and repentance of sin are as much a work of the Holy Spirit as any other part of salvation (John 6:44; 16:8-9). They are divine works of grace, not pre-salvation works of human effort. But just as receiving Christ as Lord and Savior demands the action of the believer’s will, so do confession and repentance. It is not that an unbeliever must understand everything about confession, repentance, or any other aspect of salvation. A person can genuinely receive Christ as Lord and Savior with very little knowledge about Him and the gospel. But genuine belief is characterized by willingness to do whatever the Lord requires, just as unbelief is characterized by unwillingness to do whatever He requires.

In another attempt to make the self-satisfied young ruler face his true spiritual condition, **Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”** In this context, **complete** is used as a synonym for salvation, as it frequently is in the book of Hebrews, where the same basic Greek word is translated “perfect” (see 7:19; 10:1, 14; 12:23). Jesus was saying, “If you truly desire eternal life, prove your sincerity by selling **your possessions and** giving what you have **to the poor.**” If he truly lived up to the Mosaic command to love his neighbor as himself, he would be willing to do what Jesus now commanded. His willingness to obey that command would not merit salvation but it would be evidence that he desired salvation above everything else, as a priceless treasure or a pearl of great value for which no sacrifice could be too great (see Matt. 13:44-46).

The ultimate test was whether or not the man was willing to obey the Lord. The real issue Jesus presented was, “Will you do what I ask, no matter what? Who will be Lord in your life, you or Me?” That hit a sensitive nerve. Jesus demands to be Lord, sovereign over all. There was no better way to find out if the man was ready to accept Christ’s sovereignty than to ask him to give up his riches. The Lord challenged his wealth to force him to admit what was most valuable to him—Jesus Christ and eternal life or his money and

possessions. The latter was clearly the man's priority, and therefore for him salvation was forfeited.

The first part of Jesus' command was quite capable of being obeyed in the man's own power. But he refused to comply with it, not because he *could not* but because he *would not*. He not only failed to keep God's impossible commands but failed to keep this one that was easily possible, proving conclusively that he really did not want to do God's perfect will and be spiritually **complete**.

Mark tells us that as He gave the man that command, "Jesus felt a love for him" (10:21). The Lord must have felt for him as He did for Jerusalem as He looked out over that great city and cried, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it" (Luke 13:34). Jesus was approaching the time when He would shed His own blood for the sins of the rich young ruler, and for the sins of Jerusalem and of the whole world. But as much as He loved the man and desired for him not to perish, He could not save him while he refused to admit he was lost. The Lord can do nothing with a life that is not surrendered to Him, except to condemn it.

It is possible the man did not even hear Jesus say, "**Come, follow Me.**" He was so dismayed by the command to sell his possessions and give to the poor that Jesus' call to discipleship did not register on his conscious mind. His call to discipleship always falls on deaf ears when there is unwillingness to give up everything for Him (see Matt. 8:19-22).

The young man did not want Jesus either as Savior or as Lord. He was not willing to give Him his sins to be forgiven or his life to be ruled. Therefore when he heard Jesus' **statement, he went away grieved; for he was one who owned much property**. Contrary to his own self-assessment, he did not live up to any of God's law, but he was especially guilty in the area of materialism. The **property** he thought he **owned** really owned him, and he would rather be its servant than Jesus'.

He went away grieved because, although he came to Jesus for eternal life, he left without it. He did not desire it above the

possessions of his present life. He wanted to gain salvation, but not as much as he wanted to keep his **property**.

Zaccheus was also a wealthy man. But when Jesus called him, “he hurried and came down, and received Him gladly.” Spontaneously he volunteered to do essentially what Jesus commanded the rich young ruler to do. “Half of my possessions I will give to the poor,” Zaccheus said, “and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.” Jesus then told him, “Today salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:5-9). Zaccheus was not saved because of his new-found generosity. Rather his new-found generosity was evidence that he was truly saved. As implied in the next verse, Zaccheus was saved because he confessed he was lost (v. 10).

Although every sin must be forsaken for Christ’s sake, there is often a certain sin or group of sins that a person finds particularly difficult to give up. For that **young man** it was love of his wealth and the prestige associated with it. Willingness to give up his **property** would not have saved him, but it would have revealed a heart that under the convicting work of the Holy Spirit was ready for salvation.

When Jesus declared, “No one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions” (Luke 14:33), He was not referring only to material possessions. For some people the supreme obstacle to salvation might be a career, an unsaved boyfriend or girlfriend, or some cherished sin. Many people who are materially destitute are just as far from the kingdom as the rich young ruler. Yet they must be willing to give up whatever they do possess, even if all they have left is pride, if they would be saved.

Salvation involves a commitment to forsake sin and to follow Jesus Christ at all costs. He will take disciples on no other terms. A person who does not “confess with [his] mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in [his] heart that God raised Him from the dead,” cannot be saved, “for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation” (Rom. 10:9-10).

19
The Poverty of
Riches and the
Riches of Poverty
(19:23-29)

And Jesus said to His disciples, “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” And when the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, “Then who can be saved?” And looking upon them Jesus said to them, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” Then Peter answered and said to Him, “Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?” And Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones,

judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, shall receive many times as much, and shall inherit eternal life.” (19:23-29)

The rich young ruler came to Jesus seeking eternal life, but the barriers of his self-centeredness and self-righteousness stood in the way of his receiving it (19:16-22). He would not recognize his need for repentance and Christ's forgiveness nor would he submit to Christ's lordship. He sincerely wanted eternal life, but he wanted his riches and his self-righteousness even more. Whoever wants anything more than Christ will forfeit Christ.

In this present passage the Lord elaborates on the spiritual danger of trusting in material riches and the spiritual blessings of forsaking them for His sake. He first focuses on what might be called the poverty of riches (vv. 23-26) and then on the riches of poverty (vv. 27-29).

THE POVERTY OF RICHES

And Jesus said to His disciples, “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” And when the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, “Then who can be saved?” And looking upon them Jesus said to them, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (19:23-26)

The expression **Truly I say to you** was a common Jewish figure of speech used to introduce a teaching of great importance. It carried the idea of, “Pay special attention to what I am about to say.” The important truth Jesus wanted to convey to **His disciples** at this

time was that, as they had just seen tragically illustrated by the rich young ruler, **it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.**

The kingdom of heaven refers to the sphere of God's gracious rule and, as is clear from the fact that Jesus uses both in the same statement, is synonymous with **the kingdom of God**. By intertestamental times, **heaven** had become a common Jewish substitute term for the covenant name of God (Yahweh, Jehovah), which they preferred not to speak. In this context the terms are also synonymous with eternal life, which the rich young ruler was seeking (v. 16), and therefore with salvation. Following up on the incident of that young man, whose wealth was for him an impenetrable barrier to receiving Christ as Lord and Savior, Jesus explained to the Twelve the eternal danger of trusting in material possessions.

The Lord repeatedly emphasized that following Him required willingness to sacrifice everything a person had, economic, personal, social, and all else. "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me," He said; "and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life shall lose it" (Matt. 10:37-39). A person must desire salvation more than anything else, so that no sacrifice is too great to make for Christ's sake. That is why "the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it" (Matt. 7:14).

Duskolās (**hard**) is used in the New Testament only here and in the parallel synoptic accounts (Mark 10:23; Luke 18:24). Jesus went on to explain that, as far as **a rich man entering the kingdom of heaven** is concerned, **hard** is equivalent to impossible: "**Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.**"

The expression **easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle** was a Jewish colloquialism for the impossible. It was probably a modified form of a Persian expression for impossibility, "easier for an elephant to go through the eye of a needle," that is quoted in the Talmud. Being the largest animal known in Palestine, the camel was substituted for the elephant.

Some have been confused by this text, thinking it appears to say that the rich have no hope of salvation. So in order to make the expression signify something difficult but not impossible, interpreters have suggested numerous explanations, many of them farfetched. Some propose that there was a very small gate in the ancient wall of Jerusalem called the Needle's Eye. In order for a camel to go through it, they surmised, the animal would have to be completely unloaded and then crawl through on its knees. But neither the Persian nor the Jewish saying used the term gate, and no Jerusalem gate by that name is mentioned in any extant historical or archeological record. In any case, no sensible person would go to such trouble when he could take his camel a few hundred yards down the wall and go through a larger gate.

Other scholars have suggested that scribal error changed the Greek word *kamilos* (a large rope or cable) into *kamēlos* (a camel). But a large rope would also be impossible to thread through the eye of a needle. More than that, it is hard to conceive that the scribes who made copies from the original manuscript all made the same mistake and made it in all three gospel accounts!

Even if an ancient manuscript were found with the word for camel changed to *rope*, it would be rejected for the reason that it would indicate a scribe had changed it to make it more acceptable. Because no scribe would turn *rope* into *camel*, the latter would be considered the original reading. The expression clearly refers to an impossibility. It is impossible for a rich man such as the one just encountered to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Before considering what Jesus meant by saying it is impossible, let us consider some reasons why it is difficult. For one thing, the rich tend to have false security in their riches. Because wealth can provide for all physical needs and a great many things beyond needs, the wealthy are inclined to rely on their money to buy whatever they want, so they see little reason to depend on God. That is one reason there are “not many wise, . . . mighty, . . . noble; but God has chosen the foolish, . . . weak, . . . base, . . . despised” (1 Cor. 1:26-28). The poor, on the other hand, became the special objects of and responders to our Lord's teaching (Luke 4:18).

An attitude of self-sufficiency plagued the church at Laodicea. Because they said, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” they did not realize that spiritually they were “wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked” (Rev 3:17). In A.D. 60 Laodicea had a devastating earthquake that virtually levelled the city. Although the Roman government offered to rebuild the city for them, the proud inhabitants insisted on doing it themselves. They succeeded in raising the entire city out of the ashes, as it were, without any outside help. That proud, self-sufficient attitude obviously had spilled over into the church, whose members came to think of themselves as able to do without the help even of God.

Those who have great material resources tend to imagine they do not require divine resources. Paul therefore told Timothy to “instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17). More than that, the apostle goes on to say, “Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed” (vv. 18-19).

Paul’s advice to Timothy was that he confront prospective converts who were rich in the same way Jesus confronted the rich young ruler. If a person prefers his earthly fortune to the lordship of Jesus Christ, his heart is not prepared for salvation. Willingness to give up everything for the Lord will not in itself save him, but it demonstrates that he is desperate for salvation and has found the “pearl of great price” for which he will sell all he has if need be.

Only godliness brings gain that has lasting value and satisfaction, Paul assures us. “But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang” (vv. 6, 9-10).

It is especially difficult for rich people not to be closely tied to this world, to their bank accounts, investments, and possessions. A

person's heart is where his treasure is (Matt. 6:21), and the wealthy usually find it hard, and seemingly unnecessary, to treasure the things of God. When they hear the gospel, its divine seed frequently falls on thorny hearts that may have an initial response but are full of "the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things" that choke the Word and make it unfruitful (Mark 4:18-19).

The successful farmer who tore down his old barns and built bigger ones to hold all his grain was oblivious to the welfare of his soul. Completely content in his riches, he said to himself, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry." And because he refused to recognize God as the source of his many goods or to allow Him to have any place in his life, his life was forfeited. "God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' So is the man," Jesus explained, "who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:18-21).

Every possession a person has is by the provision of God and ought to be used to His glory. Even Christians run the danger of being sidetracked and trapped by their possessions, giving to God only what remains after they have accumulated what they want and fulfilled their own plans.

All that may explain why it is so hard for the rich to enter God's kingdom, but why it is impossible is a completely different issue—and is the whole point here.

The young ruler was not a denouncer of Christ but a seeker who wanted eternal life, who wanted kingdom citizenship. But the flaw was that he thought he himself had the resources to procure it. That is the point here.

In Mark's parallel account, Jesus makes clear that the impossibility of entering **the kingdom** by any humanly devised or empowered means extends to everyone, not just the rich. We learn from Mark that after the disciples expressed amazement about His statement concerning the wealthy, Jesus said, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!" (Mark 10:24). The rich young ruler's problem was not his wealth itself but his trust in his wealth and in his own ability to meet God's standards for acceptance. He wanted to

enter the kingdom and receive eternal life on his own terms, through his own money, and by his own efforts. But, Jesus said, it is so **hard** for anyone to get saved on his own terms and by his own efforts that it is absolutely impossible. The poorest of the poor have no better chance to gain eternal life by their own efforts at righteousness.

Jesus is not here teaching how hard it is for rich people to get unhooked from their riches and bow their knees to Him in humble faith. He is saying how impossible it is for them or for anyone else to be saved by self-effort of any kind. In effect, He was saying the same thing God said through the Mosaic law It was humanly impossible to live up to a single one of the Ten Commandments or to the two great commandments (Lev. 19:18; Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37-39), and those laws were intended to show God's people the impossibility of meeting His perfect, holy standards in their own power. Salvation has always been impossible by human effort.

Paul expressed the same truth when he wrote: "Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:19-20).

Jesus declared that all works-righteousness, which is the basis of every man-made religion, is worthless, affirming what Jeremiah had written hundreds of years earlier: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then you also can do good who are accustomed to do evil" (Jer. 13:23). Every human being since the Fall is by nature "accustomed to do evil" and is therefore unable to do good in any way that is acceptable to God. No one can save himself any more than he can change the color of his skin or than a leopard can change his spots.

Jesus was not separating out the rich as being more inherently far from **the kingdom** than other people but was pointing out that their riches on the one hand were a formidable barrier and on the other hand that their money gave them no advantage at all, though they might be able to buy more sacrifices, give more alms, and make more offerings at the Temple.

The wealthy are also inclined to be selfish and self-centered. Their time and interests are often devoted to enlarging, protecting, and enjoying what they have, and consequently they have little time or concern for the interests or welfare of others. I once talked with a man who had worked for several multimillionaires. He said that they had three things in common: they not only were rich but were capable of getting even richer, they were eccentric, and they were extremely selfish and self-centered. Although there are exceptions, those characteristics are generally universal. Like the self-indulgent rich man who was oblivious to the diseased and destitute Lazarus who laid outside his gate hoping to have a few table crumbs (Luke 16:20-31), the wealthy are inclined to be interested only in themselves.

Jesus' teaching about the impossibility of the rich entering the kingdom by their own efforts was a shocking idea to Jews. Therefore, **when the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, "Then who can be saved?"** For many centuries the rabbis had taught that accumulation of wealth was a virtue and that it was not only unwise but sinful for a person to give away more than one fifth of what he owned. They had designed a religious law to protect their selfishness and greed. Envisioning the Lord in their own materialistic image, they reasoned that God was pleased with a gift in direct proportion to its size. Therefore, the more one gave out of the permissible one fifth limit, the more favor he found with God.

Such ideas were so strongly entrenched that in much Jewish thinking alms giving was virtually a means of buying salvation. Much like the indulgences of the Middle Ages, alms giving was considered a means of literally purchasing a more favored place in the kingdom. For Jesus to teach that wealth was actually a serious *barrier* to the kingdom was diametrically contrary to everything most Jews had been taught. The rich could afford the largest and choicest of the sacrificial animals. They could give large amounts to the Temple and their local synagogues. They never lacked for money to drop into the thirteen trumpet-shaped receptacles in the court of the women that were conspicuously located so that their generous giving to the Lord's work could be observed by fellow worshipers.

But if even the rich cannot enter the kingdom by their own efforts and generosity, the disciples wondered, what could the poor

hope for? In total bewilderment they therefore asked Jesus, **“Then who can be saved?”**

And looking upon them Jesus said to them explicitly what the Mosaic law said implicitly: **“With men this is impossible.”** Just as it is not merely difficult but impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, it is not merely difficult but **impossible** for **men** to please the Lord and come into His kingdom on their own terms and by their own efforts. In one simple declaration, Jesus utterly destroyed the current perspective in the religion of Israel and, at the same time, all hope in works-righteousness. Whatever his material possessions and earthly accomplishments, every person stands totally helpless and powerless before God. He stands condemned before a righteous God, and in his depraved nature he can do nothing to make himself holy and worthy of God’s forgiveness and acceptance. With that statement Jesus swept all religions of human achievement and works-righteousness into hell. Left to any work of man, salvation is impossible.

“But with God all things are possible,” Jesus went on to say. Because **God** is able to change sinful hearts, it is **possible** for Him to save helpless men. God can do what men cannot do. The rich young ruler went away without eternal life because he sought it on the impossible basis of his own human resources and goodness. Salvation is entirely a gracious and sovereign work of God, and the work of His human witnesses is simply to proclaim the full truth of the gospel as clearly and lovingly as possible and to rely on God to apply that truth to an unbeliever’s heart and bring him to recognize his spiritual bankruptcy and come to repentance and obedient faith. Although repentance and faith require an act of human will, they are prompted by the power of God.

“No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him,” Jesus said (John 6:44). That is why Paul admonished that “the Lord’s bondservant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:24-26).

THE RICHES OF POVERTY

Then Peter answered and said to Him, “Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?” And Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name’s sake, shall receive many times as much, and shall inherit eternal life.” (19:27-29)

With hope perhaps tinged with uncertainty, Peter ventured to ask Jesus, **“Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?”** “We came on Your terms, didn’t we?” he said in effect. “Do we thereby qualify for eternal life? The rich young ruler refused to surrender his possessions and his life to You, and he forfeited the kingdom. But we forsook our jobs, our families, our friends, and everything else we had in order to be Your disciples. We have repented of our sins and surrendered to Your lordship. Just as You commanded, we have denied ourselves and taken up our crosses for your sake. Doesn’t that qualify us for a place in Your kingdom?”

Peter was speaking for all of the Twelve, because he had no suspicion of Judas’s betrayal. As that false disciple would soon make evident, he had *not* forsaken everything for Christ but was instead seeking to use Him for his own ends. He expected Jesus to overthrow Rome and set up His own earthly kingdom, with the disciples given the highest places of honor and power. Judas was much further from the kingdom than the rich young ruler, who at least knew he needed eternal life and had a certain desire for it. Judas, on the other hand, was totally concerned with his present, earthly life.

But the rest of the Twelve, despite their small faith and slowness to understand Jesus’ teaching, had truly given themselves to Him. They shared with Judas many of the common Jewish

misconceptions about the Messiah and His kingdom. They may still have been expecting Him to establish the kingdom during their lifetimes and therefore could not bring themselves to accept the idea of His suffering and death. But they nevertheless continued to follow and obey Him. As Peter had declared in behalf of the Twelve, “You have words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68-69).

Although Peter and the others were still confused about much of Jesus’ message and mission, they knew they truly belonged to Him and that He truly loved them and would not forsake them. They were certain He had something divinely good in store for them, even if they had a distorted idea of what it was. Peter therefore asked to hear from Jesus’ own lips concerning **what then will there be for us?** “What are the benefits of Your kingdom for us?” they wanted to know. “What do we have to look forward to as Your disciples?”

Some have criticized Peter for his expectation of blessing and reward. But Jesus gave no hint of dissatisfaction with the question. Instead, He acknowledged that they were indeed His true and sincere disciples, referring to them as **you who have followed Me**. The Greek aorist participle characterizes them as His followers.

Next, He gave them the marvelous and unique promise that **in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.**

The term *palingenesia* (**regeneration**) literally means new birth. It was used by Josephus for the new birth of the Jewish nation after the Babylonian Captivity and by Philo of the new birth of the earth after the Flood and after its destruction by fire. It is used only twice in the New Testament, here and in Titus 3:5, where Paul uses it to refer to the personal new birth of believers. In the present passage, however, Jesus uses it to represent the rebirth of the earth under His sovereign dominion at the time of His second coming. It will be paradise regained and a global parallel to the individual rebirth of Christians.

The earth and the world of men will be given a new nature, described in great detail by the Old Testament prophets and by John in Revelation 20:1-15. Just as they have been given spiritual life and

a new nature in Jesus Christ but are not yet perfected, so there will be a rebirth of the earth that is divinely recreated. Although it will not yet be a totally new earth (Rev. 21:1), it will nevertheless be wonderfully superior to the present fallen and unredeemed earth. It was the belief of the Jews that Messiah would renew the earth and heavens, based on the prophecy of Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22. Peter called it “the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient times” (Acts 3:21).

All believers will sit on the throne of Christ (Rev 3:21), exercising authority over the people of the earth (Rev 2:26), while the apostles are uniquely ruling restored Israel. This cannot be the eternal state described in Revelation 21:12-14, where twelve gates in the New Jerusalem are inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes and twelve foundations are inscribed with the names of the twelve apostles.

At the time of the restoration of the earth, righteousness will flourish, peace will abound, Jerusalem will again be exalted, health and healing will prevail, the earth will produce food as never before, the lion will lay down in peace with the lamb, the deserts will blossom, and life will be long. The age-old curse that began with the Fall will then be *limited*, in anticipation of its being *eliminated* completely in the eternal state to follow (Rev 22:3).

As God had long before predicted, the Messiah, the Lord’s Anointed, will then receive all the nations as His inheritance and have the very ends of the earth as His possessions. “Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron,” the psalmist declared; “Thou shalt shatter them like earthenware” (Ps. 2:2, 8-9). Then **the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne**, as King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:16). This is a reference to the prophecy of Daniel 7:13-14, where God, “the Ancient of Days,” gives the kingdom to the Son of Man. Jesus is affirming the reality that He will rule in the coming kingdom.

At that time the redeemed of all the ages will also reign with Him. “Then the sovereignty, the dominion, and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One; His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all the dominions will serve and obey Him” (Dan. 7:27;

cf. 1 Cor. 6:2; Rev 20:4). The nation of Israel will be restored, and sharing Christ's rule over her will be the Twelve apostles, who **also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.** Matthias, who took Judas's place among the apostles shortly before Pentecost (Acts 1:26), will join the other eleven on the **twelve thrones** (cf. Dan. 7:22 and Isa. 1:26).

Because amillennial interpreters do not believe in a literal thousand-year kingdom on earth or in Israel's national restoration, they take the **twelve thrones** and **the twelve tribes** as being purely figurative. One such writer made no attempt to discern Jesus' meaning but simply commented, "Now we have to wonder what our Lord meant by the twelve tribes of Israel."

If Jesus was referring to a real reigning on His part when He spoke of His throne, He must be referring to literal **thrones** that the apostles would **sit upon** while literally **judging the twelve tribes of Israel.** And as already noted, this millennial truth is also revealed elsewhere in Scripture.

The Word makes clear that in the reign of Christ over the world, He will be sovereign and rule over Jews and Gentiles with righteousness, peace, and immediate justice. He will be worshiped as supreme Lord, and His kingdom will bring prosperity, healing, health, and blessedness.

Not only that, Jesus continued, but "**everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, shall receive as much, and shall inherit eternal life.**" Those who renounce their possessions and become poor for Christ's **name's sake** are going to share with the apostles in His triumph and reign. Mark reports that Jesus said the person who gives up those things for His sake and the gospel's "shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age" (Mark 10:30).

When a person comes to Jesus Christ he must often have to turn his back on certain relationships, even with those who are very dear to him. Many times his conversion turns his own family and closest friends against him, in some cases even to the point of seeking his disinheritance or even his life. But the one who gives up everything for Christ's sake, not only will inherit eternal life but also

the family of God in this present life. He will have a host of new fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters with whom he will forever be united in God's divine family. Wherever he goes, he meets spiritual loved ones, many of whom he has never seen or heard of before. Throughout the world he finds those who will share his sorrows, encourage his spirit, and help meet his needs, material as well as spiritual.

The believer in Jesus Christ will have blessings now, blessings in the millennial kingdom, and blessings throughout all eternity. To be poor for the sake of Christ is to be rich indeed. Jim Elliot, a young missionary martyred by the Auca Indians of Ecuador whom he was seeking to reach for Christ, wrote shortly before his death, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

20
Equality in the
Kingdom
(19:30–20:16)

But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; and to those he said, “You too go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.” And so they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing; and he said to them “Why have you been standing here idle all day long?” They said to him, “Because no one hired us.” He said to them, “You too go into the vineyard.” And when evening had come, the

owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, “Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.” And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. And when those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; and they also received each one a denarius. And when they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, saying, “These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.” But he answered and said to one of them, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?” Thus the last shall be first, and the first last. (19:30–20:16)

The prophet Ezekiel ministered to the children of Israel during the Babylonian Captivity: Like the other true prophets of God, he repeatedly had to remind them of and warn them about their sins, especially those for which they were exiled in the first place. One of those sins was that of accusing God of being unfair and unjust.

They liked to use the proverb, “The fathers eat the sour grapes, but the children’s teeth are set on edge,” which brought into question God’s justice. “‘As I live,’ declares the Lord God, ‘you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore. Behold all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die’” (Ezek. 18:2-4). Twice in that chapter the Lord declares, “Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not right.’ Hear now, O house of Israel! Is My way not right? Is it not your ways that are not right?” (v. 25; cf. v. 29).

When men doubt the justice and fairness of God, it is always because of their own perverted views of justice and of Him. God Himself is the standard for righteousness, and it is as impossible for Him to be unjust as to lie. Confronting the same false principle reflected in the ancient Israelite proverb, Paul declared, “There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the

Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to every man who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God” (Rom. 2:9-11). To the Colossians he wrote, “From the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality” (Col. 3:24-25). God punishes those who do wrong and blesses those who do right, with utter impartiality.

In no area is God’s impartiality more significant and wonderful than in regard to salvation. No matter what men’s circumstances might be when they come to Christ, and no matter how well or poorly they may serve Him after coming, they receive the same glorious salvation. That is the great truth Jesus teaches in Matthew 19:30–20:16.

THE PARTICIPANTS IN KINGDOM EQUALITY

But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; and to those he said, “You too go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.” And so they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing; and he said to them “Why have you been standing here idle all day long?” They said to him, “Because no one hired us.” He said to them, “You too go into the vineyard.” (19:30–20:7)

Jesus’ words, “**Many who are first shall be last; and the last, first,**” may have been a common proverb. But since He used it

on several occasions and it is not found in other literature, it seems more likely that He originated the expression Himself.

In the parable that follows, Jesus illustrated His intended application of the proverb. He states plainly that the theme of the parable is **the kingdom of heaven**, the subject He had been dealing with since the rich young ruler approached Him. That man wanted to know how to receive eternal life (19:16), which every Jew knew was equivalent to the hope of salvation and heavenly citizenship. Following up on that incident, Jesus warned His disciples about the great barrier that riches can be to entering **the kingdom**, and then declared the impossibility of entering by man's own resources and efforts and the possibility of entering only by God's gracious power (vv. 23-29).

This parable teaches a magnificent and blessed truth about **the kingdom of heaven**, which, Jesus said, **is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard**. He is giving an illustration of the spiritual realm where God sovereignly reigns in righteousness and grace, and in particular, an illustration of the equal and just basis on which it is entered through His grace. As He often did, He used a common earthly story to illustrate a heavenly truth.

The estate of **the landowner** included a large **vineyard**, for which he needed **to hire laborers**. It is not stated whether he was preparing a new vineyard, pruning the vines of an existing one, or getting ready to harvest the grapes. But all of those tasks required considerable hard labor. Vineyards generally were planted on terraced hillsides, most of which were stony. Preparing the terraces involved digging out the tiers and using the stones to build small retaining walls on the outside edges. Then the terraced areas had to be filled with good soil, most of which often had to be carried a considerable distance up the slopes from more fertile ground below.

Every summer, both new and old vines had to be pruned back to improve production, and that, too, was demanding work. The final major operation was, of course, the harvesting, done in late September. The weather was still hot then (see v. 12), and it was necessary to gather the grapes before the fall rainy season began. If for some reason the grapes were slow in ripening, the time for

harvesting could be significantly shortened. Consequently, the grape harvest was a hectic and demanding time.

Because most owners did not have enough household servants or regular workers to do those jobs, temporary day **laborers** were hired from nearby towns and villages. These **laborers** were usually unskilled at a trade and were near the bottom of the social-economic scale, many of them not far above beggars. They worked from job to job, many of which lasted no more than a day, and often less. They had no guarantee of work beyond what they might be doing at the time. They would gather in the market place before dawn to be available for hiring, and that is where the landowner found these particular men **early in the morning**.

Because they were unskilled, desperate for work, and therefore vulnerable, they were often underpaid and otherwise disadvantaged. Because of His great compassion for the poor and downtrodden, God commanded His people, “You shall not oppress your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of a hired man are not to remain with you all night until morning” (Lev. 19:13). In other words, they were to pay hired workers decent wages and pay them at the end of every day, because that was often all a man would have with which to feed his family the following day. As Moses explains elsewhere, “You shall give him his wages on his day before the sun sets, for he is poor and sets his heart on it; so that he may not cry against you to the Lord and it become sin in you” (Deut. 24:15). Because they worked only from day to day, they were to be paid day to day.

After he found them in the market place, the landowner **agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day**, and he then **sent them into his vineyard** to begin work. A **denarius for the day**, the wage of a Roman soldier, was good pay for such workers. It is likely they were usually paid less, and they readily agreed to this man’s equitable offer.

The Jewish workday began at 6:00 a.m., which was called the first hour. When it was **about the third hour**, that is, nine o’clock, the owner went into town again and **saw others standing idle in the market place**. These **others** may have been latecomers who had to travel a greater distance or perhaps were less able-bodied than the others and moved more slowly. Or they may have had only a few

hours' work to do at the beginning of the day and were now back in the employment line. In light of the owner's generosity, it may have been that he had seen those men earlier in the morning but did not need them. Perhaps he now came back out of compassion and hired them because of their need rather than his own. For whatever reasons, an additional group of laborers had gathered.

Standing idle does not signify laziness or indolence but merely points up the fact that they were unemployed at the time. They were entirely dependent on someone's hiring them, and the fact that they were **in the market place** shows they were looking for work.

The owner did not offer a particular wage to these men but simply told them, "**You too go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.**" As in all rural communities, everyone knew everyone else, and these workers no doubt trusted the owner as a man of his word. In any case, they were doubtlessly extremely glad to have work to do at any wage, **and so they went.**

At **about the sixth hour** (noon) **and the ninth hour** (3:00 p.m.) the landowner went back into the village **and did the same thing.** At each of those times he found more men hoping for work and hired them.

Then, near the very end of the day, at **about the eleventh hour** (5:00 p.m.), he went back still again **and found others standing; and he said to them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day long?"** No explanation is given as to why these men had **been standing . . . idle all day long** and yet not been hired. Perhaps they were in another section of the market or had somehow been overlooked. Or perhaps they were the oldest, weakest, and least productive workers, whom no one else wanted to hire. But those particulars are irrelevant to the parable. The point is that, even at that late hour, there were men still looking for work, **because**, as they explained, **no one hired us.**

This last group had worked only one hour (v. 12) **when evening had come**, which was the twelfth hour, or six o'clock. Following the Mosaic requirement to pay such workers at the end of each day, **the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the**

laborers and pay them their wages.” That is what every conscientious Jewish employer did in obedience to Old Testament law

Jesus’ next instruction, however, was quite unusual. The men were to be paid **beginning with the last group to the first.** Here is where Jesus was able to demonstrate men’s self-serving ideas of fairness, and where the parable begins to intersect with the proverb “Many who are first will be last; and the last, first” (19:30; cf. 20:16).

The primary idea of the parable, and of Jesus’ application of the proverb, is not a simple reversal of payment order. Although that procedure was certainly not customary, it would not in itself have caused much concern. The radical action of the landowner, which reflects the parable’s main point, is that **those hired about the eleventh hour . . . each . . . received a denarius,** a whole day’s wage, as their pay.

THE OBJECTION TO KINGDOM EQUALITY

And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. And when those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; and they also received each one a denarius. And when they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, saying, “These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day.” (20:9-12)

The account does not mention the fact, but it is obvious from the eleventh-hour workers’ wages that the men hired at the third, sixth, and ninth hours were also paid **a denarius.** It is therefore understandable that **when those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more.** At this point they had no problem with what the owner had done but, in fact, were elated. Because he had paid the other men a full day’s wage for a partial day’s work, they assumed **that they would receive more** than a day’s wage. At the rate the eleventh-hour group was paid, they would have received 12 day’s

pay for one day's work! They were more than willing to be paid last if that meant being paid so handsomely.

But their hopes were soon dashed when **they also received each one a denarius**, and they reacted exactly as we would expect. **They grumbled at the landowner, saying, "These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day"** Their normal, very human reaction was, "That's not fair! Those men only worked an hour at the end of the day. We worked hard all day long, including during **scorching heat**. Why should they get paid as much as we did?" They may have been overdramatizing their case, but their basic description of the situation was correct. In any case, they were exceedingly disgruntled at this perceived injustice and were determined not to leave until they had satisfaction from **the landowner**, who was standing near his foreman when the wages were handed out.

THE VINDICATION OF KINGDOM EQUALITY

But he answered and said to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?" Thus the last shall be first, and the first last. (20:13-16)

To their charges, the owner **answered and said to one of them**, probably the spokesman for the group, **"Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?"** *Hetairos* (**friend**) is not the term for a close friend but rather a casual companion. The owner let them know firmly but courteously that they were out of line. He was **doing** them **no wrong**, because they had a clear agreement early in the morning at the market place (v. 2) that

they would be paid a **denarius** apiece, a fair wage. “You worked the twelve hours you agreed to work,” he said, “and I paid you the **denarius** I agreed to pay you. We both lived up to our sides of the bargain, and therefore you have no legitimate complaint. **Take what is yours and go your way.** It should not be your concern, if **I wish to give to this last man the same as to you.**”

More than that, he asked rhetorically, “**Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own?**” What he paid the late-coming workers, or any others, was strictly his own business, and he was perfectly within his **lawful** rights. He could do whatever he might **wish with what** were his **own** assets.

The problem was not injustice on the part of the landowner and foreman but jealousy on the part of the workers. “**Is your eye envious because I am generous?**” the owner asked the angry spokesman. As he had just reminded the group, he completely lived up to their mutual agreement, and that should have been their only concern. But jealousy and envy are not based on reason but on selfishness. The charge of unfairness was not grounded in a love for justice but in the selfish assumption that the extra pay they *wanted* was pay they *deserved*. In reality, of course, what the latter-day workers were paid had absolutely no bearing on what the all-day workers were paid. They had, as it were, entirely separate contracts with the owner.

But selfishness sees what it wants to see, and all those envious men could see was that they did not receive the grand bonus they expected and thought they deserved. It was not that they did not get the wage that they earned and had agreed upon but that they could not stand seeing someone who was hired at the last minute get paid the same as they did. Instead of rejoicing at the good fortune of their coworkers, they envied them and were bitter. It is possible that the eleventh-hour workers were less capable and more needy than the all-day men, who probably were hired first because they were the best workers. The other men had a hard time finding work at all, and when they did it may have been menial, demanding, and low-paying. But regardless of the differences between the men’s situations, capabilities, accomplishments, or needs, none of them was wrongly

paid. In fact, all of them were well paid by a man who was not obligated to hire them in the first place.

Although the parable includes clear warnings about impugning the fairness of someone and about the ugly sin of envy, its primary point is that of the owner's right to pay all the workers the same wage. Jesus, of course, was not teaching economic or business principles but rather using such principles to teach an infinitely more wonderful spiritual truth.

To understand the parable's spiritual meaning it is necessary to understand who and what are represented in it. Jesus explicitly said the parable is about "the kingdom of heaven" (v. 1). The vineyard is therefore the kingdom itself, the landowner is God the Father, and the foreman is the Son, Jesus Christ. The laborers are believers, and the denarius is eternal life, which all received equally for trusting in Christ. The work day is the believer's lifetime of service to his Lord and the evening is eternity.

God's sovereign principle for salvation is that every person who comes in faith to His Son, Jesus Christ, receives the same gracious salvation prepared by the Father and given by the Son. There are no exceptions or variations. Whether a person comes to God as a small child and lives a long life of faithful, obedient service, or whether he comes to Him on his deathbed, all come into the kingdom on the same basis and receive the same glorious, eternal blessings. The penitent thief who turned to Jesus on the cross with his last breath received the same salvation and heavenly glory as the apostles. He died justly as a criminal, whereas most of them died unjustly because of their faithfulness to Christ. He did not have even one hour to serve Christ, whereas some of them served Him far into old age. He knew just enough about Christ to be saved, and his service was limited to a brief time of praise and thankfulness, whereas the disciples were privileged to live intimately with Him for three years and were given unique divine revelation from and about Him. Yet all of them were received equally by their divine Savior and King and stand equally before Him in heaven.

The Lord will indeed *reward* His saints at His coming (cf. 1 Cor. 4:5; Rev. 22:12) according to their faithfulness. As Jesus had taught earlier, "The Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His

Father with His angels; and will then recompense every man according to his deeds” (Matt. 16:27; cf. 5:12; 6:4; 10:42). “Each man’s work will become evident,” Paul declared, “for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:13-15). But individual rewards are another matter completely and relate to the specific nature of our faithfulness and diligence in serving Christ on earth. The subject of the parable of the landowner is not personal rewards that will determine the nature and scope of our ruling and serving in eternity but rather the common blessedness of eternity that will belong to all believers.

Here the Lord is not teaching about the differences of rewards but the equality of salvation. He is saying that Christians who have spent a life of ease and spiritual indolence have the same eternal salvation as those who suffer a martyr’s death. The immature, weak, and disobedient Christian has the same prospect of inheriting the kingdom as one who is mature, self-giving, and spiritual. All believers will receive “the crown of life” (James 1:12; Rev 2:10), “the crown of righteousness” (2 Tim. 4:8), and the “crown of glory” (1 Pet. 5:4). The Greek genitives of apposition behind each of those three phrases refer to the future blessing of *all* believers—eternal life, eternal righteousness, and eternal glory!

From a human perspective, that seems inequitable; but from the divine perspective, it is totally just. Because no person is worthy of salvation, eternal life is a gracious gift for which only Jesus Christ could have paid the cost. Differences among human beings are infinitely smaller than the difference between even the most righteous human being and God. Before receiving Christ as Lord and Savior all men are equally lost, and after they receive Him they are equally saved. Relative merit is irrelevant, because all that even the greatest human righteousness can merit is damnation. “All our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment,” Isaiah declared (Isa. 64:6). By God’s perfect standard of righteousness, no person comes to Christ with more or less merit, and no one is received by Him with more or less grace.

How wonderful that truth is. The Christian who is envious of other Christians, for whatever reason, not only is unspiritual but foolish. If God really did give him what he deserved, he would be destined for hell rather than for heaven. The spiritual believer rejoices in the salvation of others, no matter what the circumstances of their conversion. If he sees someone come to Christ on a deathbed, after a life of profligacy and infidelity, he rejoices with the angels in heaven that one more sinner has repented (Luke 15:10) and that God has again been glorified through His marvelous grace.

A pastor friend told me that his father not only had been an unbeliever all his life but was a vocal Christ rejecter, openly criticizing the things of God and wanting no part of the gospel. When his father was hospitalized with a severe stroke and no longer able to communicate, the son again presented the gospel to him as he had many times before. "I witnessed to him with all my heart," he said. "I told him how he could embrace Christ even at this point in his life, even though he had so strongly rejected Him. I don't know whether he did or not, because he had no way of letting me know. But I know that if he did believe he will inherit the same eternal life that I have. And how I hope that he did."

Jesus told the parable of the landowner in response to Peter's query in behalf of the apostles about what was in store for them, which, in turn, was in response to Jesus' teaching about the impossibility of entering the kingdom by human means or effort. The apostles represented the all-day workers who began at 6:00 a.m. and stayed on the job until 6:00 p.m. They had forsaken everything to follow Christ and had been with Him for nearly three years. Although they had suffered nothing like they would suffer a few years later, they nonetheless had endured considerable hardship and ridicule for the Lord's sake. Their faith was genuine and they truly loved Christ.

But as events would soon prove, they were still terribly self-centered. Only a day or so later, the mother of James and John, no doubt with their approval and perhaps even at their request, asked Jesus to promise that in His kingdom "these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left" (Matt. 20:20-21). Jesus had just spoken again of His imminent suffering and death, yet the minds of these two disciples were on their own personal

aggrandizement. They were playing one-upmanship while their master was at that very time on His way to Jerusalem to be crucified (v. 18-19). When the other disciples heard what had happened, they “became indignant with the two brothers” (v. 24). But their indignation was far from righteous. As they would soon demonstrate, they were just as ambitious as James and John. Not many weeks later, in the Upper Room a few hours before Jesus’ arrest, the disciples were still arguing among themselves “as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest” (Luke 22:24).

After Jesus had arisen and appeared to the disciples and they had gotten over the shock of His crucifixion, their minds returned again to their own selfish, worldly ambitions. In light of everything they had said and done before, their question, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6) was no doubt centered more on the prospects for their own glory than on Christ’s.

In the parable of the gracious landowner Jesus was dealing with the selfish, indulgent, envious, and ambitious orientation of the disciples. He wanted them to see, and He wants all His followers to see, that salvation is not in any way deserved or earned. It is the free gift of God, dispensed sovereignly and impartially to whomever believes in His Son.

Believing tax collectors, prostitutes, criminals, and social outcasts will have the same heavenly residence as Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Wesley. There are no servant quarters or lower-class neighborhoods in heaven. Everyone will have a room in the Father’s house specially prepared for him by the Son (John 14:2). Every believer is a part of the church, which is the bride of Christ (Rev 21:2, 9), every believer is a child of God and a fellow heir with Christ (Rom. 8:16-17), and every believer is blessed “with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). It is not that every believer receives an equal *part* but that every believer receives equally *the whole* of God’s grace and blessing. Just as hell is the total absence of God, heaven is the total presence of God. And every one of His children will enjoy equally the fullness of His presence there. Everyone who belongs to God has all of God. That great reality is summed up in the truth of John’s marvelous declaration, “We shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is” (1 John 3:2).

From this parable flow many spiritual principles that are closely related to the central truth that the gift of eternal life is equal for all believers. First is the principle that God sovereignly initiates and accomplishes salvation. The landowner went out looking for workers, and it was he who asked them to labor in his vineyard. And because God does the seeking and the saving in His own initiative and power, we have no demands on His special favor or privilege. Every person who believes has first been sought out by the Father and given to the Son (John 6:39). And whether He sought us early in our lives or late, and whether we answered His call early or late, all merit and glory belongs to Him.

A second principle is that God alone establishes the terms of salvation. Because the laborers in the vineyard came at different times, they worked a different number of hours, and we can assume they worked with many different degrees of productivity. But they did not receive different pay. The measure of God's gift of salvation is not man's merit or accomplishments but His own grace, which does not vary.

A third principle is that God continues to call men into His kingdom. He keeps going back and going back into the market places of the world calling men to Himself. And He will continue to call until the last hour of this age. The night of judgment is coming when no man can work, but while it is day, the Father will continue to draw men to Himself. "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working," Jesus said (John 5:17), because the Lord does not wish "for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).

A fourth principle is that God redeems everyone who is willing. "The one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out," Jesus said (John 6:37, 39). All the laborers who went to the vineyard recognized they were needy. They had no hope of work except what the landowner would give them, and they received it gladly and thankfully. They had given up dependence on their own resources and looked only to him.

A fifth principle is that God is compassionate to those who have no resources and acknowledge their hopelessness. He reaches out to those in need who know they are in need. When the men in the last group told the landowner they were standing idle because no one

would hire them, he hired them. And when anyone comes to God knowing he has no other prospect for life but Him, the Lord will always lovingly and mercifully accept that person for His own.

A sixth principle is that all who come into the vineyard worked. They may have come at the last hour, but they worked. Even the penitent thief on the cross, who died within hours if not moments after confessing his faith in Christ, still testifies today to the saving grace of God. The history of the church is replete with stories of those whose deathbed conversions were used by God to lead others to Himself.

A seventh principle is that God has the divine authority and ability to keep His promises. At every hour of the day that the landowner went to the market place, he hired all who wanted to work, and at the end of the day there was no shortage of funds to pay each one the full amount. Christ's sacrifice on the cross was sufficient to pay for the sins of the whole world, from the Fall of Adam until the day of judgment. If any person is not saved it is because he will not be saved. Man's sin can never outstrip God's grace, because where sin increases, grace increases all the more (Rom. 5:20).

An eighth principle is that, just as God always gives what He has promised, He also always gives more than is deserved. The 6:00 a.m. workers were envious of those who came at 5:00 p.m. because, in their selfish view, they deserved to be paid more. But the landowner was no more obligated to hire the first workers than the others. He would have been entirely justified to have passed them all by, and all of them were paid more than they were worth. In an infinitely greater way, no believer is qualified to receive God's least favor, much less salvation, and even the best person by human standards is blessed immeasurably beyond what he could possibly deserve.

A ninth principle, which is a corollary of the previous one, is that humility and a genuine sense of unworthiness is the only right attitude in which a person may come to the Lord. Like the elder brother who was resentful when the prodigal son returned home and was royally received by their father, the early workers lost some of their humility at the end of the day because of their jealousy. But they

had come to the vineyard in the same attitude of submissiveness in which the others came.

A tenth and final principle is that of God's sovereign, overarching grace. From beginning to end, the parable pictures God's divine, boundless grace. The men's work had absolutely no relationship to what they were paid. Even less do men's works of supposed righteousness have any relationship to what they receive through faith in Jesus Christ. Just as sin is the great equalizer that causes every man to "fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), God's grace is the great equalizer that removes sin and makes every believer equally acceptable to Him in Christ.

21

The Sufferings of

Christ

(20:17-19)

And as Jesus was about to go up to Jerusalem, He took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and on the way He said to them. “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and will deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify Him, and on the third day He will be raised up.” (20:17-19)

In this passage Jesus gives the third (see 16:21; 17:22-23) and last prediction of His impending suffering, death, and resurrection. Both His words and the truths they convey are simple, clear, and explicit. He was not speaking in a parable or in figures of speech but in very ordinary, unambiguous terms. He was not revealing a mystery

or explaining deep theological truths. He was simply stating what would soon become historical facts.

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ form the central events of biblical revelation in both the Old and New Testaments. It is those two historical events, and certain others surrounding them, that Jesus now again predicts to the Twelve as being imminent.

Throughout history, some people have portrayed Jesus as a well-meaning, loving, gentle, peaceful, but naive visionary who somehow got caught in a hostile world and accidentally wound up being crucified. Others have less generously pictured Him as a self-styled, would-be conqueror who tried to pull off a coup of sorts and became a victim of His own ambition.

But such views do not reflect at all the biblical record. The suffering and death of Christ were no miscalculation or accident. They were not the least surprising to Jesus. On the contrary, He knew about them even before His murderers had thought of their evil plans. The Messiah's suffering and death were planned by our holy God ages before they were plotted in the minds of evil men. Jesus' first recorded words were, "I must be about My Father's business" (Luke 2:49, KJV), and among His last words before His death were, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). Jesus knew why He was on earth, including every detail of His life and ministry. And because He had that divine foreknowledge, He must have endured many sufferings a thousand times in His mind before they transpired in His life.

Clearly the Lord wanted the disciples to understand what He would soon face, as well as prepare them for what would also be a time of severe suffering and danger for them. More than that, He wanted them to understand that these things, evil as they were, were nevertheless a part of God's great redemptive plan and were the very reason He had come to earth.

Jesus knew how difficult it was for the disciples to comprehend what He was trying to tell them. They were so attuned to the popular Jewish concepts of the glorious, conquering, reigning Messiah that anything He taught to the contrary seemed to go by them. To most Jews of that day, just as to most Jews of our own time, the idea of a suffering and dying Messiah was unthinkable, an

absolute self-contradiction. Like their fellow Jews, the disciples were looking for a lion, not a lamb.

So for the third time it is recorded that the Lord calls them aside and seeks to impress on them the reality of what is about to happen to Him. First He assures them that these events are a part of God's revealed plan. Then He gives detailed predictions of the particular events, and finally an idea of the proportion and power of the sufferings He would endure.

THE PLAN OF HIS SUFFERING

And as Jesus was about to go up to Jerusalem, He took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and on the way He said to them. "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; (20:17-18a)

Jesus had finished His Galilean ministry and had crossed into Perea, on the other side of the Jordan River (19:1). As Jewish travelers from Galilee often did in order to avoid going through Samaria, Jesus traveled down the east side of the Jordan and crossed over to Jericho (20:29). From there He would **go up to Jerusalem**.

Jericho is near the northern end of the Dead Sea, which is over 1,000 feet below sea level. Although **Jerusalem** is only 14 miles due west of the Dead Sea, it is at an elevation of 2,500 feet above sea level, making the trip **up** from Jericho quite steep.

The fact that Jesus **took the twelve disciples aside by themselves** indicates they were traveling in the company of others, probably a large crowd. Some of the group doubtlessly had been following Jesus for some time (cf. v. 29), and others were part of the thousands of Jews making the yearly Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem who found themselves in the company of this astounding Teacher and Healer. But His public ministry was nearing an end, and He devoted the great majority of His time to private instruction of the **disciples**.

Behold was a common exclamation, a means of calling special attention to something of importance. In this context it also carried the idea of resolution and conviction. Even more than on the earlier occasion that Luke describes, Jesus now “resolutely set His face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). He did not plan to go alone, but told the Twelve, **“We are going up to Jerusalem.”**

As already noted, they still had great difficulty accepting the idea of a suffering and dying Messiah, and it was common knowledge that the Jewish leaders in **Jerusalem** sought to kill Him. Therefore the disciples “were amazed, and those who followed were fearful” (Mark 10:32). They thought it not only unnecessary but foolhardy for Jesus even to think of going to Jerusalem.

The Greek word behind *amazed* is *thambeō*, which refers to great astonishment or bewilderment, and sometimes even carried the idea of immobility because of fright. It denoted complete inability to correctly comprehend and react to an idea or event. The disciples had witnessed nearly three years of Jesus’ divine, miraculous power and of hearing His authoritative teaching. They had left everything for Him and had put themselves completely into His care. Now everything seemed hopeless and pointless, and they could make no sense at all of what was happening.

The disciples were so disbelieving and confused that they had perhaps given up, emotionally if not intellectually, on the idea of an immediate inauguration of the kingdom. Yet they could not imagine what the alternative might be. Jesus was doing nothing to establish a political following and certainly was not raising up an army. If He was powerless against the Jewish establishment, He was totally insignificant as far as the Roman government was concerned. To go to Jerusalem was certain death, and “Thomas therefore, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with Him’” (John 11:16). The most positive attitude they could muster was a heroic but hopeless resignation to go and die with their Master.

Mark reports that Jesus was walking ahead of the disciples and the crowd (Mark 10:32). It was as if He were a military commander going into battle at the head of his troops, bravely putting himself in the most dangerous and vulnerable position. But Jesus had

no troops and no weapons, only a small band of confused, helpless disciples and a thrill-seeking multitude that would flee at the first sign of danger.

Yet it was the divine plan that Jesus go **to Jerusalem** in order that “all things which are written through the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished” (Luke 18:31). Going to Jerusalem was no accident, no quirk of fate. Jesus would not be caught off guard and unexpectedly trapped there by His enemies. The Lord not only knew of but foretold those events through His prophets. Now He moved resolutely toward their fulfillment. They were, indeed, the very culmination of the redemptive plan of God.

Through Moses, God had predicted that none of the Messiah’s bones would be broken (Ex. 12:46). Through the psalmists, He predicted that, on the cross, the Messiah would be pierced (22:16), that lots would be cast for His garments (22:18), that He would be given vinegar to drink (69:21), that He would cry out in pain (22:1), that He would rise from the dead (16:10), and that He would ascend into heaven (110:1). Zechariah predicted the Messiah’s entering Jerusalem on a colt (Zech. 9:9), His betrayal for 30 pieces of silver (11:12), His desertion by His friends (13:7), and His being pierced (12:10).

The whole sweep and flow of the Old Testament in its types and symbols demanded that the Messiah, the Lord’s Anointed, die for the sins of a world that could never itself atone for those sins. The death of Christ has been called the scarlet thread of Scripture, the supreme truth around which all others are woven.

When Adam and Eve sinned, they immediately became aware of their nakedness, and to provide them clothing of skins, animals had to be killed. From the beginning, guilt and shame had to be covered by sacrifice. That was the first great principle of redemption taught in Scripture. But those skins, like all the countless sacrifices thereafter, were only symbolic. They could cover man’s nakedness but not his sin.

The second great principle of redemption that God revealed is that He Himself will provide the necessary sacrifice for man. God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his only son through whom the divine promise could be fulfilled. Abraham was able to raise the

knife and be willing to plunge it into Isaac's heart because of his sure belief that God could raise his son from the dead (Heb. 11:19). When the Lord stayed Abraham's hand and provided a ram to take Isaac's place on the altar, Abraham named that place of sacrifice, "The Lord Will Provide" (Gen. 22:14).

The third great principle of redemption God revealed was that acceptable sacrifice had to be unblemished. When the death angel was about to pass over Egypt, striking dead all the first-born, God provided for the Israelites to be protected by smearing the blood of an unblemished lamb on their doorposts and lintels (Ex. 12:5-7).

During the wilderness wanderings, God revealed to Moses the fourth great principle of sacrifice: that it is the central act of acceptable worship. In the details of the intricate sacrificial system, God showed Israel that sacrifice would be inherent in every act of true worship, because it opened the way to God.

But in the requirements and rituals of the Old Testament, those principles were only pictured. No sacrifice offered by man could cover sin, provide a substitute for himself, be morally and spiritually unblemished, or become an acceptable act of worship to God. Only God Himself could present such a sacrifice, and it is that divine sacrifice to whom all the other sacrifices pointed. And when that perfect sacrifice was made, the others no longer had significance. When Jesus died on the cross, the veil of the Temple was torn in two and the validity of the sacrificial system ended. Less than forty years later, with the total destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, even the possibility of other Old Testament sacrifices ended.

The disciples knew they were going to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover with Jesus, but they did not know that Jesus was Himself God's ultimate and only true Passover Lamb. They were still thinking lion, but He was thinking Lamb. They were thinking kingdom, but He was thinking sacrifice. They were thinking glory, but He was thinking suffering and death.

The disciples did not fully understand what the Old Testament taught about the Messiah, and they did not understand what Jesus Himself repeatedly told them about Himself. Even after the resurrection He rebuked two of the disciples for their lack of comprehension of what Scripture had long before revealed. "O

foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” (Luke 24:25-26). A short while later He told the eleven and some other believers gathered with them in Jerusalem, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day” (v. 46).

Paul had to remind the Corinthian Christians of the central truth he had taught them many times before: that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Many years later, Peter reminded the believers to whom he wrote that “As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow” (1 Pet. 1:10-11).

Jesus’ suffering and death were always in God’s plan. When Jesus was only a few weeks old and was brought by His parents to the Temple to be presented to the Lord, the godly Simeon told Mary, “Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed—and a sword will pierce even your own soul” (Luke 2:34-35). John the Baptist announced Jesus’ ministry by declaring, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29), and every Jew who heard that message knew John was speaking of a sacrificed lamb. In his great vision on the Island of Patmos, the apostle John saw “a Lamb standing, as if slain,” and heard a great host of angels “saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slain’” (Rev 5:6, 12).

Jesus was going to Jerusalem because that is where He was to sacrifice Himself for the sins of the world, in perfect accordance with God’s revealed plan.

THE PREDICTIONS OF HIS SUFFERING

and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and will deliver Him to the Gentiles (20:18b-19a)

By His own divine omniscience, Jesus knew how many husbands the woman at Sychar had, although He had never met or heard of her before (John 4:16-18). He told the disciples exactly what they would find when He sent them into Jerusalem to find a colt (Matt. 21:2). He forecast the destruction of Jerusalem nearly forty years before it would occur (Matt. 24:1-2). Now Jesus omnisciently adds additional details of His suffering and death to the many prophecies of the Old Testament.

Jesus referred to Himself or was referred to by the gospel writers some eighty times as **the Son of Man**, an Old Testament title that connoted the Messiah's divinity but emphasized His incarnation and humiliation. As the divine/human **Son of Man**, Jesus declared that He would **be delivered to the chief priests and scribes**.

The Lord made no mention of the one by whom He would **be delivered**, although He knew it would be Judas. That is why some translators have chosen to render the verb as "betrayed," instead of the more literal **delivered** or "handed over."

The Jewish priesthood was composed of several ranks and levels. The Levites were the lowest level and numbered in the many thousands. They did not perform priestly functions as such but were responsible for serving the priests. The ordinary priests served in various capacities in the Tabernacle and later the Temple. By New Testament times a group had developed called **the chief priests**, who were the hereditary aristocracy of the priesthood. The highest position within that group was that of the high priest, an office handed down from father to son.

Next in importance among the Jewish religious leaders were the **scribes**, who gained their positions not by heredity but by learning. They were authorities on the Old Testament, especially the Mosaic law, as well as on the thousands of rabbinical traditions they had developed over the past several hundred years since the return from Babylon. **Scribes** were often called lawyers, rabbis, or doctors

and, as is abundantly evident from the gospels, were closely associated with the Pharisees.

The chief priests and scribes therefore respectively comprised the hereditary and the intellectual aristocracy of Judaism. That elite group of religious leaders came to vehemently hate and oppose Jesus because He threatened their hypocritical and ungodly system of power. And as the executive body of the high Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, they would soon **condemn Him to death**.

Because Rome did not allow subject nations to impose the death penalty, the Jewish religious leaders could **condemn Jesus to death** but could not execute **Him** without Roman approval. It was therefore necessary for them to **deliver Him to the** pagan Roman **Gentiles** in order to carry out their murderous scheme. And because they could not convince Pilate, the Roman governor, that Jesus' religious offenses deserved the death penalty, they resorted to blackmail. "If you release this Man," they told the governor, "you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar" (John 19:12).

THE PROPORTION AND POWER OF HIS SUFFERING

to mock and scourge and crucify Him, and on the third day He will be raised up. (20:19b)

The first phrase describes what might be called the proportion of Jesus' suffering, the degree of agony to which He was unjustly but willingly condemned.

While Jesus was being held by the Gentile Roman authorities, they proceeded to **mock and scourge Him**, as the custom was with prisoners who were not Roman citizens, even if they had not been convicted of a crime. First Pilate had Jesus scourged with leather whips in which sharp pieces of bone and metal were embedded. Then his soldiers "took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole

Roman cohort around Him. And they stripped Him, and put a scarlet robe on Him. And after weaving a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they kneeled down before Him and mocked Him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' And they spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head" (Matt. 27:26-30). Only after that painful humiliation did they take Him away **and crucify Him.**

It is significant that, when referring to Christ's sufferings before and during His crucifixion, the New Testament always uses the plural (see 2 Cor. 1:5; Phil. 3:10; Heb. 2:10; 1 Pet. 1:11; 4:13). His pain was not one dimensional, but involved sufferings of many sorts.

The physical pain of crucifixion was excruciating, which was the reason why it was Rome's preferred means of execution for enemies of the state. But by itself it was not always fatal, and there are numerous historical records of men surviving it. When they wanted death to be certain, the victim was scourged beforehand. The great loss of blood, as well as frequent exposure of internal organs, not only greatly increased suffering but assured death.

Jesus' physical sufferings cannot be minimized. He felt every sting of the reed and every cut of the lash. He felt the agony of His bruised and lacerated muscles trying to carry the heavy cross out of the city and up to Golgotha. He felt the surges of pain as the nails were driven through His hands and feet and He was hoisted to an upright position so that the entire weight of his body rested on those nails. He suffered great thirst, which was yet exceeded by the suffocating pull of His body against His lungs.

But the greatest sufferings He endured were not physical but emotional and spiritual, just as Isaiah had vividly predicted.

He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He

was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. . . . The Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth. . . . He was cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due. (Isa. 53:2-8)

As the prophet makes clear, Jesus' sufferings went much deeper than the physical. The Messiah would endure inner sufferings far more devastating than the pain in His body. He had to suffer as a sinless Man for the offenses of sinful men who despised and rejected Him. He was, indeed, stricken even by His own heavenly Father in order that He could bear the penalty that fallen man deserved but could not survive. "The Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering. . . . He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors" (Isa. 53:10, 12).

Jesus suffered the pain of disloyalty. It was one of His own disciples, one of the specially chosen Twelve, who betrayed Him to the chief priests. He could declare with the psalmist, "Even my close friend, in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me" (Ps. 41:9). One whom He had called, taught, and loved had turned against Him and delivered Him into the hands of His enemies. The anguish of betrayal must have cut deeply into Jesus' heart many times before the night when the wicked deed was actually committed. He not only was betrayed by a friend but with a kiss. There can be little human suffering more overwhelming than that caused by someone close and dear who violates the intimacy and trust of friendship even to the point of treachery.

Jesus also suffered the pain of rejection. He was turned over to the chief priests and scribes, who, in the name of all Israel, God's own chosen people, rejected His messiahship and treated Him instead as a criminal worthy of death. He was the Stone the builders rejected. The Redeemer of Israel "came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11). His disciples fled from Him,

ashamed even to be called His friends, much less His servants. He had to endure the rejection even of His own Father, who could not look upon the sin borne in the body of the Son.

Jesus suffered the pain of humiliation. He was mocked by the leaders of His own people and then mocked by the Gentiles to whom they sent Him. Those pagans humiliated Him with a mock crown, a mock scepter, a mock robe of royalty, and mock obeisance. They scorned Him, spat on His face, and nailed Him naked to a cross for the world to behold.

Jesus suffered the pain of unjust guilt. The guilt He took upon Himself and for which He suffered and died was not His own. It was for the sins of others that He paid the penalty. All the guilt of all the people who had ever lived and who would ever live was placed on Him. It was perhaps the prospect of bearing that guilt and shame that caused the sin-despising Christ to sweat great drops of blood as He prayed that last night in Gethsemane.

Jesus suffered the pain of injury. As already noted, Roman scourging was done with a whip tipped with sharp bits of bone and metal that tore deep gashes into the flesh and even into the organs and bones of the victim. The customary ordeal consisted of forty lashes, administered with such intensity that it often required a second man to finish the beating. Because of the extreme shock and profuse bleeding, victims frequently died before the full number of lashes could be applied.

Finally, Jesus suffered the pain of death itself. Physiologically, it may have been from suffocation that He died. But the most painful suffering that killed Him was the cumulative grief He had to endure as penalty for the sins of mankind. To save the lost whom He loved with infinite love, He had to become for them the sin He hated with infinite hatred. God “made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

But contrary to what both His friends and His enemies thought, Jesus’ death was not the end. The Father would never allow His “Holy One to undergo decay” (Ps. 16:10). Therefore, **on the third day** Jesus would **be raised up**, never to face suffering or death again.

He died to conquer sin and its penalty, which is death. He died that those who believe in Him would never have to die.

22

How to Be Great in the Kingdom (20:20-28)

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Him with her sons, bowing down, and making a request of Him. And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left." But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to Him, "We are able." He said to them, "My cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father." And hearing this, the ten became indignant with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to Himself, and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among

you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”
(20:20-28)

We live in a proud and egotistical generation. People push and promote themselves in ways that would have been abhorrent and totally unacceptable only a generation ago. Yet in a great part of modern culture, pride and high self-esteem have come to be redefined not only as virtues but as the supreme virtues.

Our day is reminiscent of the time in history when at the height of the ancient Greek and Roman empires pride was exalted and humility belittled. This tragic development will surely contribute to the demise of modern society as it did to the demise of Greece and Rome. No society can survive the self-destructiveness of pride run rampant, because every society depends for its preservation and success on the mutually supportive and harmonious relationships among its people. When a significant number of them become committed only to themselves and to their own interests, with little regard for their families, friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens, society disintegrates. As self becomes stronger, relationships become weaker. As self-rights become supreme, the interpersonal bonds that hold society together are severed.

The promotion of self-esteem, self-fulfillment, and self-glory has become a major industry that ranges from exercise programs to motivation for executive success. Tragically, the cult of selfism has found its way into evangelical Christianity. Books, seminars, conferences, magazines, and organizations that promote self under the guise of personal spiritual development abound. The movement has found little resistance in the church, which often seems determined to beat the world at its own fleshly game. From countless sources, claims are heard that God's great design for His people is health, prosperity, success, happiness, and self-fulfillment. The Bible's teaching of suffering and cross-bearing for Christ's sake are either ignored altogether or foolishly explained away. A weak gospel,

easy believism, and nonsacrificial Christian living are the reflections of this new “evangelical” selfism.

Whenever the church has been spiritually strong it has distrusted its own wisdom and strength and looked to the Lord’s, it has shunned its own glory and sought only His, and it has condemned pride and exalted humility. Times of spiritual awakening are inevitably characterized by a sincere sense of brokenness, contrition, and unworthiness. There is always reverential fear of the Word of God, which, working through genuine meekness, gives the church great power. Like Paul, the church becomes strong when it knows it is weak (2 Cor. 12:10).

But a great part of the western church has become self-indulgent, self-satisfied, and self-reliant, claiming numerical and financial growth as evidence of spiritual blessing. It has replaced sacrifice with success, suffering with self-satisfaction, and godly obedience with fleshly indulgence.

Yet the Bible’s testimony is clear and consistent. It was out of pride that Adam and Eve doubted God, believed Satan, and relied on their own judgment, and since that time pride has continued to be the chief characteristic of fallen, sinful mankind. The book of Proverbs warns that “a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, is sin” (Prov. 21:4), that “everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord” (16:5), and that “the fear of the Lord is to hate evil . . . pride, arrogance, and the evil way” (8:13). Insolence, arrogance, and boasting have always been marks of a depraved, reprobate mind (Rom. 1:30). Conceit is a favorite trap of Satan, even for believers, and has always been a trait of false teachers (1 Tim. 3:6; 6:4). “The boastful pride of life is not from the Father, but is from the world,” John declared (1 John 2:16).

Since the first rebellion in the Garden, God has sternly resisted the proud (James 4:6; Ps. 138:6), brought them into contempt (Isa. 23:9), abased them (Ps. 18:27), judged them (Ps. 31:23), humbled them (Dan. 4:37), scattered them (Luke 1:51), and punished them (Mal. 4:1). By the same token, God has always honored humility and meekness. “He regards the lowly” (Ps. 138:6), hears “the desire of the humble” (Ps. 10:17), and values humility even above honor (Prov. 15:33). The Lord intends humility to be part of

His children's daily clothing (Col. 3:12; 1 Pet. 5:5) and daily living (Eph. 4:1-2). He seeks to bless that one "who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at [His] word" (Isa. 66:2).

Abraham, that special servant and friend of God, humbly said, "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes" (Gen. 18:27). His son Isaac was selflessly willing to die as a sacrifice to God (Gen. 22:7-9). Isaac's son Jacob cried out to God, "I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which Thou has shown to Thy servant" (Gen. 32:10). Jacob's son Joseph, dishonored and sold into slavery by his wicked brothers, forgave them without a trace of bitterness or revenge. When they begged him for forgiveness, he lovingly told them, "'Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good. . . . So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.' So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them" (Gen. 50:19-21).

Moses, the meekest man on the earth, humbly pleaded before the Lord, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" (Ex. 3:11). After Israel's defeat at Ai because of the sin of Achan, Joshua, in humiliation in behalf of his people, "tore his clothes and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the Lord until evening" (Josh. 7:6). David, a man after God's own heart, humbly prayed, "Thine, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Thine is the dominion, O Lord, and Thou dost exalt Thyself as head over all. Both riches and honor come from Thee, and Thou dost rule over all, and in Thy hand is power and might; and it lies in Thy hand to make great, and to strengthen everyone" (1 Chron. 29:11-12).

There were also Hezekiah, king of Judah, who "humbled the pride of his heart" (2 Chron. 32:26); Manasseh, another king of Judah, who "humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers" (2 Chron. 33:12); Josiah, king of Judah, to whom the Lord said, "Because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before God, . . . I truly have heard you" (2 Chron. 34:27); Isaiah, who confessed, "I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5); and many others

who were great in God's sight because of their humility and their self-sacrifice for His sake.

The humility that accompanies true spiritual greatness is also illustrated throughout the New Testament. Although he was Jesus' first cousin and had been called to the exalted task of announcing and preparing the way for the Messiah, John the Baptist humbly said, "He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals" (Matt. 3:11). It was because of such self-effacing and genuine humility that Jesus declared, "Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist" (Matt. 11:11).

Peter's first hint of greatness was expressed in his saying to Jesus, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (Luke 5:8). And at the end of his life, when "the laying aside of [his] earthly dwelling [was] imminent," he could say of Christ with perfect sincerity, "To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity" (2 Pet. 1:14; 3:18). Paul's greatness is seen in his declaring to the Ephesian elders that he had served "the Lord with all humility" (Acts 20:19).

Each of those heroes of Scripture characterized the person who is great in God's sight, because they refused to seek personal prominence but gave all prominence to the Lord. It is only the humble heart, the servant heart, that enjoys greatness in the kingdom of God.

While they were with Jesus during His earthly ministry, the twelve disciples desperately needed to learn humility. Not only did they need it for its own sake but also to enable them to understand clearly many other things their Master taught. It was not so much limited intelligence but excessive pride that prevented them from understanding and accepting Jesus' teaching about such things as servanthood, self-sacrifice, humility, persecution, and His clear and repeated predictions about His own forthcoming sufferings and death. They were too encumbered with self-promotion, self-service, self-esteem, and self-glory for those truths to penetrate their minds or hearts. They sought the high places of power and honor for themselves, with little regard for the welfare of their fellow disciples or even for their Lord.

The disciples had, indeed, left everything to follow Jesus. They had genuinely confessed Him as the Messiah and as their Lord and Savior. But, like many Christians in every age since that time, they often focused on what they would gain, revealing that they had not completely let go of pride, selfishness, and worldly standards. No doubt the greatest hindrance to their accepting the idea of a suffering, dying Messiah was that they did not *want* to believe in such a Messiah. If Jesus were to suffer and die, they feared that they would suffer the same fate. At best, they would be disgraced outcasts rather than honored rulers. They much preferred focusing on such promises as that of their one day sitting “upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” and of their receiving back many times what they had given up for Christ (Matt. 19:28-29).

Not only had Jesus told them on at least three occasions that He would be arrested and would suffer and die, but He had also told them explicitly that they should themselves expect and be willing to endure the same things. They had heard Jesus tell a certain would-be follower, “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (Matt. 8:20). He had warned the disciples, “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. . . . But beware of men; for they will deliver you up to the courts, and scourge you in their synagogues; and you shall even be brought before governors and kings for My sake. . . . And you will be hated by all on account of My name” (10:16-18, 22). He had called for self-sacrifice when He told them, “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me” (10:37-38; cf. 16:24). He had pointed them to humility when He told them, “Unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” and that “whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (18:3-4).

But the disciples persisted in bickering among themselves, in refusing to take Jesus’ words at face value, and in continuing to exalt and promote their own selfish interests. Their primary concern was expressed in Peter’s question to Jesus, “What then will there be for us?” (19:27).

Nineteen hundred years later, many Christians are still echoing Peter's question: "What's in it for me?" Many Christians look at grace as a free lunch, a divine open door to health, prosperity, and self-fulfillment, a celestial storehouse of good things they can order on demand from God.

John Stott has observed that "A chorus of many voices is chanting in unison today that I must at all costs love myself." In his book *The Danger of Self-Love*, Paul Brownback writes along the same line, saying, "This sudden escalation of teaching on self-love . . . was the spontaneous response of those who were firmly convinced of the solid biblical basis of self-love. And . . . almost immediately the Christian public felt warmly at home with its newfound friend; self-love has been easily incorporated into the mind-set of evangelical Christians" ([Chicago: Moody, 1982], p. 13).

Also commenting on the current cult of self-love, John Piper writes,

Today the first and greatest commandment is, "Thou shalt love thyself." And the explanation for almost every interpersonal problem is thought to lie in someone's low self-esteem. Sermons, articles, and books have pushed this idea into the Christian mind. It is a rare congregation, for example, that does not stumble over the "vermicular theology" of Isaac Watts's "Alas! And Did My Saviour Bleed": "Would He devote that sacred head/For such a worm as I?" ("Is Self-Love Biblical?" *Christianity Today*, August 12, 1977, p. 6)

Referring to that last phrase from Watts's hymn, critics often accuse evangelicals of being victims of "worm theology," because they preach and teach the total depravity of man.

Embracing self-love is not a new danger in the church. It was clearly a threat to the unity, faithfulness, and purity of the Corinthian church and doubtlessly to many others of that day as well. Several hundred years later, Augustine wrote in his classic *The City of God*: "Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of

self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself. The latter in the Lord.”

About a thousand years later, John Calvin said, “For so blindly do we all rush in the direction of self-love that everyone thinks he has a good reason for exalting himself and despising all others in comparison.” He then comments that “there is no other remedy than to pluck up by the roots those most noxious pests, self-love and love of victory. This the doctrine of Scripture does. For it teaches us to remember that the endowments which God has bestowed upon us are not our own, but His free gifts, and that those who plume themselves upon them betray their ingratitude.”

Someone has wisely written,

The cross of popular evangelicalism is not the cross of the New Testament. It is, rather, a bright ornament upon the bosom of the self-assured and carnal Christian whose hands are indeed the hands of Abel, but whose voice is the voice of Cain. The old cross slew men; the new cross entertains them. The old cross condemns; the new cross assures. The old cross destroyed confidence in the flesh; the new cross encourages it. The old cross brought tears and blood; the new cross brings laughter. The flesh, smiling and confident, preaches and sings about the cross, and before that cross it bows and toward that cross it points with carefully staged histrionics, but upon that cross it will not die and the reproach of that cross it stubbornly refuses to bear.

It is to the cross of suffering and death that Jesus calls His disciples, and to the obedience and self-giving that lead to that cross. But the believer’s cross is small and his suffering insignificant compared to what his Lord’s suffering and death purchased for him. “For if we died with Him,” Paul assured Timothy, “we shall also live with Him; if we endure, we shall also reign with Him” (2 Tim. 2:11-12). To the Roman church he testified, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18). And at the end of his

life Peter had long since stopped asking, “What’s in it for me?” Instead, he confidently counselled fellow believers: “After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you” (1 Pet. 5:10).

But while Jesus ministered on earth, the Twelve were far from such self-giving, self-effacing discipleship. Consequently, Jesus’ third and most detailed prediction of His passion and death fell on deaf ears. No sooner had He again finished mentioning His death and resurrection than two of the disciples tried to secure from Him a place of honor and greatness for themselves in the anticipated kingdom. In that event and in Jesus’ response to it we can see four wrong, worldly ways by which men pursue greatness. Following that, the Lord gave an exhortation and example of what constitutes the true greatness that God honors.

HOW NOT TO BE GREAT

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Him with her sons, bowing down, and making a request of Him. And He said to her, “What do you wish?” She said to Him, “Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left.” But Jesus answered and said, “You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to Him, “We are able.” He said to them, “My cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father.” And hearing this, the ten became indignant with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to Himself, and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. (20:20-25)

It is impossible for the principles of the world to be effective in or adaptable to God's kingdom. By their very nature they are contrary to His way and destructive of His work. They not only never produce greatness but always produce disharmony, pettiness, and spiritual weakness in the Body. In this passage four of those worldly principles are clearly seen.

POLITICAL POWER PLAY

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Him with her sons, bowing down, and making a request of Him. And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left." (20:20-21)

The first worldly principle for greatness might be called political power play and is reflected in the attempt of **the mother of the sons of Zebedee** to persuade Jesus to give those two **sons**, James and John, the highest places of honor in His kingdom.

Throughout history, one of the most common tactics for getting ahead has been using the influence of family and friends to one's own advantage. These people are manipulated to gain political office, a promotion in business, a lucrative contract, or whatever else is craved. As the saying goes, "It's who you know that counts." Some years ago a pastor frankly admitted that for his denomination's annual convention he always reserved a hotel room next to the leaders in order to cultivate their friendships and thereby help secure future pastorates in larger churches.

It seems incredible that James, John, and their **mother** could ask Jesus such a crass, self-serving favor immediately after His prediction of the persecution and death He would soon face in Jerusalem. There is no indication, either in this text or in Mark's parallel account (see 10:35), that any of the disciples made a response

to what Jesus had just said about His own imminent death. They may simply have discounted His prediction as being merely figurative and symbolic, or they may have been so preoccupied with their own interests and plans that His words went by them. In any case, they did not pursue the subject. They did, however, continue to pursue their own interests.

From the Mark passage it is clear that **the mother** was speaking at the behest of her **two sons**. In fact, Mark makes no mention of her at all. The three obviously came with a common purpose and plan they had discussed among themselves beforehand. The mother probably spoke first, and then James and John spoke for themselves.

It is implied in Matthew but explicit in Mark that the first request was intentionally general and indefinite: “Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You” (Mark 10:35). Their approach was like a child trying to get a parent to promise something before saying what it is for fear that a specific request for it might be denied.

The three of them may have been trying to capitalize on their family relationship to Jesus. By comparing the gospel accounts of the women who stood vigil near the cross, it becomes evident that the mother of James and John was named Salome and was a sister of Mary, the Mother of Jesus (see Matt. 27:56; Mark 15:40; John 19:25), making her Jesus’ aunt and James and John His first cousins. In addition to relying on their relationship as Jesus’ cousins, the brothers perhaps also thought to play on Jesus’ affection for his mother by having her sister approach Him for the favor.

Bowing down was a common act of obeisance given to ancient monarchs, and the mother may have been trying to flatter Jesus by appealing to His sense of power and royalty. By treating **Him** like a king, she hoped to manipulate Him into making a gesture of magnanimity. Near Eastern kings liked to pride themselves in having the resources to grant any favor or request. It was such pride that induced Herod Antipas to swear to the daughter of Herodias, “Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom” (Mark 6:23).

The fact that James, John, and their mother made **a request of Christ** for a blank check strongly suggests that they knew the request was not legitimate. The **request** was purely self-seeking, for her as well as for them. As their mother, she could bask vicariously in their exalted positions, and her own prestige would be greatly enhanced. In marked contrast to what they would become after Pentecost, James and John were not noted for their shyness or reticence, and Jesus had nicknamed them “Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17). Their request of Jesus not only was bold but brash. In effect, they were claiming that, of all the great people of God who had ever lived, they deserved to have the two highest places of honor beside the King of heaven.

Like the scribes and Pharisees who loved “the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues” (Matt. 23:6), James and John longed for prestige and preeminence and to be exalted over the other apostles. Like the self-seeking Diotrophes (3 John 9), they loved to be first. But that is not the way to greatness in the kingdom of God.

SELF-SERVING AMBITION

But Jesus answered and said, “You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” They said to Him, “We are able.” He said to them, “My cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father.” And hearing this, the ten became indignant with the two brothers. (20:22-24)

These verses reflect a second wrong way to spiritual greatness, that of self-serving ambition. The request of James, John, and their mother not only was brash but foolish. Bypassing the mother, Jesus **answered** the two brothers directly **and said**, “**You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup**

that I am about to drink?” The three had no idea of the full implications of their request.

The cup that Jesus was about to drink was the cup of suffering and death, which He had just finished describing to them (vv. 18-19). Jesus was saying, “Don’t you realize by now that the way to eternal glory is not through worldly success and honor but through suffering? Haven’t you heard what I’ve been teaching about the persecuted being blessed and about taking up your own crosses and following Me?”

The apostle Paul learned that the way to great glory is through great affliction for Christ’s sake. Although he suffered extreme hardship, persecution, and suffering, he considered those things to be insignificant compared to what awaited him in heaven. He told the self-serving, pleasure-loving Corinthians, “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17). It is those who are persecuted “on account of Me” who Jesus said will have great reward in heaven (Matt. 5:11-12).

Suffering from physical afflictions such as disease, deformity, and accident or from the emotional distresses of a lost job or the death of a loved one can be used by the Lord to strengthen believers spiritually. He can help them grow even through problems and hardships they bring on themselves because of foolishness or sin. But the affliction that brings eternal glory is that which is brought about and is willingly endured because of faithfulness to the Lord. It is suffering because of the gospel, being “persecuted for the sake of righteousness” (Matt. 5:10). The one who has the greatest glory beside Christ in heaven will be the one who has faithfully endured the greatest suffering for Him on earth.

To drink the cup meant to drink the full measure, leaving nothing. It was a common expression that meant to stay with something to the end, to endure to the limits, whatever the cost. **The cup** that Jesus was **about to drink** was immeasurably worse than the physical agony of the cross or the emotional anguish of being forsaken by His friends, painful as those were. The full measure of His **cup** was taking the world’s sin upon Himself, an agony so

horrible that He prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt” (Matt. 26:39).

Either because they completely misunderstood what Jesus meant or because, like Peter promising never to forsake Christ, they self-confidently thought they could endure anything required of them, James and John foolishly declared, “**We are able.**” And just as Peter denied the Lord three times before the cock crowed, those two brothers, along with all the other disciples, fled for their lives when Jesus was arrested (Matt. 26:56).

No doubt with great tenderness and compassion, the Lord then assured the brothers, “**My cup you shall drink.**” But it would not be in their own power but in the power of the Holy Spirit that they would suffer greatly for their Master’s sake. James was the first apostle to be martyred (Acts 12:2), and John ended his long life as a condemned exile on the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9). They did indeed share in the “fellowship of His sufferings” (Phil. 3:10).

Nevertheless, He continued, “**to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give.**” Not only were James and John presumptuous in asking **to sit on Jesus’ right and . . . left**, but it was not, in any case, His prerogative to grant such a request. Rather, Jesus said, “**It is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father.**” It would not be on the basis of favoritism or ambition that those honors would be bestowed, but on the basis of the Father’s sovereign choice. Personal ambition is not a factor in the eternal, sovereign plan of God. It is therefore not only sinful but a foolish and useless waste of effort.

The response of **the ten** other disciples seems righteous on the surface. But they **became indignant with the two brothers** not because of their own righteousness but because of their envious resentment. They had in the past expressed the same proud and selfish sentiments, and they would express those sentiments again. On the way from Caesarea Philippi to Capernaum “they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest” but were ashamed to admit it to Jesus (Mark 9:33-34). Even at the Last Supper “there arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest” (Luke 22:24). They were all guilty of the

same self-serving ambition that had just been demonstrated by **the two brothers**.

DOMINANT DICTATORSHIP

But Jesus called them to Himself, and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, (20:25a)

The other ten disciples had been standing near **Jesus** and overheard what He had been discussing with James, John, and their mother. Now the Lord **called them to Himself** and reminded them of another wrong way of achieving spiritual greatness besides the two they had just demonstrated. It could be called the way of the dominant dictator. *Katakurieuō* (**lord it over**) is a strong term carrying the idea of ruling *down* on people, the prepositional prefix *kata* intensifying the verb.

“The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over their subjects,” Jesus said. Virtually every government of that day was a form of dictatorship, often of a tyrannical sort. The world seeks greatness through power, epitomized by despotic **rulers of the Gentiles** such as the pharaohs, Antiochus Epiphanes, the caesars, the Herods, and Pilate—under all of whom the Jews had suffered greatly.

One of the reasons many countries in the third world today are susceptible to the deceitful attractions of Communism is that they have lived so long under oppressive dictatorship. Centuries of abuse by vain, cruel, exploitive rulers has made them ripe for revolution.

Though not in as absolute or destructive form as those, the same philosophy of dominance is found in modern businesses and even in some Christian organizations. Many people in high positions cannot resist the temptation to use their power to **lord it over** those under them. Some are radical egomaniacs, whereas others are respectable and orthodox. But they share a common worldly desire to

control others. Peter therefore warned Christian leaders against “lording it over those allotted to [their] charge” (1 Pet. 5:3).

CHARISMATIC CONTROL

and their great men exercise authority over them. (20:25b)

A fourth wrong way to achieve spiritual greatness is that of charismatic, manipulative control. The expression **great men** (*megaloi*) carries the idea of distinguished, eminent, illustrious, or noble. It represents those who have high personal appeal and have achieved high stature in the eyes of the world and who seek to control others by personal influence. They can be seen as different in style from those in verse 25a. Whereas the dominant dictator uses the sheer power of his position and is often hated, the charismatic leader uses the powers of popularity and personality. By flattery, charm, and attractiveness, he manipulates others to serve his own ends.

Exercise authority over also translates a strong and intensified Greek verb, combining *kata* (down) and *exousiazō* (to have authority), and could be rendered “to play the tyrant.”

The church has never been without self-seeking leaders who capture the fascination of the people who willingly follow them while they make merchandise of the gospel in order to feather their nests and build up their reputations. By telling people what they like to hear (2 Tim. 4:3), they skillfully take advantage of selfish, gullible believers.

HOW TO BE GREAT

It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first

among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many:” (20:26-28)

This simple, clear passage is one of the most beautiful in the gospels. The principle it teaches needs little explanation, but it is in great need of emulation by those who call Jesus Lord.

First Jesus presents the precept and then the pattern.

THE PRECEPT OF TRUE GREATNESS

It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; (20:26-27)

Jesus turned the world’s greatness upside down. The self-serving, self-promoting, self-glorying ways of the world are the antithesis of spiritual greatness. They have no place in God’s kingdom and are **not** to be **so among you**, Jesus told the Twelve. In many different ways He had taught them what He told Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36).

The world’s way of greatness is like a pyramid. The prestige and power of the great person is built on the many subordinate persons beneath him. But in the kingdom, the pyramid is inverted. As the great commentator R. C. H. Lenski has observed, God’s “great men are not sitting on top of lesser men, but bearing lesser men on their backs.”

Unfortunately, however, there are still many people in the church who, like James and John, continually seek recognition, prestige, and power by manipulating and controlling others to their own selfish advantage. A tragic number of Christian leaders and celebrities have gained great followings by appealing to people’s emotions and worldly appetites. But that **is not** to be **so among** Christ’s disciples today any more than among the Twelve.

Jesus went on to explain that it is not wrong to desire great usefulness to God, only wrong to seek the world's kind of greatness. Paul assures us that "it is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do" (1 Tim. 3:1). As the apostle goes on to point out (vv. 2-7), the standards for an overseer in Christ's church are high. But the man who is willing to meet those standards for the Lord's sake and in the Lord's power will have the Lord's blessing.

Therefore, Jesus said, "**Whoever wishes to become great among you**, that is, great by God's standards rather than men's, **shall be your servant.**" He was not, as some have suggested, contradicting what He had just taught. He was speaking of an entirely different kind of greatness than the sort James and John were seeking and that the world promotes. This kind of greatness is pleasing to God, because it is humble and self-giving rather than proud and self-serving. The way to the world's greatness is through pleasing and being served by men; the way to God's greatness is through pleasing Him and serving others in His name. In God's eyes, the one who is great is the one who is a willing **servant**.

It is not only not wrong but very much right to seek eternal glory, because that glory is God-given. Paul declared, "Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority" (1 Thess. 2:6). But he also declared to those same believers in Thessalonica that "it was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 2:14). The way to that divine and eternal glory, which comes from God, is the way of renouncing the worldly and temporal glory that comes from men. The way to God's glory is the way of the **servant**. Man's focus must be on rendering spiritual service with consummate excellence and leaving the success of that service to the Lord.

Jesus was speaking of being a true servant, not a sham. He did not have in mind the "public servant" who uses his office for personal gain and power. Godly greatness comes from genuine humility. Only God knows a person's heart, and Paul assures us that the Lord "will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the

motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God" (1 Cor. 4:5).

Servant is from *diakonos*, from which the term *deacon* is derived. The original Greek word was purely secular, referring to a person who did menial labor, such as house cleaning or serving tables. It was not necessarily a term of dishonor but simply described the lowest level of hired help, who needed little training or skill.

But Christ elevated *diakonos* to a place of great significance, using it to describe His most faithful and favored disciples. He could have chosen any number of more noble words to characterize obedient discipleship, but He chose this one because it best reflects the selfless, humble life that He honors. It is also the life that He Himself exemplified, as He would go on to say (v. 28).

The surest mark of the true **servant** is willing sacrifice for the sake of others in the name of Christ. The sham servant avoids suffering, while the true servant accepts it.

Paul had the pure, genuine heart of a servant. He readily acknowledged his apostleship and the divine authority that came with that unique, high office. But he even more readily acknowledged that his office and authority belonged to God and were only entrusted to him as a steward (1 Cor. 4:1). To the proud, self-centered, factious, and worldly Corinthians he said, "What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one" (1 Cor. 3:5). Later in that letter he says sarcastically,

You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us. . . . For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to

conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now” (4:8-13)

In his book *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, William Law writes,

Let every day be a day of humility; condescend to all the weaknesses and infirmities of your fellow-creatures, cover their frailties, love their excellencies, encourage their virtues, relieve their wants, rejoice in their prosperities, compassionate their distress, receive their friendship, overlook their unkindness, forgive their malice, be a servant of servants, and condescend to do the lowliest offices of the lowest of mankind.

Another great saint of past years, Samuel Brengle, wrote,

If I appear great in their eyes, the Lord is most graciously helping me to see how absolutely nothing I am without Him, and helping me to keep little in my own eyes. He does use me. But I am so concerned that He uses me and that it is not of me the work is done. The axe cannot boast of the trees it has cut down. It could do nothing but for the woodsman. He made it, he sharpened it, and he used it. The moment he throws it aside, it becomes only old iron. O That I may never lose sight of this. (Quoted in Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* [Chicago: Moody, 1967], p. 58.)

Jesus reiterated and intensified His description of God’s way to greatness: **“Whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave.”** The position and work of a **slave** were much lower and demeaning even than those of a servant. A servant was to some degree his own person. He often owned little more than the clothes on his back, but he was free to go where he wanted and to work or not work as he pleased. But a **slave** (*doulos*) did not belong to himself but

to his master and could go only where the master wanted him to go and do only what the master wanted him to do. He did not belong to himself but was the personal property of someone else.

In several of his letters Paul identified himself as Christ's slave (*doulos*) even before identifying himself as His apostle. He greeted the Romans with the words, "Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle" (Rom. 1:1; cf. Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1). That is why he could say, "If we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's" (Rom. 14:8). Slaves were the property of their owners and could therefore be bought and sold. Like such a **slave**, Christians "have been bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:20; cf. 7:23) and are the property of the Lord who bought them with His own precious blood (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

Paul greatly desired to be exalted and to receive glory, but the exaltation and glory he sought were God's and he sought them in God's way, through the suffering of servanthood and the bondage of slavery. It was said of one leader in the early church that "He belonged to that class of early martyrs whose passionate soul made an early holocaust of the physical man."

In one of her most beautiful poems Amy Carmichael wrote,

Hast thou no scar?
No hidden scar on foot, or side, or hand?
I hear thee sung as mighty in the land,
I hear them hail thy bright ascendant star;
Hast thou no scar?

Hast thou no wound?
Yet, I was wounded by the archers, spent.
Leaned me against the tree to die, and rent
By ravening beasts that compassed me, I
swooned:
Hast thou no wound?

No wound? No scar?

Yes, as the master shall the servant be,
And pierced are the feet that follow Me;
But thine are whole. Can he have followed far
Who has no wound? No scar?

The cost of true greatness is humble, selfless, sacrificial service. The Christian who desires to be **great** and **first** in the kingdom is the one who is willing to serve in the hard place, the uncomfortable place, the lonely place, the demanding place, the place where he is not appreciated and may even be persecuted. Knowing that time is short and eternity long, he is willing to spend and be spent. He is willing to work for excellence without becoming proud, to withstand criticism without becoming bitter, to be misjudged without becoming defensive, and to withstand suffering without succumbing to self-pity.

When faithful believers have done everything they can for the Lord to the limit of their abilities and energy, they say to Him, “We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done” (Luke 17:10). It is to such disciples that the Lord will say in return, “Well done, good and faithful slave; . . . enter into the joy of your master” (Matt. 25:21).

William Barclay has succinctly commented, “The world may assess a man’s greatness by the number of people whom he controls and who are at his beck and call; or by his intellectual standing and his academic eminence; or by the number of committees of which he is a member; or by the size of his bank balance and the material possessions which he has amassed; but in the assessment of Jesus Christ these things are irrelevant.”

THE PATTERN FOR TRUE GREATNESS

just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (20:28)

The emphasis of this verse is in the words **just as the Son of Man**. What Jesus says about Himself should also characterize His followers. “I am your perfect Pattern,” He was saying, “your supreme Example. My attitude should be Your attitude, and My kind of living should be your kind of living. If you want to be great as God wants you to be great, be like Me.”

To discover what it means to become a godly servant and slave, the disciples had only to look at **the Son of Man** Himself. Many years after John presumptuously asked to be seated at Jesus’ side in the kingdom, the now humble apostle wrote, “The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked” (1 John 2:6). As once his life had centered in himself and his great desire had been to lord it over others, now it was centered in Jesus Christ and was abandoned to the selfless service of others in His name. He no longer sought to manipulate Jesus but only to emulate Him.

In His incarnate role as **the Son of Man**, Jesus **did not come to be served, but to serve**. “Although He existed in the form of God, [He] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name” (Phil. 2:6-9).

Jesus is the supreme example of humility and servanthood, because, as the sovereign of the universe and of all eternity, He subjected Himself to humiliation and even to death. He is the most exalted because He faithfully endured the most humiliation. Although He was the King of kings and had the right **to be served** by others, He ministered as a Servant of servants and gave His life **to serve** others.

During the Last Supper, after the disciples had again been arguing about which of them was the greatest, Jesus asked, “Who is greater, the one who reclines at the table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves” (Luke 22:27). It was probably at this time that Jesus gave them the beautiful object lesson of servanthood recorded by John.

[Jesus] laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself about. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. . . . And so when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments, and reclined at the table again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master; neither is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." (John 13:4-5, 12-17)

Jesus' ultimate act of servanthood, however, was **to give His life**. "Greater love has no one than this," He said, "that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Some years ago, Joe Delaney, a star football player for the Kansas City Chiefs, saw three young boys out in a lake, crying out for help and struggling to stay above the water. Although he was himself a poor swimmer, Joe dived into the water and tried to save them. One of the boys was rescued, but Joe and the other two boys drowned. He willingly laid down his life in an effort to save those boys, making the ultimate sacrifice in their behalf.

Although such heroes are lauded, the world understands little of that kind of selflessness, which runs counter to man's natural inclination to self-preservation. But self-giving is to be the normal pattern for Christians, just as it was the normal pattern for Christ.

In His next statement, Jesus presents the first explicit New Testament teaching about the redemptive work of the Messiah. He would vicariously suffer for the sins of mankind as **a ransom** for those who trust in Him. He did not simply **give His life** an example for others. He was no mere martyr for a godly cause, as some claim. Nor was He merely an example of life-giving selflessness, although He was indeed the supreme example of that. Jesus not only lived and died for others but died as **a ransom** for others.

In that redemptive aspect, of course, His followers cannot follow His example. Nothing that a believer can do will have any direct spiritual benefit for himself or others. If he could not merit his own salvation, he surely cannot merit the salvation of someone else.

Lutron (**ransom**) was the term commonly used for the redemption price of a slave, the amount required to buy his freedom. It is used only twice in the New Testament (see also Mark 10:45), both times in reference to Christ's giving of Himself to redeem others. Here it is followed by the preposition *anti* ("instead of"), expressing an exchange. In 1 Timothy 2:6, the word used for "ransom" is *antilutron*, which simply combines the two words used here. In both cases the idea is that of a price paid for a life.

The unbeliever is a slave to sin, the flesh, Satan, and death, and it was to redeem men from those slaveries that Jesus gave **His life a ransom** in exchange for sinners. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," Paul explained to believers in Rome. "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. 8:1-3). "Having been freed from sin," the apostle had told them earlier, "you became slaves of righteousness" (6:18). Christ's sacrifice bought us back from the slavery of sin.

And although the noun *lutron* is used only twice in the New Testament, other forms of the root word are used frequently, as are numerous synonyms. "For you have been bought with a price," Paul reminded the worldly Corinthian believers; "therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:20). To the Galatians he wrote, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13; cf. 4:5); to the Ephesians he wrote, "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace" (Eph. 1:7; cf. v. 14; 4:30); and to Titus he wrote, "[Christ] gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:14). Peter reminds believers that they "were not redeemed with perishable things like

silver or gold, . . . but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). In John’s magnificent vision on Patmos he heard the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders proclaim of Christ, “Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9).

Jesus’ **ransom** was paid to God to satisfy His holy justice, and it was more than sufficient to cover the sins of everyone who has ever lived and ever will live. His death was sufficient for “the whole world,” says John (1 John 2:2). It is not the Lord’s will “for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). And because He “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4), He has therefore provided atonement for every person. “For this is the will of My Father,” Jesus said, “that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:40).

Although His **ransom** is sufficient for every person, it is valid only for those who believe in Him. It is in that sense that His redemption is **for many**, rather than for all. The Lord was not teaching limited atonement, the idea that He died only for the sins of a select few. Paul makes it clear that Christ died for the whole world: “The man Christ Jesus . . . gave Himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim. 2:5-6).

The basic idea behind *anti* (**for**) is that of being set over against something else, and the word was often used to denote an exchange or substitution. In becoming **a ransom for many**, Jesus exchanged His life for the lives of the **many** who would believe in Him. It became His death for the deaths of those **many**, His undeserved punishment for the punishment they deserved. As Isaiah had predicted 700 years earlier, “Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; . . . He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed” (Isa. 53:4-5).

Christ, then, is the pattern for all to follow in being servant leaders. By giving His life He gained the eternal glory and esteem of

God and men. That is the path to greatness.

23

The Blind Who Saw

(20:29-34)

And as they were going out from Jericho, a great multitude followed Him. And behold, two blind men sitting by the road, hearing that Jesus was passing by, cried out, saying, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” And the multitude sternly told them to be quiet; but they cried out all the more, saying, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” And Jesus stopped and called them, and said, “What do you want Me to do for you?” They said to Him, “Lord, we want our eyes to be opened.” And moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed Him. (20:29-34)

Jesus was now on His way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover with His disciples. Infinitely more important than that, however, He was going there to suffer and die (20:18-19). He would be celebrating the Passover for the last time and then giving Himself

as the one, final, perfect Passover Lamb, sacrificed for the sins of the whole world (Heb. 7:27).

His arrest, trial, and crucifixion were but a few weeks away. Why, we may wonder, did He take time to minister to two blind beggars? In light of the disciples' slowness to learn and believe, why did He not spend the last few days alone with them, drilling into them what He so much wanted them to understand?

The reason was His compassion (v. 34). When better could Jesus have demonstrated the depth and breadth of divine compassion than while He was on the way to His crucifixion? The Twelve would one day look back on the healing in Jericho and on all His other acts of mercy and realize that their Lord was never too preoccupied to be compassionate, never in too much of a hurry to heal the afflicted, never in too much agony Himself to be insensitive to the agony of others. That realization itself would be one of the most important lessons they would learn from their Master. In these few verses is found one of the most beautiful portrayals of the loving, compassionate heart of God.

THEIR PERSISTENT PLEA

And as they were going out from Jericho, a great multitude followed Him. And behold, two blind men sitting by the road, hearing that Jesus was passing by, cried out, saying, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" And the multitude sternly told them to be quiet; but they cried out all the more, saying, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" (20:29-31)

As Jesus and the disciples **were going out from Jericho, a great multitude followed Him.** The Lord had finished His ministry in Galilee, ministered on the east side of the Jordan in Perea, and had now recrossed the Jordan back into Judah, just above the Dead Sea near **Jericho.**

The city of **Jericho** was a jewel in the barren wilderness that surrounded the Dead Sea, an oasis of fresh water, beautiful trees, and productive crops of figs, citrus, and other fruit. Among other things, it was known as the city of the palms. Herod built a fort and winter palace there, and Josephus reports that, when there was snow in Jerusalem, only fifteen miles away, Jericho was warm and pleasant.

Jericho doubtlessly brought many memories to Jesus' mind. It was there that Rahab the harlot lived, a very special woman in Israel's history and in Jesus' own ancestry. Though a prostitute and a pagan Gentile, she trusted in the God of Israel and, with her family, was spared when the Lord destroyed the ancient city. Along with Ruth, another Gentile, Rahab is one of only two women named in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:5). And it was in the wilderness hills to the west of **Jericho**, clearly visible from the city, that Jesus was tempted for forty days by Satan.

Whereas Matthew's account has Jesus **going out from Jericho**, Mark reports that He was coming "to Jericho" (10:46) and Luke that "He was approaching Jericho" (18:35). The difficulty can be explained by the idea that Matthew was referring to the old Jericho, some of the ruins of which are still evident today, and that the other two writers were referring to the contemporary city. In that case, Jesus would have been moving out of the ruins of the old city and into the new. Or it may have been that Jesus had gone through the city to the outskirts and was now leaving. When He responded to the cries of the two blind men whom He had passed, He may have turned and gone back toward the city. After that He decided to go into the city again, where He later encountered Zaccheus (Luke 19:1-2). In any case, **a great multitude followed Him** now, as they often did.

Behold was used to call special attention to something or someone, in this case **two blind men** who ordinarily would have gone unnoticed. Blind people were extremely common in the Near East, especially in the cities. Because none of them could work and few had families who could or would support them, the majority of blind people were beggars, as were these two (see Mark 10:46). Like most other beggars, they congregated outside the city gates to take advantage of travelers, who were more likely to be carrying money than the average person on the street.

A special balsam bush grew in Jericho from which a medicine was made to treat blindness. Consequently, that city had an unusually large number of blind people who came there in hope of a cure. The two blind men who cried out to Jesus were but two among perhaps hundreds in the vicinity.

Blindness was common in ancient times, as it still is today in underdeveloped areas of the world. Many people were blinded by such things as accidents or battle wounds. But many others became blind shortly after birth from gonorrheal infection of the eyes, contracted from the mother during birth. Many women carried the bacterium, although most of them were not affected by it themselves. Other infants were blinded by trachoma, a virulent form of conjunctivitis. Although it usually took several days or weeks for such diseases to cause total blindness, for all practical purposes infected babies were blind from birth. Birth eye infection is still a great danger, even in modern societies, and doctors therefore routinely place antiseptic drops in the eyes of newborns.

Mark and Luke mention only one man, whom Mark identifies as “Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus,” and who apparently was spokesman for the two of them (see Mark 10:46; Luke 18:35). Mark touches a distinctly human chord by naming this man and even his father. Although Bartimaeus was doubtlessly unknown while he was a blind beggar, it is possible that he later became highly respected in the early church and well known to Mark and those to whom he wrote. Mark would have been saying to his readers, in effect, “And do you know who one of those blind men was? Bartimaeus, our dear friend and brother in Christ!”

Hearing that Jesus was passing by, Bartimaeus and his friend cried out, saying, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!” *Krazā*, from which **cried out** is taken, is an onomatopoeic word that was used for any sort of screaming or anguished shout. It was used of the rantings of insane people and of a woman’s cries at childbirth. It was used of the Canaanite woman near Tyre and Sidon who cried out for Jesus to heal her daughter (Matt. 15:22), of the crowd’s shouting for Jesus’ crucifixion (Mark 15:13-14), and even of Jesus’ crying out from the cross (Matt. 27:50).

These two blind men were absolutely desperate, realizing that the last possible hope of their seeing would soon depart. They could hardly have known of Jesus' impending crucifixion, but they seemed to sense that they would never encounter Him again and that this was their last chance. They were therefore shouting at the top of their voices, not caring who else heard them as long as Jesus did.

The amazing thing about these two men was not their physical blindness, which was common in their day, but their spiritual sight, which is uncommon in any day. Physically they could see nothing, but spiritually they saw a great deal.

In itself, their addressing Jesus as **Lord** does not indicate that they considered Him to be the Messiah. **Lord** was a common term of honor used to address not only dignitaries but anyone due special respect. But their asking Him for **mercy**, and most certainly their calling Him by the messianic title **Son of David**, clearly shows their recognition of who He was. In announcing Jesus' birth to Mary, the angel declared that her Son would be given "the throne of His father David" (Luke 1:32). When a few days after this incident in Jericho Jesus came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, He was greeted by the crowds shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest!" (Matt. 21:9). It was common knowledge among all Jews that "the Scripture said that the Christ [Messiah] comes from the offspring of David" (John 7:42).

But the blind men's knowledge of Christ and their great determination were tempered by humility. In asking for healing they acknowledged their unworthiness of help and threw themselves entirely on Jesus' **mercy**. Their actions were necessarily loud and obtrusive, because that was the only way they could have been heard over the din of the multitude. But their hearts were right, because despite their great need, they knew they deserved nothing from the Son of David and that only His grace could help them. One cannot be dogmatic about the extent of their faith at this point, but they clearly recognized Jesus' messiahship and His supernatural power to heal.

When a person steps out to God on all the faith he has, even if it is incomplete and weak, the Lord will meet him at that point and lead him to redemption. As He declared through Jeremiah, "You will

seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13). Speaking of the two blind men of Jericho, Alfred Edersheim beautifully observed that “the faith of the blind rose to the full height of divine possibility.”

Resenting the intrusion of the two men, **the multitude sternly told them to be quiet.** The world, and many Christians, can often be callous and cruel. Everyone in the **multitude** was doubtlessly better off physically, economically, and socially than the two blind men, but they thought only of their own selfish concerns, in light of which these needy men were but an annoyance.

But as F. F. Bruce has expressed it, the two blind men “refused to be bludgeoned into silence by the indifferent crowd,” and **they cried out all the more, saying again, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!”**

THEIR SUPERNATURAL PRIVILEGE

And Jesus stopped and called them, and said, “What do you want Me to do for you?” They said to Him, “Lord, we want our eyes to be opened.” And moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and immediately they regained their sight and followed Him. (20:32-34)

Jesus doubtlessly heard them the first time, but for His own reasons He waited until they cried out again before responding. He **stopped and called them, and said, “What do you want Me to do for you?”** Mark says that Jesus had first sent someone else to tell them, saying, “Take courage, arise! He is calling for you.” Bartimaeus was so elated at hearing those words that he cast “aside his cloak, . . . jumped up, and came to Jesus” (Mark 10:49-50). He apparently was so certain of being healed that he figured he could come back later and find his cloak by himself.

The men answered Jesus, **“Lord, we want our eyes to be opened.”** After years of blindness their one compelling desire was to see. **And moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes; and**

immediately they regained their sight. As the Creator of the universe reached out to those men, He suspended the natural laws which He Himself had made. **Moved with infinite divine compassion,** the Son of Man, who was also the Son of God, bestowed the mercy on the physical needs for which they pleaded.

The fact that Matthew says **they regained their sight**, using the same verb Bartimaeus had used in his request (Mark 10:51), suggests that these men had once been able to see. If so, they were more keenly aware of what they were missing than if they never had sight.

Jesus used many different ways to perform His healing miracles. Sometimes the afflicted person was asked to do something himself. Sometimes the Lord simply spoke a word, and sometimes He performed some action, such as putting His fingers in deaf ears or making salve from mud and anointing blind eyes. In this case **Jesus touched their eyes.** His miracles were always complete, and usually, as here, they were instantaneous, defying natural explanation.

It is significant that among the many self-acclaimed faith healers of history, including those in our own day, there is a marked absence of restoring sight and raising the dead. Many other afflictions can be faked or can be given temporary improvement by the power of suggestion working in a desperate mind. But where are the miracles of vision given to the blind? Where is the person whose eyes are permanently damaged or completely missing who has regained his sight by the laying on of a healer's hands? And where is the person who was dead and has been restored to life?

Even more common and tragic than physical blindness is the spiritual blindness the two men must have felt as they encountered the Son of God. And the context strongly suggests that they also sought deliverance from that kind of blindness.

Jesus was born into a world of people who, with few exceptions, were totally blind spiritually. He "was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him" (John 1:9-11; cf. 8:12). Men were spiritually blind then, and are spiritually blind today, because they do not *want* to see God's

truth. As Jesus explained to Nicodemus, “This is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed” (John 3:19-20).

“The lamp of the body is the eye,” Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount; “if therefore your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (Matt. 6:22-23). To man’s natural spiritual blindness, Satan adds his own. “The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving,” Paul declares, “that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). And to that double blindness, God may add still more. When men persistently refuse to hear His Word and believe in Him, God may choose to judicially reinforce their willing hardness of heart. To Isaiah, the Lord gave the unenviable task of telling his fellow Israelites, “Keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand.” He was, in fact, told to “render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, lest they see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed” (Isa. 6:9-10).

The minds of unbelieving Jews were blinded to the full meaning of God’s Word because “their minds were hardened; for until this very day,” Paul said, “at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ” (2 Cor. 3:14; cf. Rom. 11:25). The epitome of the spiritually blind were the hypocritical, unbelieving scribes and Pharisees, the leading religionists of Israel whom Jesus called “blind guides” (Matt. 23:16, 24).

Further evidence of the former blind men’s desire for spiritual as well as physical sight is the fact that, after Jesus restored their sight, they **followed Him**. It is true that many, and probably most, of the multitude who were following Him (v. 29) were not true disciples. But the fact that Luke says Bartimaeus, and presumably his friend, not only followed Jesus but were “glorifying God” (18:43) gives good

reason to believe the men were restored spiritually as well as physically.

In addition to that, Mark reports that Jesus said to them, “Go your way; your faith has made you well” (Mark 10:52). “Made . . . well” is from *sōzō*, which referred to any kind of rescue or deliverance, including deliverance from physical affliction or peril (see Matt. 8:25; Mark 13:20; Luke 23:35). But it is also the most common New Testament term for salvation, the deliverance from sin through Christ, and that would seem to be its meaning in Jesus’ final words to these men.

Faith was not a requirement for Jesus’ healings. He healed many people at the request of someone else, as in the case of the centurion who pleaded for the healing of his paralyzed servant (Matt. 8:5-13). The infants He healed and those He raised from the dead obviously were not able to exercise any sort of faith. Whereas the New Testament tells of countless people who were healed without faith, it reports none who were saved without faith, because it is only by God’s grace working through faith that a person can be saved (Eph. 2:8). It therefore seems that inherent in Jesus’ declaration “your faith has made you well” was His assurance of the men’s salvation. He spoke exactly the same words to the single leper who glorified God for his healing and came back to give Jesus thanks (Luke 17:12-19). All ten lepers had been healed physically, but only this man was “made . . . well” because of his faith, strongly suggesting that, whereas his cleansing (v. 14) was physical, his being made well (v. 19) was spiritual.

Three features of Jesus’ healing of physical afflictions become clear in this story. First, this powerful, dramatic demonstration of God’s compassion for men was a proof of Jesus’ messiahship. Second, it was a preview of the millennial kingdom, when there will be a thousand-year age of freedom from sickness, disease, and other physical affliction. Third, His healings were symbolic. His healing of blindness was a picture of His immeasurably more wonderful healing of spiritual blindness. What He did for blind eyes was a vivid portrayal of what He desires to do for blind souls.

24

The Humble

Coronation of Christ

(21:1-11)

And when they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them, and bring them to Me. And if anyone says something to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and immediately he will send them.” Now this took place that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, “Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold your King is coming to you, gentle, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’” And the disciples went and did just as Jesus had directed them, and brought the donkey and the colt, and laid on them their garments, on which He sat. And most of the multitude spread their garments in the road, and others were cutting

branches from the trees, and spreading them in the road. And the multitudes going before Him, and those who followed after were crying out, saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; hosanna in the highest!” And when He had entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, “Who is this?” And the multitudes were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.” (21:1-11)

Most people today have little first-hand knowledge of a genuine monarchy. Those who hold the title of king or queen in modern societies are often rulers in name only, having little if any governmental power or responsibility. An elaborate coronation is often the only notice they will ever have of any consequence. But until modern times the coronation of a monarch involved the display of great splendor and pageantry. The king would be dressed in the most expensive robes and jewels and would be driven through his capital city in an ornate carriage drawn by stately horses. Accompanying him would be his courtiers and foreign dignitaries, and following that would be a large retinue of the nation’s finest soldiers. In many countries high-ranking religious leaders would also participate.

At the climax of the events, the king would be presented with a scepter or would stand on a sacred stone or participate in some other ritual signifying the transfer of power and authority into his hands. Musicians would play and sing, and the crowds would break into spontaneous choruses of praise to their sovereign. Every part of the ceremony was designed to highlight the majesty, glory, power, and dignity of the king.

At her coronation in 1838, Queen Victoria of England wore a crown encrusted with giant rubies and sapphires surrounding a 309-carat diamond. Her scepter was capped with an even larger diamond, cut from the Star of Africa and weighing 516 1/2 carats.

Matthew 21:1-11 portrays the most significant coronation the world has yet seen, but it was a coronation in marked contrast to the kind just described. It was a true coronation of a true King. He was affirmed as King and was, in a sense, inaugurated into His kingship.

But there was no pomp, no splendor, and a nondescript sort of pageantry.

Traditionally, this coronation has been called Jesus' triumphal entry. It was his last major public appearance before His crucifixion and was an extremely important event in His divine ministry on earth, an event that is frequently dramatized but seldom studied carefully or understood for its true significance.

THE END OF THE PILGRIMAGE

And when they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, (21:1a)

After healing the two blind men in Jericho and leading Zaccheus to Himself, the Lord made His final journey to **Jerusalem**. As He **approached Jerusalem**, He also approached the end of His three years of ministry, which had been preceded by thirty years of obscurity. He was about to reach the final goal set before Him by His heavenly Father. As the multitudes followed along with Him to celebrate the Passover, little did they know they were accompanying the Passover Lamb Himself.

During a census taken about ten years after this time, the number of sacrificial lambs slaughtered at the Passover was determined to be some 260,000. Because one lamb was allowed to be offered for up to ten people, the worshipers in Jerusalem that week could have numbered over 2,000,000. It is not likely that the number then would have been much higher than during this last Passover that Jesus celebrated, indicating that the city was teeming with people.

But before He and the Twelve entered Jerusalem they stopped at the little hamlet of **Bethphage**. Except for its being closely associated with **the Mount of Olives** and Bethany (see Mark 11:1; Luke 19:29), nothing else is known of the town, there being no other biblical, historical, or archaeological evidence of its existence.

John tells us that Jesus visited Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany “six days before the Passover” (John 12:1-3), making it probably Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath. As He faced the coming week of pain and death, He sought out the comfort and companionship of those three beloved friends.

But even in that brief time of respite, the stabs of hell continued to afflict Him. While Mary anointed His feet with costly perfume and wiped them with her hair, the traitor Judas, who was also a thief, made a hypocritical objection to that beautiful act by feigning concern for the poor. No doubt with deep anguish of heart for Judas’s hardened unbelief, Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Let her alone, in order that she may keep it for the day of My burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have Me” (John 12:3-8).

Probably on the next day, which would have been the first day of the week, or Sunday, a great number of Jews came to Bethany to see Jesus and also to “see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead” (John 12:9). And because Lazarus was a living testimony of Jesus’ supernatural power, and therefore a dramatic witness against their rejection of Jesus’ messiahship and a threat to their authority, “the chief priests took counsel that they might put Lazarus to death also” (v. 10).

It was therefore probably on Monday, the next day after the crowd visited Him in Bethany (John 12:12), that Jesus came to Bethphage and prepared to enter Jerusalem through the East Gate of the city. According to this chronology, the triumphal entry was on Monday rather than “Palm Sunday,” as Christian tradition has long maintained.

This chronology also eliminates the problem of what is often referred to as “silent Wednesday,” so called because the gospel accounts would have no record of Jesus’ activities on Wednesday if the triumphal entry had been on Sunday. In what was by far the most momentous week of Jesus’ ministry, such a gap is difficult to explain.

Additional support for a Monday triumphal entry is found in the Mosaic requirement that sacrificial lambs for Passover were to be selected on the tenth day of the first month (originally called Abib but after the Exile called Nisan) and kept in the household until sacrificed on the fourteenth (Ex. 12:2-6).

In the year Jesus was crucified (whether taken as A.D. 30 or 33), the tenth of Nisan was the Monday of Passover week. If Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphally on Monday, He was received into the hearts of the Jewish people as a nation much as a family received the sacrificial lamb into the home. In so doing our Lord would have fulfilled the Passover symbolism even in that small detail, being received by His people on the tenth of Nisan. Continuing that perfect fulfillment, He was then crucified on Friday the fourteenth of Nisan, as the true Passover Lamb sacrificed for the sins of the world.

THE EXACTNESS OF PROPHECY

then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them, and bring them to Me. And if anyone says something to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and immediately he will send them.” Now this took place that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, “Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold your King is coming to you, gentle, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’” And the disciples went and did just as Jesus had directed them, and brought the donkey and the colt, and laid on them their garments, on which He sat. (21:1b-7)

From this text and many others it is clear that Jesus was always in control of the events that affected His life. He initiated His own coronation when He **sent two disciples** to procure the mount on which He would ride into Jerusalem. He thereby set into motion a series of climactic events that culminated in the voluntary, gracious sacrifice of Himself on the cross that had been divinely planned from eternity past. From beginning to end the gospels completely belie the contention of many liberal interpreters that Jesus was carried away by the enthusiasm of the mob and became caught up in a tragic web of religious and political intrigue that caught Him by surprise. He was

not a well-meaning moral teacher who went too far in rankling the Jewish leaders and was helplessly swept away to an untimely execution.

The **two disciples** were told to **go into the village opposite** them, where they would **immediately . . . find a donkey tied . . . and a colt with her**. Although the **village** was nearby, the two animals obviously were out of sight, or Jesus would simply have pointed to them. The mother **donkey** was brought along no doubt in order to induce her offspring to cooperate. The young **colt** would not easily have left its mother and would have been even more difficult to handle than donkeys normally are.

Only in His omniscience could Jesus have known that the **donkey** and her **colt** would at that moment have been where they were, waiting to be found by the two disciples. Jesus also knew the disciples would be questioned about taking the animals. He therefore further instructed them, **“If anyone says something to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and immediately he will send them.”**

Mark reports that “some of the bystanders,” who Luke says were the owners, did indeed ask, “‘What are you doing, untying the colt?’ And they spoke to them just as Jesus had told them, and they gave them permission” (Mark 11:5-6; Luke 19:33). Because the owners readily gave permission for use of the animals when told **the Lord had need of them**, it seems likely they were believers in Jesus. We also learn from those other two gospels that the colt had never been ridden (Mark 11:2; Luke 19:30). It was a gesture of respect and honor to offer such an animal to someone, as if to say, “This animal has been reserved especially for you.”

Now this took place that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, Matthew explains. Jesus’ entire life and ministry were marked by two overriding purposes, to do His heavenly Father’s will (Matt. 26:39, 42; John 4:34; 5:30) and to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah’s first coming (Matt. 5:17; Luke 13:33; 24:25-27; Acts 3:21).

The daughter of Zion refers to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, which was sometimes referred to as **Zion**, because Mount Zion is the

city's highest and most prominent hill. The prophecy quoted in verse 5 is from **the prophet** Zechariah, who 500 years earlier had predicted that the people of Jerusalem would hail the Messiah as their **King** as He was **coming** into the city and that He would be **gentle**, or humble, **and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden** (see Zech. 9:9).

It seems incongruous and totally inappropriate that any king, much less the **King** of kings, should make His triumphal entry **mounted on a donkey** rather than a beautiful white stallion or in a regal chariot. But that is what God's prophet predicted and that is what God's Son did, because that was the divine plan. He was not at that time intended to come in earthly splendor or to reign in earthly power. He did not come in wealth but in poverty; He did not come in grandeur but in meekness; and He did not come to slay Israel's enemies but to save all mankind. The incarnation was the time of His humiliation, not the time of His glorification.

Because He was a **King** like no other king, His coronation was like no other coronation. By the standards and purposes of the earth's kings, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was anything but triumphant; but by the standards and purposes of God, it was exactly as it was meant to be. Jesus' entry **on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden** was not a put down by His rejecters. It was the sovereign choice of God the Father and of God the Son, who Himself willingly came to earth as the Servant Savior, to take upon Himself the sin of the world. Nothing could have been more appropriate than that the Bearer of the world's sin burden would enter God's holy city of **Zion** riding on a lowly **beast of burden**.

Although Matthew was speaking specifically of Zechariah's prophecy concerning Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, it is significant that the triumphal entry also fulfilled another prophecy. Through Daniel, the Lord predicted that the time from Artaxerxes's decree ordering the rebuilding of the Temple until the coming of the Messiah would be "seven weeks and sixty-two weeks" (Dan. 9:25; cf. Neh. 2:6), that is, 69 weeks total. The literal translation is "seven sevens and sixty-two sevens," seven being a common designation for a week. In the context of the passage, the idea is 69 weeks of years, or 69 times 7 years, which comes to 483. Two different systems of reckoning have

endeavored to determine the chronology of the 483 years after Artaxerxes's decree. They are Sir Robert Anderson's *The Coming Prince* and Harold Hoehner's *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*.

None of the **disciples**, including the two sent for the donkey, understood the Lord's purpose in this or in the other great events of the coming week. "These things His disciples did not understand at the first," John said; "but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written of Him, and that they had done these things to Him" (John 12:16). But the two obediently **went and did just as Jesus had directed them, and brought the donkey and the colt**. Because they had no blankets to pad the animals' backs and were not sure which one He would ride, they **laid on both of them their garments, on which He sat**. Jesus chose **the colt**, the smallest and lowliest of the two, and mounted it with the help of the disciples (Luke 19:35).

THE EPITOME OF PRAISE

And most of the multitude spread their garments in the road, and others were cutting branches from the trees, and spreading them in the road. And the multitudes going before Him, and those who followed after were crying out, saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; hosanna in the highest!" (21:8-9)

As Jesus began to ride into the city on Monday, **most of the multitude spread their garments in the road**. It was an ancient custom (see 2 Kings 9:13) for citizens to throw **their garments in the road** for their monarch to ride over, symbolizing their respect for him and their submission to his authority. It was as if to say, "We place ourselves at your feet, even to walk over if necessary."

While those people were putting their clothes in Jesus' path, **others were cutting branches from the trees, and spreading them**

in the road. From John 12:13 we learn that the **branches** were from palm **trees**, symbolic of salvation and joy and picturing the magnificent tribute that the “great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues” one day will present “before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches . . . in their hands” (Rev 7:9). There was great excitement and ecstasy as the multitude proclaimed praise to the Messiah, to the Rabbi from Galilee who taught with such authority and who had healed their diseases and even raised the dead.

The Lord was now completely surrounded by a mass of humanity, perhaps several hundred thousand people, some of whom were **going before Him and some who followed after Him**. Fickle as they would prove to be, the people now disregarded the warning of “the chief priests and Pharisees [who] had given orders that if anyone knew where [Jesus] was, he should report it, that they might seize Him” (John 11:57). The expectations that the Messiah would bring deliverance were so great that the crowd became totally caught up in what, from a human perspective, was a frenzy of mob hysteria. Yet completely in accord with God’s plan, they unwittingly fulfilled prophecy, just as Caiaphas unwittingly fulfilled prophecy when, a few days earlier, he had arrogantly declared to fellow members of the Sanhedrin: “You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.” As John went on to explain, Caiaphas did not say that “on his own initiative; but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation” (John 11:49-51).

Seemingly with one voice, the whole multitude was **crying out, saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest!”** The Hebrew word hosanna is an exclamatory pleas meaning “save now.” But the crowd on that day was not interested in Jesus’ saving their souls but only in His saving their nation. Like the Twelve, they had long wondered why, if Jesus were truly the Messiah, He had not used His supernatural powers against the Romans. Now at last, they thought, He will manifest Himself as Conqueror. They were about to celebrate Passover, which commemorated the Lord’s miraculous

deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage. What better occasion could there be for the Lord's Anointed, the Messiah, to make the ultimate and final deliverance of His people from tyranny?

The people wanted a conquering, reigning Messiah who would come in great military power to throw off the brutal yoke of Rome and establish a kingdom of justice and righteousness where God's chosen people would have special favor. But Jesus did not come to conquer Rome but to conquer sin and death. He did not come to make war with Rome but to make peace with God for men.

Although the shouts of the multitude were entirely appropriate and were, in fact, fulfillment of prophecy, the people had no idea of the true significance of what they were doing, much less of what Jesus would soon do on the cross in their behalf. They neither understood the Lord nor themselves. He intentionally did not enter Jerusalem with a powerful retinue of soldiers who would fight for Him to the death. He entered instead with a ragtag multitude of ordinary people, most of whom despite their loud proclamation of His greatness, would soon turn against Him, and none of whom would stand by Him

The multitude acknowledged Jesus as **the Son of David**, which was the most common messianic title. They were crying out for Messiah's deliverance, pleading, in effect, "Save us now, great Messiah! Save us now!" They were quoting from a popular praise psalm from the Hallel (Psalms 113-118), in particular Psalm 118, which was also a psalm of deliverance, sometimes called the conqueror's psalm. Almost two centuries earlier, the Jews had hailed Simon Maccabees with the same psalm after he delivered the Acra from Syrian domination.

The multitudes knew who Jesus was, but they did not understand or truly believe what they knew. They were right in their belief that He was the Messiah, **the Son of David**, and that He had come **in the name of the Lord**. But they were wrong in their belief about the sort of Deliverer He was. They knew He was a king, but they did not understand the nature of His kingship or His kingdom. They did not realize any more than Pilate that the kingdom He came then to bring was not of this world (John 18:36). That is why, when it dawned on them a few days later that Jesus had not come to deliver

them from the Romans, they turned against Him. When they clamored before Pilate for the release of Barabbas instead of Jesus (John 18:40), they shouted, in effect, the words Jesus had predicted in the parable of the nobleman: “We do not want this man to reign over us” (Luke 19:14).

The people wanted Jesus on their own terms, and they would not bow to a King who was not of their liking, even though He were the Son of God. They wanted Jesus to destroy Rome but not their cherished sins or their hypocritical, superficial religion. But He would not deliver them on their terms, and they would not be delivered on His. He was not a Messiah who came to offer a panacea of external peace in the world but to offer the infinitely greater blessing of internal peace with God.

Many people today are open to a Jesus who they think will give them wealth, health, success, happiness, and the other worldly things they want. Like the multitude at the triumphal entry, they will loudly acclaim Jesus as long as they believe He will satisfy their selfish desires. But like the same multitude a few days later, they will reject and denounce Him when He does not deliver as expected. When His Word confronts them with their sin and their need of a Savior, they curse Him and turn away.

The Romans were godless and cruel oppressors, and the Lord would not allow them to survive indefinitely. But they were not His people’s greatest enemy. Their greatest enemy was sin, and from that they refused to be delivered. God would allow the holy Temple of His chosen people to be destroyed long before He allowed their pagan oppressors to be destroyed. He would, in fact, allow those very pagans to destroy the holy Temple.

On the day after His triumphal entry into Jerusalem Jesus “entered the temple and cast out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves. And He said to them, It is written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer;” but you are making it a robbers’ den” (Matt. 21:12-13). That cleansing of the Temple was purely symbolic and had little lasting effect. The mercenary moneychangers and sacrifice sellers were doubtlessly back in business the next day. But less than forty years later, in A.D. 70,

the Romans would utterly destroy the Temple, after which, just as Jesus foretold, not one stone of it was left upon another that was not torn down (Matt. 24:2). Not until modern times, nearly two thousand years later, could even its ruins be identified.

As far as the true intent of the people was concerned, Jesus' coronation was a hollow, empty pretense. The words of the multitude were right, but their hearts were not. In any case, He had not come at that time to be crowned but to be crucified.

He will be crowned one day in a way that is perfectly befitting. The times of rejection will be over, and at His name "every knee [will] bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and . . . every tongue [will] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:10-11). The first time He came, He came to provide men's salvation. But when He comes again, He will come to display His sovereignty. His great and ultimate coronation is described by John:

And when He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, having each one a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And Thou hast made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth." And I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, "To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever." And the four living creatures kept saying, "Amen." And the elders fell down and worshiped. (Rev.5::8-14)

THE ELEMENT OF PERPLEXITY

And when He had entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, “Who is this?” And the multitudes were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.” (21:10-11)

Matthew’s account of Jesus’ entry closes with an element of perplexity. After the great shouts of acclamation had somewhat subsided and Jesus **had entered Jerusalem**, the residents of the city began asking, **“Who is this?”** The best response the multitude of celebrants could give was, **“This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.”** Obviously most of them had paid little attention to what they had been shouting so vociferously. They had barely finished proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of David, who came in the name of the Lord. But they did not comprehend what they said, and when the mass emotions subsided, they were hard put to say who **Jesus** really was, other than a **prophet** who came **from Nazareth in Galilee**. They no longer called Him the Son of David or praised Him as the great Deliverer. He was now no more than a **prophet**.

The people knew but they would not believe, and because they would not believe they ceased to know. Like their forefathers to whom Isaiah preached, they heard but did not perceive and saw but did not understand, because their hearts were insensitive (Isa.6:9-10). They heard Jesus’ message, they attested to His miracles, and they even acknowledged His divinity, but they rejected His saviorhood and His lordship. They were totally earthbound, materialistic, and self-satisfied. They were interested only in the kingdoms of this world, not the kingdom of heaven. They would have accepted Jesus as an earthly king, but they would not have Him as their heavenly King.

25
Purging the
Perverted Temple
(21:12-17)

And Jesus entered the temple and cast out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves. And He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a robbers’ den.” And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were crying out in the temple and saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became indignant, and said to Him, “Do You hear what these are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babes Thou hast prepared praise for Thyself?’” And He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and lodged there. (21:12-17)

The triumphal entry on Monday had begun outside Jerusalem's East Gate, where a multitude followed Jesus into the city and another large group came out of the city to meet Him and then led the way before Him, spreading clothes and palm branches in the road as they went (vv. 8-9; cf. John 12:12-13). "He entered Jerusalem and came into the temple," Mark tells us; "and after looking all around, He departed for Bethany with the twelve, since it was already late" (Mark 11:11). On Tuesday morning, after spending Monday night in Bethany, He went back into Jerusalem.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, at Passover time the city of Jerusalem swelled to perhaps four or five times its normal size because of the Jewish pilgrims who came from all over the known world to celebrate this great feast. Tradition had long dictated that Passover could be celebrated properly only in Jerusalem. But because the city could not accommodate the increased multitudes that came for that occasion, the religious leaders declared a special edict each year that temporarily extended the city boundaries to include a sizable area outside the walls, including several small villages such as Bethphage and Bethany. Like many other visitors, Jesus and His disciples spent the day within the walled city proper but spent the night in a nearby community. Those who could not find rental lodging and who had no friends living in the area often camped in the open air.

While they were in Jerusalem, many Jews went to the Temple to pray, to offer sacrifices, to perform rites of ritual cleaning and purification, and to present offerings in the large trumpet-shaped receptacles located in the Court of the Women.

But as Jesus came into the Temple on this Monday of Passover week, He came for a unique purpose: to give further demonstration of His messianic credentials. To the thousands of celebrants, to the religious leaders, and most specifically to the chief priests and scribes (see Matt. 20:18; 21:15), He again offered clear testimony to the nature of His kingliness and of His kingdom.

From the first dramatic demonstrations of His miracle-working power, the crowds had wanted to take Him by force and make Him king (John 6:15). Their intent, of course, was for Him to be a king of their own liking who would fulfill their aspirations of

deliverance from the yoke of Rome. But the Lord consistently refused to be that kind of king and perform that kind of deliverance. His coronation processional into Jerusalem the day before was marked by simplicity rather than pomp and by humility rather than splendor. He was not accompanied by influential dignitaries and a powerful army but by unarmed, powerless nobodies. And as He had predicted (20:18-19) and would soon demonstrate, He had come not to reign but to die, not to be crowned but to be crucified, and not for the purpose of delivering Israel from the power of Rome but of delivering men from all nations from the power of sin.

But Jesus now gave a demonstration of kingliness that was in marked contrast to His humble inauguration the previous day.

HE SHOWED HE WAS ON A DIVINE MISSION

And Jesus entered the temple (21:12a)

Some ancient manuscripts of Matthew contain the words “of God” after the temple, and that reading would seem to be authentic. As R. C. H. Lenski has commented, “The temple of God is never used in the New Testament as a phrase anywhere but here, so it seems unlikely that some scribe would put it in. But if you understand what Jesus is about to do, it makes all the sense in the world that [Matthew] would have affirmed that this was the temple of God when he is about to describe the utter ungodliness of its activities.” Still, the phrase “of God” adds nothing to the basic teaching of the passage, because **the temple** in Jerusalem obviously belonged to the God of the Jews. But those two words do serve to sharpen the focus and intensify the emphasis, by highlighting the fact that Jesus was dealing with the holy earthly symbol of the presence of His heavenly Father.

If Jesus had been the military Messiah the people wanted, He would have brought an army into Jerusalem and attacked the main Roman garrison at Fort Antonius. Instead, alone and weaponless, He attacked a group of His fellow countrymen who were profaning **the**

temple. The supreme issue for Jesus was not Rome's army but God's Temple. The Messiah did not come as a military, economic, political, or social savior from injustice and oppression but as a spiritual Savior from sin and death. At His second coming He will indeed make right the injustices and inequities that plague mankind. But before He comes again as King of kings and Lord of lords to establish His glorious millennial kingdom and to resolve all the conflicts of fallen mankind, He first had to come as Savior to establish His spiritual kingdom within those who trust in Him.

Jesus began His ministry at a Passover just as He now ended it at a Passover. Just as at the present time, "He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the moneychangers seated." And just as He was about to do again, He had done before, when He "drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the moneychangers, and overturned their tables; and to those who were selling the doves He said, 'Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a house of merchandise'" (John 2:14-16).

During the hidden years of His adolescence and young adulthood, and certainly during His ministry, Jesus had seen much social injustice, much economic inequity, much deprivation and poverty, and much oppression and cruelty by the Romans. But His mission never focused on those things, because they are not man's greatest problems. It was the far more severe problem of sin that Jesus had come to conquer. Men's problem with God is infinitely greater than their problems with other men. They cannot, in fact, solve their problems with each other until their problem with Him is solved through faith and obedience.

It was in the Temple erected in His own name and by the people He had chosen for Himself that the Lord was most offended and denied. It was therefore in His own house that cleansing began. As long as things were wrong with Israel's worship, things could not be right in the nation. Worship is always the focal point. The great problem with society is not injustice, inequity, crime, or even immorality—pervasive and destructive as those evils might be. Society's evil of evils has always been its abandonment of God. And it is as true today as it was in ancient Israel that the people of God

must themselves be revived and renewed before they can be His instruments for changing the world around them.

Jesus had cleansed the Temple three years earlier, yet it was now probably more profane and corrupted than ever. Why, then, would He again bother to make this seemingly futile gesture? He knew that His act of cleansing would be temporary and would not change the hearts of the religious leaders. But He was compelled to make that clear testimony to God's holiness and to God's judgment against desecration and false religion.

God had repeatedly sent prophets to warn His people of their idolatry and other sins and to call them back to Himself. Sometimes there would be reform, but the reform almost invariably would degenerate into even worse idolatry than before. Yet He sent His prophets again and again to declare His truth, His holiness, and His judgment. The Lord never stops declaring His will to His people, no matter how often or how wickedly they reject it. Revealed truth that does not result in repentance becomes the source of greater condemnation.

As Jesus entered **the temple**, it was doubtlessly filled with thousands of Jewish worshipers, milling about the outer Court of the Gentiles, where everyone was allowed to enter. Perhaps the Jewish leaders reasoned that if Gentiles could be there so could anything else. Within the past several decades the area had come to be used as a religious marketplace, operated under the auspices of the high priest, Annas. He was a corrupt and vile man, who saw the Temple and his exalted position only as means to personal power and wealth. The business enterprises in the Court of the Gentiles came to be known as the "Bazaar of Annas," whose chief priests and other associates oversaw the Temple franchises. Merchants would buy rights to a concession for selling sacrificial animals, wine, oil, or salt, or for exchanging money into the proper currency and denominations used in Temple offerings. In addition to the franchise fees the operators would often be required to pay a certain percentage of their profits to Annas.

According to levitical law, any animal approved by the priests could be offered in the Temple. But the chief priests made certain that animals not bought in one of their franchises would be judged

unacceptable, giving their concessionaires the de facto right to provide all the animals. According to the Jewish-Christian historian Alfred Edersheim, a person would often have to pay as much as ten times what an animal normally cost. As if that extortion were not enough, those who needed to have foreign currency exchanged or who had to have their money converted into the exact amount for an offering were charged a twenty-five percent fee. Jesus was therefore speaking quite literally when He called the Temple marketplace “a robbers’ den” (v. 13).

When He was compelled to cleanse His Father’s house of sacrilege, Christ demonstrated He was on a divine mission for His heavenly Father.

HE DEMONSTRATED DIVINE AUTHORITY

and cast out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves. (21:12b)

The temple was the supreme place of Jewish worship, and the high priest and chief priests were therefore the most powerful religious leaders in Israel. Within the confines of the Temple, the guards of the high priest had extraordinary power. Because Jewish law required death for any non-Jew who went further into the Temple than the Court of the Gentiles, the Romans had given approval for the Temple guards to slay an offender on the spot.

Yet Jesus confronted the high priest, the chief priests, the Temple guards, and the Temple merchants with impunity. They were about to meet someone over whom they had absolutely no power. Although many of those men would later be instrumental in Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion, they were able to exert that power only by the Father’s allowance. Like Pilate, they had no authority over Jesus that had not “been given . . . from above” (John 19:11). As Jesus had declared to the unbelieving Pharisees on an earlier occasion

in Jerusalem, He alone had power over His life. “For this reason the Father loves Me,” He said, “because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again” (John 10:17-18).

In a few days Jesus would submit Himself into the hands of the Jewish religious leaders for them to do with as they pleased. But on this occasion they were powerless to prevent Him from making a final demonstration of His divine authority. Without warning and without resistance, Jesus **cast out** both the merchants and their customers **and overturned the tables of the moneychangers**. Before the thousands of worshipers, the bewildered merchants, and the priests who happened to be present, Jesus made a shambles of the bazaar and declared the shame of those who profited from it. The whole arena was in confusion and disarray, with animals running loose, **doves** flying around, and money of all kinds rolling across the courtyard. But at that time the merchants, **moneychangers**, and priests did not and could not raise a hand or even a voice against Him, anymore than the lions could bite the prophet Daniel.

There were also human reasons why Jesus was not resisted. The priests and other religious leaders were fearful of the Jewish populace, many of whom had just proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah (see Luke 19:48). The merchants were also afraid of the people, whom they had cheated and extorted for so many years. Historical records reveal that several decades later the people did indeed riot against their mercenary Temple exploiters. But those reasons fall short of fully explaining what happened to those who were desecrating the Temple. They were not merely intimidated but were powerless and speechless before the authority of this Galilean Teacher whom they despised and refused to recognize as the Messiah.

Mark reports that Jesus was in such powerful control that He would not even “permit anyone to carry goods through the temple” (Mark 11:16). Because the Temple was near the East Gate, the Court of the Gentiles was often used as a thoroughfare by those travelling to or from the southwest side of the city. Jesus also put an immediate halt to that contempt for the sanctity of God’s house. The implication seems to be that He made the people drop what they were carrying

and leave empty-handed. Here, too, we see no hint of resistance or opposition. Jesus' commanding presence was such that it instilled fear and submission in every person there, regardless of what they thought of Him or of what He was doing.

Jesus came to earth in humiliation as the incarnate Son of God, but on this occasion, as on several others, He forcefully manifested divine hatred against sin, especially sin that profanes God's name and sullies His holiness. By this mighty unresistable display of power He made the Temple symbolically clean. With the great clutter of animals, tables, chairs, money, and frightened people, it was far from tidy; but it was for a brief time cleansed of overt moral defilement.

It was in part out of Martin Luther's great hatred of indulgences, the supposed buying of God's grace for money, that the Protestant Reformation was born. Believers today should cry out as Luther did for Christ to cleanse the church of its many modern defilements, including making merchandise of the gospel. Judgment still must "begin with the household of God" (1 Pet. 4:17).

HE REVEALED COMMITMENT TO DIVINE SCRIPTURE

And He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are making it a robbers' den." (21:13)

As He often did, Jesus vindicated what He was doing by appealing to the Old Testament, here quoting from Isaiah 56:7, "**My house shall be called a house of prayer.**" Following the full Isaiah text, Mark's quotation includes the phrase "for all the nations" (Mark 11:17). Matthew omits those words probably because he was writing primarily to Jews. But the major point in both in both accounts is that Jesus' cleansing of the Temple was consistent with the Word of God.

The Temple was to be a place of worship, quiet meditation, contemplation, praise, and devotion, a place where God's people could draw close to Him in worship, sacrifice, and offerings and

could seek His will and blessing. It was not meant to be a combination marketplace, stockyard, and bank, where hucksters and charlatans carried on their greedy enterprises under the guise of serving and worshiping the Lord.

At the dedication of the Temple of his day, Solomon prayed, “O Lord my God, . . . listen to the cry and to the prayer which Thy servant prays before Thee today; that Thine eyes may be open toward this house night and day, toward the place of which Thou hast said, ‘My name shall be there,’ to listen to the prayer which Thy servant shall pray toward this place. And listen to the supplication of Thy servant and of Thy people Israel, when they pray toward this place; hear Thou in heaven Thy dwelling place; hear and forgive” (1 Kings 8:28-30).

It was to the Tabernacle, which preceded the Temple as Israel’s central place of worship, that Hannah went when she was grieving bitterly over her childlessness. In that holy place the Lord graciously granted her request for a son, whose name was Samuel and who became one of God’s choice servants (1 Sam. 1:9-20). David declared, “One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to meditate in His temple” (Ps. 27:4).

In charging that the chief priests and their cohorts had made the Temple into **a robbers’ den**, Jesus again quoted from Scripture, this time from Jeremiah 7:11. Instead of being a place where God’s faithful people could come and worship unmolested and protected, the Temple had become a place where they were extorted and their extortioners were protected. Those religiously-connected thieves found refuge in the Temple as highwaymen found refuge in **a robbers’ den**. But unlike normal thieves, their robbery was public, and they stole and took refuge in the same place. The sanctuary of God had become a sanctuary for robbers.

HE MANIFESTED DIVINE COMPASSION AND POWER

And the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. (21:14)

Fearful of Jesus, and unable to resist Him, the priests, merchants, moneychangers, sacrifice-buyers, and travelers using the Court of the Gentiles as a short cut through the city apparently had all dispersed. But **the blind and the lame**, though surely awed by Jesus, were not afraid of Him. Even immediately after His dramatic display of divine indignation, those needy souls correctly sensed that the Lord's fury was in no way directed at them. Just as the wicked and unrepentant can expect God's anger, those who humbly seek for His truth and His help can expect His compassion.

The diseased and the crippled, most of whom were necessarily beggars, continually gathered at the Temple, hoping at the least for the gift of a few denarii and at the most for a miracle of healing. They were despised and ignored by most of their countrymen, in great part because they were considered to be suffering as the direct result of sins either they or their parents had committed (see John 9:2). The selfish leaders of the Temple had little compassion for them (see Matt. 23:4).

Had it not been for the countless thousands of sick, diseased, blind, deaf, and other suffering people in Palestine, both Jesus' great compassion and His great power of healing would be unknown to us. Compared with the length of eternity, all earthly afflictions are temporary. But in this life they are very real and very trying, and the Lord does not minimize them. It was to alleviate suffering as well as to demonstrate His divine power and authority that Jesus compassionately healed those who came to Him and never turned them away or chided them.

Jesus' compassion was a supreme credential of His divine kingship, not only because of the power it demonstrated but because of the gracious love it demonstrated that is so characteristic of God but so uncharacteristic of fallen man. When John the Baptist was in prison and had doubts about Jesus' messiahship, Jesus told John's disciples, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind

receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matt. 11:4-5).

Believers know that Jesus Christ some day is going to come to this world in devastating judgment, that all judgment has been given to Him by the Father, and that He alone holds the keys to death and hell. They know He controls the destiny of every soul, and that He has the sovereign and just right to send unbelieving men and women to hell forever. But, like **the blind and the lame** who came to Jesus in the Temple, Christians come to the Lord with awe but also with perfect confidence, knowing that He will not turn them away or condemn them. They know He loves His children and will never do them harm but always do them good, even when they experience that good through His hand of discipline (Heb. 12:6).

Jesus’ majestic display of divine compassion was accompanied by a mighty expression of divine power. No sooner had the blind and the lame approached Him for help than **He healed them**. Only God can restore sight to eyes totally destroyed by disease, as many blind eyes were in that day. And only God can replace limbs that are shattered or diseased beyond repair or are even missing.

HE ACCEPTED DIVINE WORSHIP AND HUMAN REJECTION

But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were crying out in the temple and saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became indignant, and said to Him, “Do You hear what these are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babes Thou hast prepared praise for Thyself’?” And He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and lodged there. (21:15-17)

Along with everyone else present on that occasion, the ungodly **chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that Jesus had done**. They heard **the children who were crying out in the temple saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David,”** just as their parents had done the day before (v. 9). They well knew that **Son of David** was a messianic title and that the Messiah would perform such miracles and wonders as Jesus had been performing. But their reaction was far different from that of the **children** and adults who praised and glorified Jesus.

Children is literally “boys” and probably refers to the many young teenaged boys who had passed their bar mitzvahs and had come to Jerusalem to celebrate their first Passover as a man, just as Jesus Himself had done many years earlier (Luke 2:41-42).

But instead of joining in the worship of the Messiah, the Temple leaders **became indignant**. The term behind **indignant** carries the idea of fury and wrath. To those men, Jesus’ healing of the blind and lame, though incontestably amazing, was repugnant. The Pharisees had charged Jesus with casting out demons by the power of “Beelzebub the ruler of the demons” (Matt. 12:24). **The chief priests and the scribes** now perhaps thought the same thing about His healing. Not only did He oppose them as the rulers of the Temple, but in their eyes He actually worked against God by arbitrarily healing those they thought were being divinely punished for their sins.

Like the Pharisees, **the chief priests and the scribes** felt so self-righteously superior to the common man, especially to the afflicted and poor who were thought to deserve their fate, that witnessing no amount of suffering could elicit compassion in them. And they were so adamant in their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah that no amount of evidence could elicit belief in them.

Instead of recognizing their authority, Jesus condemned their self-righteousness. Instead of praising their holiness, He condemned their hypocrisy. Instead of acknowledging their religious works as pleasing to God, He condemned them as offensive to God and worthless. Consequently, those men refused to recognize Jesus even as a legitimate rabbi, much less as the promised Son of David. What was perfectly clear to most of the common Jewish people in

Jerusalem was perfect nonsense to the erudite and self-satisfied Temple elite.

They therefore **said to Him, “Do You hear what these are saying?”** They said, in effect, “Don’t You realize that these children, like the rabble yesterday, are calling You the Messiah? Why don’t You stop them? How can You stand there accepting acclaim that belongs only to God? How can You tolerate such blasphemy?” The true problem, of course, was that they could not tolerate Jesus’ compassionate godliness, because it was a scathing indictment of their hardened ungodliness.

Letting His accusers know that He was not oblivious to what was going on, Jesus first replied simply **Yes**. He was fully aware of what was being said, and He was fully aware of its meaning and significance. “But,” He went on to ask the learned men, **“have you never read, ‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babes Thou hast prepared praise for Thyself’?”** As he did on numerous occasions, Jesus nettled the Jewish leaders by quoting the Old Testament against them, the accepted experts in Scripture.

Jesus was quoting from Psalm 8:2, and the two Hebrew words for infants and **nursing babes** refer to children under three years, the age at which Jewish children were normally weaned. As already noted, the children who hailed Jesus in the Temple were far past the age for weaning. Jesus’ point was that if even tiny **infants and nursing babes** would be prepared by the Lord to give **praise** to Himself, how much more could older children be expected to praise Him? Christ *will* be praised, and if men will not praise Him, He had declared to the Pharisees, “The stones will cry out” (Luke 19:40).

Even Jesus’ rejection by the chief priests and scribes and His willing acceptance of that rejection demonstrated His divine kingship. God knew that wicked mankind would reject His Son, and it was integral to the divine plan that the Messiah would be “despised and forsaken of men” (Isa. 53:3). At any time Christ could have thwarted the evil men who sought to kill Him. When He was being arrested in the Garden a few nights later, He explained to Peter, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matt. 26:53).

In the simple but haunting words **He left them** there is a volume of truth. Jesus left the unbelieving priests and scribes because they would not come to Him. They challenged Him again the next day, asking, “By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?” He responded by asking them, “The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?” And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, If we say, “From heaven,” He will say to us, “Then why did you not believe him?” But if we say, “From men,” we fear the multitude; for they all hold John to be a prophet.’ And answering Jesus, they said, ‘We do not know.’ He also said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things’” (Matt. 21:23-27).

Instead of attacking Rome, Jesus attacked Judaism. Instead of being a conqueror, He was a confronter. Instead of promoting revolution, He preached righteousness. And instead of clearing out the enemy without, He cleaned out the enemy within.

This was not the kind of Messiah Judaism was looking for then or is looking for today. The majority of Jews, religious or irreligious, have no interest in the Son of righteousness. Those who look for a Messiah at all are looking for the same kind their forefathers looked for in Jesus’ day. They are still looking for a military, political, and economic savior who will change the world in their behalf but who will not change them.

Jesus will not remain where He is unwanted. Although every man is accountable to God, He forces Himself on no one. And although salvation is first of all by God’s sovereign initiative and power, no person is saved unwillingly. Because the unbelieving chief priests and scribes would not receive Him, **He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and lodged there**, to be with His dear friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and the other faithful disciples who trusted in and loved Him.

26
The Way of the Fig
Tree
(21:18-22)

Now in the morning, when He returned to the city, He became hungry. And seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it, and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, “No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you.” And at once the fig tree withered. And seeing this, the disciples marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree wither at once?” And Jesus answered and said to them, “Truly I say to you, if you have faith, and do not doubt, you shall not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it shall happen. And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive.” (21:18-22)

On Monday morning of Passover week Jesus rode into the city on a donkey colt to a Messiah's welcome and was acclaimed the Son of David, as the people shouted hosannas and placed clothes and palm branches on the road before Him (Matt. 21:1-11). On Tuesday He came into the city again and cleansed the Temple of the sacrifice merchants and moneychangers (vv. 12-17). Now, on Wednesday, He entered Jerusalem for the third time since coming up from Jericho.

From Mark we learn that the encounter with the fig tree involved two successive days. Jesus cursed the fig tree on the morning He entered Jerusalem to cleanse the Temple, and it was on the following day, Wednesday, that the disciples noticed that the tree was "withered from the roots up" (Mark 11:14, 20). Matthew condenses the two events into one account, which He mentions only in regard to Wednesday.

In light of Jesus' just having been hailed by the populace as Israel's great Messiah and King, His cleansing the Temple and cursing the fig tree were of special and monumental significance. The cleansing of the Temple was a denunciation of Israel's worship, and the cursing of the fig tree was a denunciation of Israel as a nation. Instead of overthrowing His nation's enemies as the people anticipated He might, the newly-acclaimed King denounced His own people.

It was inconceivable to Jews that their Messiah would condemn them instead of deliver them, that He would attack Israel instead of Rome. That is why the accolades of the triumphal entry were so short-lived, turning in a few days to cries for Jesus' death. He had conclusively demonstrated what both His words and His actions had testified all along—that He had not come as a political-military Messiah to free Israel from Rome and set up an earthly kingdom. When that truth finally dawned on them, whatever else Jesus did became irrelevant to most Jews. They had no use for such a Messiah and certainly no use for such a King. By joining their leaders in calling for Jesus' death, the people would declare in essence what Jesus had predicted in the parable of the nobleman: "We do not want this man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14).

Jesus' cursing of the fig tree was not nearly so powerfully dramatic as the cleansing of the Temple, but it was equally

significant.

THE PREDICAMENT

Now in the morning, when He returned to the city, He became hungry. And seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it, and found nothing on it except leaves only; (21:18-19a)

As noted above, **the morning** refers to Wednesday, the day after the cleansing of the Temple and two days after the triumphal entry. Jesus **returned to the city** of Jerusalem after spending the night in Bethany as He had been doing, doubtlessly with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (see Mark 11:11).

It seems certain that Jesus' hosts would have prepared breakfast for Him had He wanted it, but He may have gone out very early to pray on the nearby Mount of Olives, which He often did, and had no time to return to Bethany to eat. Or it may have been that He had eaten breakfast many hours earlier and that His intense prayer and His climbing the Mount of Olives rekindled His hunger. In any case, **He became hungry**. Although He was the Son of God, in His incarnation Jesus had all the normal physical needs characteristic of human beings. Therefore, when He saw **a lone fig tree by the road**, **He** hoped to find fruit on it to eat.

Fig trees were common in Palestine and much prized. It was not uncommon for them to grow to a height of twenty feet and equally as wide, making them an excellent shade tree. When Jesus called him to discipleship, Nathanael was sitting under a fig tree, probably in his own yard (John 1:48). Before the Jews had entered the Promised Land, the Lord described it to them as "a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey" (Deut. 8:8). Through Zechariah the Lord promised His people that at Messiah's second coming, He would "remove the iniquity of that land in one day" and "every one of you will invite his neighbor to

sit under his vine and under his fig tree” (Zech. 3:9-10). A favorite place for people to gather was under a fig tree.

Just as the presence of the fig tree was a symbol of blessing and prosperity for the nation, its absence would become a symbol of judgment and deprivation. Largely because of the many conquests of Palestine after the rejection of Christ, the land became greatly denuded and barren. Some invaders used the trees to build their war machines and others simply to fuel their fires. When lumber trees were gone, fruit and shade trees were cut down. During one occupation the rulers began taxing according to the number of trees on a piece of property, with the predictable result that many landowners cut down some of their remaining trees in order to lower their taxes.

Normally, a **fig tree** produced fruit before it sprouted leaves. Therefore when Jesus **found nothing on it except leaves**, He was disappointed, because a tree with **leaves** should already have had fruit. Fig trees bore fruit twice a year, the first time in early summer. In the much lower elevation and much hotter climate of Jericho, some plants and trees were productive almost year round. But in April, a fig tree at the altitude of Jerusalem would not usually have either fruit or leaves, because, as Mark observes, “it was not the season for figs” (Mark 11:13).

Nevertheless, if the tree produced leaves early it should have produced fruit early. Whether because of too much or too little water, the wrong kind of soil, disease, or other reason, it was not functioning as it was supposed to.

Jesus used many subjects from nature—birds, water, animals, weather, trees, flowers, and others—to illustrate His teaching. On this occasion He used a barren fig tree to illustrate a spiritually barren nation. The illustration was a visual parable designed to portray the spiritually degenerated nation of Israel.

THE PARABLE

and He said to it, “No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you.” And at once the fig tree withered. (21:19b)

Because the fig tree was barren when it should have had fruit, Jesus **said to it, “No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you.”** With those words He pronounced the tree’s doom. It was under a divine curse (see Mark 11:21) and would be perpetually unproductive. In Matthew’s account it appears that **the fig tree withered** instantly. But as already noted, although the tree may have died **at once**, the withering was not evident until the next morning when Jesus and the disciples passed by it again and saw it “withered from the roots up” (Mark 11:20).

The fig tree represented spiritually dead Israel, its leaves represented Israel’s outward religiousness, and its lack of fruit represented Israel’s spiritual barrenness. As Paul later described his fellow Jews, they had “a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge” (Rom. 10:2), a form of godliness but no godly power (cf. 2 Tim. 3:5).

Fruit is always an indication of salvation, of a transformed life in which operates the power of God. People’s right relation to God is evidenced by the fruit they bear. “A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit,” Jesus said (Matt. 7:18). In the parable of the soils, the good soil is proven by the fact that it yields a crop—sometimes a hundredfold, sometimes sixty, and sometimes thirty, but always a crop (Matt. 13:8). The good soil, Jesus went on to explain, is the person in whom the seed of God’s Word takes root and grows. It “is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit” (v. 23). Using another figure involving fruit, Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit” (John 15:5). Fruit is always the manifestation of true salvation.

Jesus’ point regarding the fig tree was that Israel as a nation had an impressive pretense of religion, represented by the leaves. But the fact that the nation bore no spiritual fruit was positive proof she was unredeemed and cut off from the life and power of God. Just as

fruitfulness is always evidence of salvation and godliness, barrenness is always evidence of lostness and ungodliness.

Empty religion almost invariably has many outward trappings in the form of clerical garments and vestments, ornate vessels, involved rituals, and other such physical accoutrements. It is also typically characterized by repetitious prayers, cited by rote and offered at prescribed times, or else by spontaneous prayers that are wordy, ostentatious, and self-glorifying. Such were the meaningless repetitions of the pagans (Matt. 6:7) and the self-righteous prayer of the Pharisee who Jesus said was actually praying to himself (Luke 18:11).

This incident was not the first time Jesus had used an illustration of a barren fig tree. On an earlier occasion He said that for three years the owner of a certain fig tree had failed to find fruit on it and therefore instructed his vineyard-keeper to cut it down. But the keeper pleaded with the owner, "Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down" (Luke 13:6-9). Presumably the request was granted. Here, too, the fig tree depicts Israel's barrenness, and the owner's willingness to wait for the tree to bear fruit represents God's patience before bringing judgment. Our Lord makes no specific comparison of that three years to the three years of His ministry, but it was three years after Jesus first presented Himself to Israel as her Messiah that the people declared their final rejection of Him by putting Him to death.

Some forty years later the curse on the nation of Israel, illustrated by Jesus' curse on the fig tree, was fulfilled. At that time, God allowed the Romans to sack Jerusalem and raze the Temple, destroying both the nation and its religion, because Israel had not borne any fruit, as it has not to this day.

In cleansing the Temple, the King's message was that Israel's worship was unacceptable, and in cursing the fig tree it was that Israel as a nation was condemned for its sinfulness and spiritual fruitlessness. Those messages of doom the people would not tolerate. They had not accepted John the Baptist's call to repentance in preparation for the coming of the kingdom or his declaration that the Messiah was coming with "His winnowing fork . . . in His hand [to]

thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and [to] gather His wheat into the barn [and to] burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:1-12). Nor had they accepted Jesus’ same call to repentance or His command to come to God in humble contrition and a genuine hunger and thirst for righteousness (4:17; 5:3-12). They were now even more ill-disposed to accept His word of judgment.

When the Lord delivered Israel out of Egypt He declared,

Now it shall be, if you will diligently obey the Lord your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you will obey the Lord your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country. Blessed shall be the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground and the offspring of your beasts, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. (Deut. 28:1-6)

But the Lord also declared,

It shall come about, if you will not obey the Lord your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the country. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Cursed shall be the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock. Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out. (vv. 15-19)

Through Isaiah, the Lord reminded Israel that He had nurtured and cared for her like a man who plants a vineyard in the best of soil

and gives it the best of care and protection. But the vineyard produced nothing but worthless fruit, and the man declared that he would remove its protective hedges and walls, let it be laid waste and become choked out by briars and thorns. He would not even allow it to receive rain. “The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel,” the prophet explains. “And the men of Judah His delightful plant. Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress” (Isa. 5:1-7). Then follows a long series of woes, or curses, describing the calamities God’s people would suffer because of their unfaithfulness and spiritual barrenness (vv. 8-30).

The people of Israel today are still under God’s curse, preserved but unblessed. They are preserved because God will yet redeem them in the final days because of His promise, but they are unblessed because they continue to reject their Messiah. “He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11). They would not have Him as Savior to deliver them from sin or as Lord to rule them in righteousness.

In modern times, some of the world’s Jews have regathered themselves to the land of Palestine and established the state of Israel. But they have not yet been regathered redemptively, because that will be the doing of the Messiah when He comes to them again to set up His kingdom. They are back in the Promised Land, but they have yet to inherit God’s promised blessings. They live in continual turmoil, instability, and danger. They are far from the peaceable kingdom the Messiah will bring but are instead an armed camp, constantly under the threat of attack and invasion. Life there has been reduced virtually to the basics of survival and defense.

Israel will not be destroyed, because God protects her. But neither is she being blessed, because she will not have Him as her God. No one comes to God the Father who does not come through God the Son (John 14:6), and because Israel will not claim the Son, she has no claim on the Father.

THE PRINCIPLE

And seeing this, the disciples marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree wither at once?” And Jesus answered and said to them, “Truly I say to you, if you have faith, and do not doubt, you shall not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it shall happen. And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive.”
(21:20-22)

When **the disciples** passed the cursed fig tree the next morning and saw that it was “withered from the roots up” (Mark 11:20), they **marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree wither at once?”** A diseased tree might take many weeks or months to die, and even one that had been salted, either by accident or from maliciousness, would take several days to die. For **the fig tree to wither** overnight was to do so virtually **at once**.

At that point the Lord moved from the visual parable of the fig tree to another truth He wanted to teach the disciples. The principle taught in the parable was that religious profession without spiritual reality is an abomination to God and is cursed. The principle Jesus was now about to teach related to the disciples’ marveling about how quickly the fig tree withered. They knew *why* it withered, because they heard Jesus curse it; they just could not understand how it could wither so fast. The Lord took the opportunity to teach them about the power of faith joined to the purpose and will of God, which can do far more than instantly wither a fig tree.

In response to their bewilderment, **Jesus answered and said to them, “Truly I say to you, if you have faith, and do not doubt, you shall not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ it shall happen.”**

Jesus obviously was speaking figuratively. He never used His own power, nor did the apostles ever use the miraculous powers He gave them, to perform spectacular but useless supernatural feats. It was precisely that sort of grandiose demonstration that He refused to give to the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees who wanted to see a

sign from Him (Matt. 12:38). Jesus had already performed countless miracles of healing, many of which they probably had witnessed. And He performed many more such miracles that they could easily have witnessed. But the sign they wanted was on a grand scale, one in which fire would come down from heaven or the sun would stand still as it had for Joshua. The literal casting of a **mountain . . . into the sea** would have been just the sort of sign the scribes and Pharisees wanted to see but were never shown.

The phrase “rooter up of mountains” was a metaphor commonly used in Jewish literature of a great teacher or spiritual leader. In the Babylonian Talmud, for example, the great rabbis are called “rooters up of mountains.” Such people could solve great problems and seemingly do the impossible.

That is the idea Jesus had in mind. He was saying, “I want you to know that you have unimaginable power available to you through your faith in Me. If you sincerely believe, without doubting, **it shall happen**, and you will see great powers of God at work.” At the Last Supper Jesus told the Twelve, “Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it” (John 14:13-14). The requirement for receiving is to ask in Jesus’ name, that is, according to His purpose and will.

Jesus was not speaking about faith in faith or faith in oneself, both of which foolish and unscriptural ideas are popular today. He was speaking about faith in the true God and in God alone, not faith in one’s dreams, aspirations, or ideas of what he thinks ought to be. “You ask and do not receive,” James warns, “because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures” (James 4:3). “This is the confidence which we have before Him,” John says, “that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us” (1 John 5:14). Mountain-moving faith is unselfish, undoubting, and unqualified confidence in God. It is believing in God’s truth and God’s power while seeking to do God’s will. The measure of such faith is the sincere and single desire that, as Jesus said, “the Father may be glorified in the Son.”

True faith is trusting in the revelation of God. When a believer seeks something that is consistent with God’s Word and trusts in

God's power to provide it, Jesus assures him that his request will be honored, because it honors Him and His Father. When God's commands are obeyed He will honor that obedience, and when any request is asked in faith according to His will He will provide what is sought. To do what God says is to do what God wants and to receive what God promises.

When the disciples asked Jesus why they were unable to cast out the demon from a young boy, "He said to them, 'Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, "Move from here to there," and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible to you'" (Matt. 17:20). Jesus was not commending small faith. It was the littleness of the disciples' faith that prevented their success in casting out the demon. He rebuked them for having small faith that stayed small, but exhorted them to have faith that, though it begins small, continues to grow. The point of the mustard seed illustration is not in its smallness but in its growing from smallness to greatness. In the same way, the virtue of mountain-moving faith is its growth from smallness to greatness as God blesses and provides.

Mountain-moving faith is activated by sincere petition to God. **"All things you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive,"** Jesus explained. The parables of the friend who asked his neighbor for a favor at midnight and of the widow who petitioned the unrighteous judge (Luke 11:5-8; 18:1-8) both teach the importance of persistent prayer. Persistent **prayer** is the prayer that moves mountains, because it is truly **believing** prayer.

Whatever our finite minds may lead us to think, there is no inconsistency between God's sovereignty and man's faith, because God's Word clearly teaches both. It is not the believer's responsibility to fathom God's inscrutable ways but to obediently follow His clear teaching. Persistent **prayer** that is **believing** God's Word cannot be inconsistent with the operation of God's own sovereign will, because in His sovereign wisdom and grace He commands such prayer and obligates Himself to honor it.

The believer who wants what God wants can ask from God and **receive** it. The Christian young person who truly wants what God wants for his life will have it. The woman who truly wants what God

wants for her family will have it. The pastor who truly wants what God wants for his ministry will have it.

God's will for His children does not, of course, always involve things that are pleasant to the flesh or the things one might naturally prefer. His will for His children includes their willingness to sacrifice, suffer, and die for Him if necessary. For the believer who seeks God's will, it is never a matter of succeeding or failing, of prosperity or poverty, of living or dying, but simply of being faithful (see 1 Cor. 4:2). Therefore Paul declares, "If we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's" (Rom. 14:8).

When the church is impotent, as so much of it is today, it is because so many Christians are impotent. And Christians are impotent because they are not persistent in praying for what God wants, believing He will provide it. God desires His children to ask and keep asking, to seek and keep seeking, to knock and keep knocking, and it is through that persistence that He promises to bless. He guarantees that they will always receive, always find, and always have the door opened to them (Matt. 7:7).

God does not build His church or build up His people by better ideas, better programs, or better methods, although such things can have a place in His work. God promises to truly reveal His power only through faithful believers who, in persistent prayer, seek only His will.

27
The Authority of
Jesus
(21:23-32)

And when He had come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him as He was teaching, and said, “By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?” And Jesus answered and said to them, “I will ask you one thing too, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?” And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the multitude; for they all hold John to be a prophet.” And answering Jesus, they said, “We do not know.” He also said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go work today in the

vineyard.’ And he answered and said, ‘I will, sir’; and he did not go. And he came to the second and said the same thing. But he answered and said, ‘I will not’; yet he afterward regretted it and went. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The latter.” Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you that the tax-gatherers and harlots will get into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax-gatherers and harlots did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.” (21:23-32)

Authority is a strong word, denoting power and privilege. A person with authority exercises control over the lives and welfare of other people. Society cannot operate without having some people in positions of authority; the alternative would be anarchy and chaos. In the family, parents have authority. In school, teachers and administrators have authority. In the community, the mayor, city council, police, and firemen all have spheres of authority. And so also in the larger bodies of government.

The conflict in this encounter between Jesus and the religious leaders was over the issue of authority, specifically Jesus’ authority, which they questioned and which they feared would threaten their own positions of authority.

THE CONFRONTATION

And when He had come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him as He was teaching, and said, “By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?” (21:23)

It was still Wednesday morning of Passover week. After Jesus and the disciples had passed the fig tree He cursed the day before and

found it completely withered (vv. 18-22; cf. Mark 11:20-21), **He had come with them into the temple.**

The group of **chief priests and elders** may have included the high priests Caiaphas and Annas, who served concurrently for several years (Luke 3:2). Because of the seriousness of their confrontation of Jesus, it is likely that at least the captain of the Temple, the second highest official, was present. **The elders** comprised a wide variety of religious leaders, which definitely included Pharisees (Matt. 21:45) and scribes (Luke 20:1), and possibly Sadducees, Herodians, and even some Zealots and Essenes. Although those groups had many differences from each other and were constantly disputing among themselves, they found common ground in opposing Jesus, because He threatened the authority of the entire religious establishment.

Every false religion has the common denominator of works righteousness, of salvation by human achievement, and is by nature offended by and opposed to the gospel of divine accomplishment by God in Christ. Although the religions of the world are divided by vast differences in theology and practice, they find common ground against the gospel of Jesus Christ, just as did the Jewish religionists in the Temple. They may presume to honor Christ as a prophet, a great teacher, or even as one among many gods, but they vehemently oppose the truth that He is the only Savior and that no person can come to God except through the merits of His sacrifice.

As He had the day before, when He so dramatically cleansed the Temple, Jesus now took center stage there again and **was teaching** as He walked about the courtyard (Mark 11:27). It seems certain that those whom He had driven out for making His Father's house a den of robbers (Matt. 21:13) had not returned, and the entire spacious Court of the Gentiles was now available for those who came to worship. Many of them had probably followed Jesus there when they saw Him come into the city that morning.

We are not told what Jesus was **teaching** on this occasion, but He was likely reiterating some of the more important truths He had taught many times before. We can be sure that whatever He said was related to His kingdom, the subject with which His ministry began (Matt. 4:17) and ended (Acts 1:3). In His parallel account, Luke reports that Jesus was "teaching daily in the temple, . . . preaching the

gospel” (Luke 19:47; 20:1), which was sometimes called “the gospel of the kingdom” (Matt. 9:35). Whatever His specific theme, “all the people were hanging upon His words” (Luke 19:48).

The primary question the Jewish leaders now had for Jesus was the same as it had been from the beginning, “**By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?**” (cf. John 2:18). By **these things**, they probably meant everything Jesus had been teaching and doing, but they particularly had in mind His abrupt and, in their eyes, utterly presumptuous cleansing of the Temple the day before. Except for His similar act at the beginning of His ministry, He had never done anything that more clearly, forcefully, and publicly devastated the religious establishment. While it was happening, they were powerless to stop Him and apparently were even speechless. But now that they had recovered from the initial shock, they were on the offensive and were demanding an explanation.

Rabbinical candidates originally had been ordained by a leading rabbi whom they respected and under whose teaching they served a kind of apprenticeship. And just as the teachings of the leading rabbis varied greatly, so did their ordinations. Because of widespread abuses, and probably also to centralize rabbinical authority, the Sanhedrin, or high Jewish council, had taken over all responsibility for ordination.

At his ordination a man was declared to be rabbi, elder, and judge, and was given corresponding authority to teach, to express his wisdom, and to make decisions and render verdicts in religious as well as many civil matters. During the service various discourses and readings were given and hymns sung. Once ordained, the man had official recognition as a credentialed teacher of Israel.

Jesus had had no such ordination and therefore had no such recognition. **By what authority**, then, the leaders asked, did He not only teach and preach but even heal the sick, cast out demons, and raise the dead? Most especially, why had He presumed to take upon Himself—an untrained, unrecognized, self-appointed rabbi—the task of casting the merchants and moneychangers out of the Temple? Although not themselves religious leaders, those men were operating their businesses under the auspices of the Temple authorities. “**Who**

gave You . . . authority to throw them out?” those authorities asked Jesus.

Although they did not recognize the source and legitimacy of Jesus’ power, they never questioned that He had it. That His authority was unprecedentedly powerful was incontestable. No one had ever healed as many sick people, cast out as many demons, or raised people from the dead as Jesus had done. The miracles were so obvious, numerous, and well attested that the religious leaders never doubted that Jesus performed them, having seen many of them with their own eyes.

Those leaders knew that power such as Jesus displayed had to be of supernatural origin, and they knew He claimed it was from God, whom He repeatedly called His heavenly Father. When He forgave a paralytic’s sins, some of the scribes present “said to themselves, ‘This fellow blasphemes.’” Knowing what they were thinking, Jesus accused them of having evil hearts and proceeded to heal the man’s paralysis in order to show His critics that He, the Son of Man, had “authority on earth to forgive sins” (Matt. 9:2-6). The crowd of common people who witnessed what He did made the only sensible response: “They were filled with awe, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men” (v. 8). But the scribes refused to accept the obvious. No amount of evidence could penetrate their confirmed unbelief. And like the Pharisees on an earlier occasion (Matt. 12:24), the Temple authorities who now confronted Jesus no doubt preferred to believe that His power came from Satan rather than God.

The chief priests and elders in the Temple also knew, as the multitudes often acknowledged in amazement, that Jesus *taught* authoritatively, with a clarity, definitiveness, and certainty that was completely lacking in the pronouncements and interpretations of the scribes (Matt. 7:29; Mark 1:22). As in many liberal church circles today, a key qualification for acceptance was lack of dogmatism. Virtually every doctrine was open to reinterpretation and revision, and absolutes were shunned as presumptuous. Human wisdom had long since replaced divine revelation, and Old Testament Scripture was cited primarily to support their humanly-devised religious traditions. When Scripture conflicted with tradition, tradition prevailed (Matt. 16:6). In the minds of most Jewish religious leaders,

there were many authorities but none that was exclusively authoritative, not even Scripture.

Yet Jesus' ministry was nothing if not authoritative. He demonstrated authority to grant those who believe in Him the right to become children of God (John 1:12). His heavenly Father "gave Him authority to execute judgment" (5:27) and "authority over all mankind" to give eternal life to those His Father has given Him (17:2). He had authority over His own life, "to lay it down," and over His own resurrection, "to take [His life] up again" (10:18).

In all the things He said and did, Jesus never sought approval or support from the recognized Jewish authorities. He completely ignored their system for ordaining rabbis and approving doctrines. He did not ask approval for His teachings, His healings, or His casting out of demons, and certainly not for His forgiving sins.

Jesus had both *dunamis* (power) and *exousia* (authority). *Dunamis* refers to ability, and *exousia* to right. Jesus not only had great power but the right to exercise that power, because both His power and His authority were from His heavenly Father. "Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life," Jesus said, "even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes," and "just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself" (John 5:21, 26). "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (6:38; cf. v. 44, 57; 7:16, 28; 8:18, 54).

And because Jesus had the Father's power and authority, He sought no human authority, accreditation, ordination, or credentials. By so doing, He pitted Himself directly against the Jewish religious system and incurred its unrelenting wrath. Its leaders were appalled and scandalized that He not only failed to consult the Sanhedrin and the Temple authorities but had the audacity to condemn them.

In asking Jesus to identify His authority, those leaders probably hoped He would say, as He had many times before, that He worked under the direct power and authority of God, His heavenly Father. That would give them another opportunity to charge Him with blasphemy, and perhaps to succeed in putting Him to death for it, as they had tried to do before without success (John 5:18; 10:31).

THE COUNTER QUESTION

And Jesus answered and said to them, “I will ask you one thing too, which if you tell Me, I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?” And they began reasoning among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ He will say to us, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men,’ we fear the multitude; for they all hold John to be a prophet.” And answering Jesus, they said, “We do not know.” He also said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.” (21:24-27)

Jesus answered the question of the chief priests and elders with a query of His own. He was not being evasive and had no reason to be, having given the answer to their question countless times before. And if they answered His question now, He would answer theirs, telling them again **by what authority He did these things.**

His question was simple: **“The baptism of John was from what source, from heaven or from men?”** Because **John** the Baptist had started his ministry first, the religious leaders had rejected him even before they began to reject Jesus. **The baptism of John** referred to His entire ministry, which was characterized by his baptizing those who repented of their sins (Matt. 3:6).

John was the last prophet of the Old Testament age and, like Jesus, became popular and admired by the masses. He was readying the people for the Messiah, and his demeanor and the content and power of his preaching had made a great impact throughout Israel. After Herod arrested John for condemning his adulterous marriage to his brother Philip’s wife, Herodias, the king hesitated for a long time in putting John to death because the people considered him to be a prophet (Matt. 14:3-5).

As the chief priests and elders quickly realized, Jesus’ question put them on the horns of a great dilemma. As **they began reasoning among themselves**, they saw they would be in trouble for

whichever answer they gave. If they were to say, **“From heaven,”** Jesus would then say to them, **“Then why did you not believe him?”** It was not simply that they had rejected John himself but that they had also rejected John’s clear testimony about Jesus, whom that prophet had openly acclaimed to be “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” and the very “Son of God” (John 1:29, 34). To have accepted John as a prophet **from heaven** would have required accepting Jesus as the Messiah; and that they absolutely would not do.

No amount of testimony from John or evidence from Jesus Himself would bring them to recognize Him as Messiah. They were trained to discount or explain away facts as well as scriptural truths that were not consistent with their humanly-devised religious beliefs and standards. The man born blind whom Jesus had healed told his Pharisee inquisitors, “We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing, and does His will, He hears him. Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, He could do nothing” (John 9:31-33). But the Pharisees were unmoved by those obvious truths. Instead, they lashed out at the man, resentful of his presumption in trying to teach the teachers of Israel (v. 34). When unbelief investigates spiritual truth, it is predisposed to reject it.

As the religious rulers continued to discuss Jesus’ question, they realized that if they answered the opposite way they would also be in trouble. If they said John’s ministry and message were **from men**, they would lose what little credibility they had with the people and would even incite their ire, because the **multitude** still considered **John to be a prophet**. They themselves firmly believed that **John** was not **a prophet**, but they did not dare state that belief in public. Their only recourse, therefore, was to confess with embarrassment, **We do not know**.

Consequently Jesus replied, **“Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.”** As Jesus well knew, had He given them an answer, they would only have used it against Him. They were not interested in learning the truth about either John or Jesus. Their sole purpose was to induce Jesus to again claim messiahship and divinity

so they would have grounds for putting Him to death for blasphemy (cf. John 5:18; Matt. 22:15).

The religious leaders persisted in rejecting the light Christ sent them, and He therefore turned it off. He had no more teaching for the scribes, Pharisees, chief priests, and others whose self-satisfaction blinded them to the truth of the gospel and their own need for it. For them there would only be further warning and condemnation. In a long series of woes, Jesus was about to declare judgment against them for doing their deeds to be seen of men, for refusing to enter the kingdom themselves and for hindering others from entering, for being blind religious guides, for being outwardly righteous but inwardly wicked, for honoring the ancient prophets in name but being of the same mind as their forefathers who killed the prophets, and for being a brood of vipers destined for hell (Matt. 23:5, 13, 16, 27, 30, 33).

When He was on trial before the high priest Caiaphas, “Jesus kept silent,” refusing to give a single further word of testimony (Matt. 26:63). And when Pilate asked Him to respond to the accusations of the chief priests and elders, Jesus “did not answer him with regard to even a single charge” (27:14).

When a person steadfastly refuses to hear God’s truth and to receive His grace, God may choose to withdraw Himself. In face of the unrelenting wickedness of mankind in Noah’s day, the Lord declared, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever” (Gen. 6:3). The Lord finally said of unrepentant Ephraim, “Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone” (Hos. 4:17), and in relation to rebellious Judah, “He turned Himself to become their enemy, He fought against them” (Isa. 63:10).

Even as Jesus approached Jerusalem during His triumphal entry, He had wept over the city, saying, “If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you when your enemies will throw up a bank before you, and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation” (Luke 19:41-44). And soon after Jesus’ severe excoriation of the scribes and Pharisees, He lamented, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who

kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’” (Matt. 23:37-39).

THE CHARACTERIZATION

But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go work today in the vineyard.’ And he answered and said, ‘I will, sir’; and he did not go. And he came to the second and said the same thing. But he answered and said, ‘I will not’; yet he afterward regretted it and went. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The latter.” (21:28-31a)

In this short parable Jesus characterizes two contrasting responses to the gospel. And once again He gives His opponents the opportunity to condemn themselves out of their own mouths.

In the first instance, the **son** who was asked to **work . . . in the vineyard** told his father, “**I will, sir,**” but he **did not go**. The implication is that he had never intended to go and lied to his father to give the false impression of obedience. The **second** son at first refused to go, saying, “**I will not,**” but he **afterward regretted it and went**.

When Jesus asked the chief priests and elders, “**Which of the two did the will of his father?**” they gave the obvious answer, “**The latter.**”

Jesus’ point in this story is that doing is more important than mere saying. It is, of course, best for a person to say he will do God’s will and then do it. But it is immeasurably better to at first refuse His will and then repent and do it than to hypocritically agree to do it but not. In this context, the doing of God’s will relates to acceptance of the gospel, of receiving Jesus as the Messiah and as Savior and Lord.

THE CONNECTION

Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you that the tax-gatherers and harlots will get into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax-gatherers and harlots did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him” (21:31b-32)

After His opponents gave the only possible answer to His question, **Jesus** showed them their connection to the parable. He informed them that, although their answer to His question was right, their response to Him and His ministry was wrong and wicked. Their own words condemned them. They did not correspond to “the latter” son, who did the father’s will, but to the former, who did not do it. “They say things, and do not do them,” Jesus said on a later occasion (Matt. 23:3). They claimed to obey God, but their actions denied that He had any place in their hearts. They claimed to be longing for the Messiah and lauded His name; but when He came, they would not have Him.

The Lord therefore **said to them, “Truly I say to you that the tax-gatherers and harlots will get into the kingdom of God before you.”** No rebuke could have cut them deeper or infuriated them more, because in their eyes, **tax-gatherers and harlots** were the scum of society, perhaps even worse than Gentiles. **Tax-gatherers** not only were merciless extortioners but were traitors to their own people, Jews who bought franchises from the Romans to collect taxes from their own people to support the Roman occupation. **Harlots** were the epitome of gross immorality. If any people were totally outside the pale of God’s mercy, the self-righteous Jewish leaders thought, it was those two groups.

The men who now stood before Jesus, on the other hand, were the religious elite, the interpreters of God’s law and the keepers of God’s Temple. They claimed to give their lives in obedience to God and lived under the self-serving illusion that, because of their exalted

positions and their many religious works, they were of all men most pleasing to Him.

Yet Jesus declared to those proud leaders that **tax-gatherers and harlots** who chose to disobey God but later repented would **get into the kingdom of God before** they would. **Before you** does not mean that the unbelieving leaders would eventually enter the Kingdom, because no unbeliever will ever enter. Jesus simply used the expression to show God's reversal of man-made standards for salvation. The **tax-gatherers and harlots** were nearer the **kingdom** than the chief priests and elders, not because they were inherently more righteous or acceptable to God, but because they were more ready to acknowledge their need for God's grace than the self-satisfied priests and elders. Jesus' point was that claims to religion do not qualify a person to enter the kingdom, and even gross sin, when repented of, will not keep a person out.

“For John came to you in the way of righteousness,” Jesus continued, giving the answer to the question His opponents had earlier refused to answer. To say that **John came . . . in the way of righteousness** was to say not only that his ministry was from God but that he was a godly man. He was a holy, righteous, virtuous, Spirit-filled man whom God had sent to prepare the way for His Son, the Messiah. He preached a righteous message and lived a righteous life. “Among those born of women,” Jesus had affirmed, “there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (Matt. 11:11).

“But you did not believe him,” Jesus told them. The Jewish leaders had been skeptical of John from the beginning, having sent a group of priests and Levites to question him (John 1:19-25). And when John “saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, “We have Abraham for our father”; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham’” (Matt. 3:7-9).

“But the tax-gatherers and harlots did believe him,” Jesus said. Some of the **tax-gatherers** had been open to the gospel even in its incomplete form taught by John the Baptist. As evidence of their sincerity in being baptized for the repentance of their sins, they asked

John, “Teacher, what shall we do?” (Luke 3:12). Although no specific instance is mentioned in the gospels, Jesus makes clear that among the multitudes who were baptized by John there were also some **harlots** who **did believe him** and who, like those tax-gatherers, confessed their sins and were forgiven (see Matt. 3:5-6).

Concluding His indictment, Jesus said, “**And you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him.**” They did not believe John’s message when they heard it themselves and did not even **believe him** when they saw the transformed lives of the tax-gatherers and harlots who had believed. In other words, they would not be convicted either by the truth of the message or its power to transform sinners.

They had been exposed to the full light of the prophet of God and the even greater light of the Son of God, yet they refused to be enlightened. They had heard the message of the herald of the King and the message of the King Himself, yet they would not listen or believe. They had witnessed the power of John and the power of Christ, yet they would not be moved.

28

Judgment on
Christ's Rejecters
(21:33-46)

“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard and put a wall around it and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower, and rented it out to vine-growers, and went on a journey. And when the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce. And the vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third. Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them. But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and seize his inheritance.’ And they took him, and threw him out the vineyard, and killed him. Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?” They said to Him, “He will bring those

wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers, who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons.” Jesus said to them, “Did you never read in the Scriptures, ‘The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief cornerstone; this came about from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes’? Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it. And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.” And when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them. And when they sought to seize Him, they feared the multitudes, because they held Him to be a prophet. (21:33-46)

Jesus continued to respond to hostile retaliation by the hypocritical, threatened chief priests and elders, who had demanded that He tell them by what authority He carried on His ministry, and especially by what authority He had driven the merchants and moneychangers out of the Temple. After they had refused to say whether John the Baptist’s ministry was from God or men, Jesus indicted them by means of the parable of the two sons and explained it by declaring that tax-gatherers and harlots would enter the kingdom before those religionists. He then threatened them further with **another parable**, the second in a trilogy of judgment parables (see also 22:1-14), which even more graphically illustrated their willful rejection of God.

THE ILLUSTRATION

“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard and put a wall around it and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower, and rented it out to vine-growers, and went on a journey. And when the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive produce. And the vine-

growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third. Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them. But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and seize his inheritance.' And they took him, and threw him out the vineyard, and killed him. (21:33-39)

As always in parabolic teaching, Jesus told a simple and understandable story, often including a shocking element, to explain a profound truth that was unknown or generally misunderstood. The situation involved in the **parable of the landowner who planted a vineyard** was commonplace in that agrarian society and was easy for His hearers to identify with. In New Testament times, the hillsides of Palestine were covered with grape vineyards, which were a mainstay of the economy. It was not unusual for a wealthy man to buy a piece of land and develop it for a **vineyard**. He would first **put a wall** of stone or a hedge of briars **around it** to protect it from wild animals and thieves. He would then make a **wine press**, sometimes having to cut it out of bedrock. In the wide, shallow, upper basin, the grapes would be squeezed, and the juice would run down through a trough into a lower basin. From there the grape juice would be poured into wineskins or clay jars for storage. Often the owner would build a **tower**, which would be used as a lookout post against marauders, as shelter for the workers, and as a storage place for seed and implements.

Those details emphasized the owner's great care in developing the vineyard. And when everything was in order, he **rented it out to vine-growers** he thought were reliable caretakers, making an agreement with them to pay a certain percentage of the proceeds to him as rent. The rest would belong to them, as payment for their work in cultivating the vineyard. Satisfied that his business venture was in good hands, the owner **went on a journey**.

Some months later, **when the harvest time approached**, the owner **sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his agreed-**

upon percentage of **produce**. But instead of paying what they owed the owner, the **vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third**. As he did with the story of the fig tree (21:18-21; cf. Mark 11:12-14, 20-21), Matthew, under Holy Spirit inspiration, here condensed several episodes into one. From Mark's account we learn that Jesus said the first three slaves came separately, one after another (Mark 12:2-5). The wicked growers **beat**, or scourged, the first slave, leaving him bruised and bloody. The second slave they **killed** outright and then **stoned a third**. If the stoning referred to the kind used in Jewish executions, that slave was probably killed as well. After that, the owner **sent another group of slaves larger than the first, and they did the same thing to them**, "beating some and killing others" (Mark 12:5).

The tenant growers had a marvelous opportunity to develop a good living. They had an excellent vineyard to cultivate and were given the complete trust of the owner to operate it. But they were not content with merely a good living; they wanted the whole harvest for themselves and were merciless in achieving that end.

After the brutal rejection of his servants, the owner **sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son."** To the contrary, however, that act simply drove the growers to greater greed and more heinous treachery. **When the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and seize his inheritance."** **And they took him, and threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.** Originally, they had plotted simply to keep all the profits from the vineyard; now they planned to expropriate the entire vineyard.

The murder of **the son** was coldly premeditated. The growers did not mistake him for another slave but knew exactly who he was. It was for the very reason that he *was* the son that they planned his murder in order to **seize his inheritance**.

By the end of this startling and dramatic parable, the interest of the Jewish leaders and the many bystanders was thoroughly piqued. The story generated great pity for the betrayed, grieving owner and resentful rage at the heartless, brutal growers.

In fact, the patience of the owner and the brutality of the growers are so absolutely astounding, so unrealistic and abnormal, that some critics say Jesus overdrew the story or that the gospel writers exaggerated His original version. But those extremes are essential to the parable's point. It was the very uncommonness of the owner's patience and of the growers' wickedness that Jesus' wanted His hearers to notice.

THE CONCLUSION

Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?" They said to Him, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers, who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons." (21:40-41)

In typical rabbinical fashion, Jesus led His hearers to finish the story themselves, asking, **"What will he do to those vine-growers?"** The chief priests and elders readily replied with moral indignation, **"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers, who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons."** They no doubt were highly pleased with this unusual opportunity to parade their self-righteousness before Jesus. They rightly assessed the proper ending of the parable, that the irate owner would first severely punish the wicked growers and then replace them with others who were reliable. They were completely unaware that, as they fed their pride on Jesus' baited question, they sprang the trap of their own condemnation.

THE EXPLANATION

Jesus said to them, “Did you never read in the Scriptures, ‘The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief cornerstone; this came about from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes’? (21:42)

At first glance, this comment seems irrelevant to the parable. But the Lord was using a familiar passage from the Old Testament to reinforce the parable’s point, and in doing so He changed metaphors. In a sarcastic query He asked the self-appointed authorities on the Old Testament, **“Did you never read in the Scriptures?”** and then cited the well-known words of Psalm 118:22.

Jesus quoted the same psalm from which were taken the acclamations of the multitude in His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when He was hailed by the messianic title, Son of David (Matt. 21:9). And it was, in fact, for His accepting that messianic praise that Jesus was rebuked by the Pharisees (Luke 19:39). Now, from the same section of the psalm, Jesus reminded the religious leaders of **the stone which the builders rejected that became the chief cornerstone.**

A **cornerstone** was the most basic and essential part of a building, from which the proper placement and alignment of every other part was determined. If the cornerstone was imperfectly cut or placed, the symmetry and stability of the entire building would be adversely affected. Sometimes **the builders rejected** a number of stones before the right one was selected. In this account, one such rejected **stone** eventually **became the chief corner stone.**

For many centuries, Israel had been the **stone which the empire builders** of the world had rejected as insignificant and despised, fit only for exploiting and then discarding. But in the Lord’s divine plan, Israel was chosen to be the **chief corner stone** in the redemptive history of the world, the nation through which salvation would come.

But the figure has an even greater significance than that. Peter declared in Jerusalem before the religious rulers shortly after Pentecost, “Let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you

crucified, whom God raised from the dead . . . He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the very corner stone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:10-12). The greater **stone** than Israel is Jesus Christ, and **the builders** who **rejected** Him were the Jewish leaders, representing all Israel, and in a fuller sense the entire unbelieving world. The **stone . . . rejected** was the crucified Christ, and the restored **chief corner stone** is the resurrected Christ.

Jesus thereby tied the messianic psalm to the parable in order to reinforce His point. The rejected Son and the rejected stone both refer to Christ. The verse from Psalm 118 goes beyond the parable to allude also to the resurrection of the Son, something the parable could not cover and still maintain its simple naturalness.

Peter reiterated the same truth in his first letter: “Behold I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious corner stone, and he who believes in Him shall not be disappointed. This precious value, then, is for you who believe. But for those who disbelieve, ‘the stone which the builders rejected, this became the very corner stone,’ and, ‘a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense’; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed” (1 Pet. 2:6-8). Paul declared to the Ephesian believers, “You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone” (Eph. 2:19-20).

When they told Jesus that the wretched vine-growers would be brought to a wretched end (v. 41), the Temple rulers judged themselves in the same way David had judged himself before Nathan. After hearing the prophet’s touching parable about the rich man who took the poor man’s only pet lamb to feed a visiting traveler, “David’s anger burned greatly against the man, and he said to Nathan, ‘As the Lord lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. And he must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and had no compassion.’ Nathan then said to David, ‘You are the man!’” (2 Sam. 12:5-7).

Jesus, in effect, had said to the chief priests and elders, “You are the men! You are the wretched vine-growers who, by your own declaration, deserve a wretched end for beating and killing the vineyard owner’s servants and then killing his son. Don’t you realize that the owner is God, the vineyard is His kingdom, the servants were His prophets, and I am His Son? You have just judged yourselves guilty of condemning to death not only the prophets but even God’s own Son.”

With regard to killing the prophets, later the same day Jesus said to the unbelieving Jewish leaders, in particular the scribes and Pharisees, “You build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, ‘If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ Consequently you bear witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up then the measure of the guilt of your fathers” (Matt. 23:29-31).

God had prepared a place of great beauty and blessing and then graciously given stewardship of it to His people Israel. It was a place of promise, hope, deliverance, salvation, and security. But Israel misappropriated all those blessings for herself, robbing God of the gratitude, glory, and honor due Him. She persecuted the prophets He patiently and lovingly sent to call her to repentance and forgiveness. Jewish tradition held that Isaiah had been sawed in two with a wooden saw (cf. Heb. 11:37). From Scripture we know that Jeremiah was thrown into a pit of slime, and tradition held that he was eventually stoned to death. Ezekiel was rejected, Elijah and Amos had to run for their lives, Micah was smashed in the face by those who refused to hear his message (1 Kings 22:24), and Zechariah was actually murdered in God’s own Temple (2 Chron. 24:20-22; cf. Matt. 23:35). Old Testament history bore witness to their murderous hearts, whose wickedness would culminate in killing the Son of God.

Through this parable and its explanation Jesus presented one of His clearest claims to divinity. The parable even alludes to the detail of His being crucified outside the city of Jerusalem (cf. Heb. 13:12), just as the vineyard owner’s son was cast out of the vineyard before being murdered.

Jesus also made it clear that the Jewish leaders who rejected Him were without excuse, that, like the evil vine-growers, they knew He was God's Son but refused to accept and honor Him as such. They wanted Him dead not because He was evil and ungodly but because He threatened their evil and ungodly control of the Temple and of the entire Jewish religious system.

Throughout history, and still today, many people refuse to receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord not because of lack of evidence but because they refuse to believe the evidence. They do not believe simply because they do not *want* to believe.

THE APPLICATION

Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it. And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.” (21:43-44)

With those straightforward, unambiguous words, Jesus removed whatever uncertainty may have remained in the minds of the chief priests and elders about what He was saying to them. In the first half of verse 43 and in verse 44, the Lord reiterated the *judgment* on unbelieving Israel and her ungodly leaders; in the second half of verse 43 He reiterated their *replacement* by believing Gentiles.

“Therefore I say to you,” the Lord declared, no doubt looking intently into the eyes of His adversaries, **“the kingdom of God will be taken away from you.”** In their stead the kingdom would **be given to a nation producing the fruit of it.**

When he first began preaching the kingdom, John the Baptist demanded that the Pharisees and Sadducees who wanted to be baptized first “bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:8). **The fruit of the kingdom** is the demonstrated righteousness produced out of a life turned from sin (see Phil 1:11; Col. 1:10). The unbelieving religious leaders would not turn from their sin and

repent, and therefore they could not produce kingdom **fruit** (genuinely righteous behavior). They were spiritually barren, and because of that willful barrenness they were cursed, like the fig tree that had leaves but no figs (21:18-19).

By grace through God's unconditional promise, Israel will one day return to God and bear fruit for His kingdom. "God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew," Paul assured his fellow Jews. And when "the fulness of the Gentiles has come, . . . all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, 'The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob'" (Rom. 11:2, 25-26).

But in the meanwhile God has chosen another people to be His own witness. He had long ago declared "I will call those who were not My people, 'My people,' and her who was not beloved, 'Beloved.' And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not My people,' there they shall be called sons of the living God" (Rom. 9:25-26).

Ethnos (**nation**) has the basic meaning of "people" and seems best translated that way in this verse, as in Acts 8:9. The **nation**, or people, who produce the fruit of the kingdom is the church, "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession" (1 Pet. 2:9). As the only citizens of God's kingdom, only believers are equipped by the Holy Spirit to bear kingdom **fruit**. "I am the vine, you are the branches," Jesus said; "he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

And he who falls on this rejected stone, that is, Jesus Himself, **will be broken to pieces**. The Jewish leaders who, as it were, fell on Jesus and put Him to death would themselves **be broken to pieces**. And on **whomever it**, Jesus the stone, **falls, it will scatter him like dust**. For those who will not have Jesus as Deliverer, He becomes Destroyer. Just as the Father has given all salvation to the Son (John 14:6), He has also "given all judgment to the Son" (John 5:22).

"If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed," Paul declared (1 Cor. 16:22). To put that truth in the language of this text, let such a person **be broken to pieces**, crushed into powder and scattered **like dust**, just as the Lord Jesus Christ Himself had warned.

God's enemies are destined to be pulverized into nothingness. To try to destroy Christ is to assure one's own destruction. Through Daniel the Lord predicted Christ's ultimate coming in judgment against the unbelieving peoples and nations of the world, represented by the magnificent and seemingly invulnerable statue of gold, silver, bronze, iron, and clay. As the "stone . . . cut out without hands," Jesus will one day strike the statue of unbelieving mankind, and "then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold [will be] crushed all at the same time, and [become] like chaff from the summer threshing floors; and the wind [will carry] them away so that not a trace of them [will be] found" (Dan. 2:32-35).

THE REACTION

And when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them. And when they sought to seize Him, they feared the multitudes, because they held Him to be a prophet. (21:45-46)

There was no mistaking that these wicked religious leaders, typified by the **chief priests and Pharisees**, were the objects of Jesus' denunciation and condemnation. Beyond any doubt, **they understood that He was speaking about them**. They knew they were the son who falsely told his father he would work in the field but then did not go and that they were the wretched vine-growers who despised the vineyard owner and beat and killed his servants and eventually killed his son. They knew they were the builders who had rejected the stone that would become the chief corner stone and that, because of that rejection they themselves would be rejected by God and forbidden entrance into His kingdom.

But as always, in spite of what they understood, the Jewish leaders took nothing Jesus said to heart. They heard but refused to heed. They knew he spoke of their ungodliness and their condemnation, but they did not take even a moment to consider

whether His charge against them was true. They would not be convinced, and hence could not be convicted. They would not repent, and therefore could not be forgiven. They knew the gracious truth about Jesus but would not follow Him, and they knew the damning truth about their own sin but would not turn from it.

Their only thoughts were of self-justification and revenge, so their reaction was **to seize** Jesus and put Him to death, just as they had been plotting since the beginning of His ministry. The hindrance to that happening was that **they feared the multitude, because they held Jesus to be a prophet**. The leaders had contempt for God but no fear of Him. They also had contempt for **the multitude** but *did* fear what they might do. They were not God-pleasers but men-pleasers. Consequently, they held off arresting Jesus until they were convinced they could turn the people against Him, which a few days later they succeeded in doing. Finally disillusioned with the Messiah who would not be their kind of savior and with the King who would not be their kind of lord, **the multitude** gave the rulers no more cause to fear them. When given the choice of releasing Jesus or the insurrectionist Barabbas, they chose Barabbas. And when Pilate asked what he should “do with Jesus who is called Christ,” they cried, “Let Him be crucified!” (Matt. 27:21-22).

This amazing passage portrays God’s gracious provision for men, His patience with their unbelief and rejection, and His love in sending even His only Son for their redemption. But it also displays His righteous judgment that will be executed when His divine patience has run its course.

The passage also portrays Jesus’ deity as the Son of God, His obedience to His Father’s will, His willingness to come to earth and die for man’s redemption, and His resurrection. But it also displays His coming one day as the instrument of divine judgment, to destroy and break in pieces those who have rejected Him.

And the passage portrays sinful mankind, its great blessings and privileges from God, its opportunity to receive truth from His prophets and eternal life from the Son. It portrays their responsibility and their accountability before a loving but just God, before whom they will be either redeemed because of faith or condemned because of unbelief.

29
Responding to a
Royal Invitation
(22:1-14)

And Jesus answered and spoke to them again in parables, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king, who gave a wedding feast for his son. And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. Again he sent out other slaves saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited, “Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast.’” But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them. But the king was enraged and sent his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and set their city on fire. Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main highways, and as many

as you find there, invite to the wedding feast.’ And those slaves went out into the streets, and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests. But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw there a man not dressed in wedding clothes, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.” (22:1-14)

This parable is the third in Jesus’ trilogy of judgment parables given in response to the Jewish religious leaders who maliciously challenged His authority (21:23, 28-30, 33-39). It is among the most dramatic and powerful of all His parables, which, though directed specifically at those leaders and all unbelieving Israel whom they represented, also has far-reaching significance and application for subsequent times, certainly including our own.

For three years Jesus had been preaching and teaching the gospel of the kingdom, which included proclaiming Himself as the Messiah, the Son of God and Savior of the world. He had been offering Himself and His kingdom to the people of Israel, His own people, the chosen people of God. But at the end of those three years, all but a handful of Jews had rejected Him. Although Jesus had always been popular with the masses wherever He ministered, their acceptance of Him was for the most part superficial and selfish.

The multitudes were awed by Jesus’ straightforward, authoritative teaching, which was in refreshing contrast to the confusing, legalistic, and complicated tradition taught by their scribes and Pharisees. They were even more awed by His healing miracles, which had brought restored health, sanity, and even life to so many countless thousands of their friends and loved ones. They doubtlessly appreciated the fact that Jesus never took financial advantage of them, never taking payment for any supernatural good work He did. On the contrary, He was always giving to them freely, and had on several occasions miraculously fed thousands. They deeply admired

Jesus for His humble, self-giving love and compassion, and they must have rejoiced when He rebuked and embarrassed their hypocritical, self-righteous leaders, who looked down on them in contemptuous superiority. How wonderful, they must have thought, that the Messiah not only is so powerful but also so compassionate.

But when the people finally realized the kind of Messiah Jesus was, and especially that He had no plans to deliver them from the Roman oppressors, their acclamation quickly turned to rejection—as is evident in their change of mood from Sunday to Thursday of this last Passover week of Jesus’ ministry. Therefore, as He continued to respond to the Jewish leaders in the Temple, where He was teaching on Wednesday morning (21:23), it was also to the multitudes that the third judgment parable was directed.

THE INVITATION REJECTED

And Jesus answered and spoke to them again in parables, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king, who gave a wedding feast for his son. And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. Again he sent out other slaves saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited, “Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast.’” But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them.” (22:1-6)

The parable contains four scenes, the first of which depicts the rejection of the invitation. Although none of His hearers may ever have attended a royal wedding feast, they were all familiar with wedding feasts in general and had some idea of the importance and magnificence of one that a king would prepare for his own son.

As **Jesus answered** the chief priests and elders (21:23), He was continuing to respond to their bitter challenge of His authority and **spoke to them again in parables** for the third time. It is likely they heard little of what He said, because their minds were by then singularly and unalterably bent on His arrest and execution. They had wanted to seize Him after He related the second parable but were still afraid of what the crowds might do (21:46).

In His first two parables Jesus gave no introduction, saving the explanation and application to the end. In this parable, however, He begins by stating that it illustrates **the kingdom of heaven**. Because most Jews believed that **the kingdom of heaven** was reserved exclusively for them, and possibly a few Gentile proselytes, the audience in the Temple immediately knew that what Jesus was going to say closely applied to them.

Although they had many perverted ideas about **the kingdom of heaven**, because the term **heaven** was so often used as a substitute for the covenant name of God (Yahweh, or Jehovah), most Jews would have understood that it was synonymous with the kingdom of God and represented the realm of God's sovereign rule. There are past, present, and future as well as temporal and eternal aspects of **the kingdom**, but it is not restricted to any era or period of redemptive history. It is the continuing, ongoing sphere of God's rule by grace. In a narrower sense, the phrase is also used in Scripture to refer to God's dominion of redemption, His divine program of gracious salvation. As Jesus uses the phrase here, it specifically represents the spiritual community of God's redeemed people, those who are under His lordship in a personal and unique way because of their trust in His Son.

In the ancient Near East, **a wedding feast** was inseparable from the wedding itself, which involved a week-long series of meals and festivities and was the highlight of all social life. For a royal **wedding** such as the one Jesus mentions here, the celebration often lasted for several weeks. Guests were invited to stay at the house of the groom's parents for the entire occasion, and the father would make as elaborate provisions as he could afford. A royal wedding, of course, would be held in the palace, and a king would be able to afford whatever he desired.

A **wedding feast** that a **king** prepared for **his son** would be a feast of all feasts, and Jesus was therefore picturing the most elaborate celebration imaginable. The fact that it was a **wedding** celebration was incidental to the purpose of the parable, the only mention of the groom being that of identifying him as the king's **son**. No mention at all is made of the bride or of any other aspect of a wedding. The point is that because the feast represents the greatest festivity imaginable, given by the greatest monarch imaginable, for the most-honored guests imaginable, a royal **wedding feast** was chosen as the illustration of the ultimate celebration.

When all the preparations were complete, the king **sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast**. The fact that they **had been invited** indicates that the guests were invited earlier and already knew they were expected to attend the wedding. To be a pre-invited guest to the king's wedding was among the highest honors possible, and no doubt those who had received invitations were boasting to their neighbors and friends. It is therefore inconceivable that, when the actual **call** came to attend, **they were unwilling to come**.

As with the previous parable of the wicked vine-growers, it is the shockingly extreme and unthinkable nature of the events mentioned that are central to the story's point. Jesus' hearers already would have begun to think to themselves, "Who would do such a thing? The very idea is preposterous." Attending the royal wedding would be an even greater experience than receiving the invitation, and it would have provided the finest food and the most prestigious fellowship in the land. Not only that, but an invitation from one's king not only brought honor but obligation. It was a serious offense to spurn the king's favor.

The initial response of the king, like the initial response of the vineyard owner, is as amazing as the responses of the guests. Few monarchs were known for their humility and patience, especially in the face of open insult. But that king **sent out other slaves saying, "Tell those who have been invited, 'Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast.'"**

The **dinner** was the first of many meals eaten during the feast, and it was ready to be served. “Remind the guests,” the king said in effect, “of all the preparations that have been made. The **oxen and fattened livestock are all butchered** and waiting to be roasted, **and everything else is ready** also. Plead with the people to **come to the wedding feast** now.”

But as before, the invited guests disregarded the call from the king, except that their refusal this time was even more crass and brutal. Many of the invitees were coldly indifferent, acting as if the wedding were of no consequence. They responded by carrying on business as usual. They **went their way**, doing the things they would normally have done in looking after their own interests, represented by the **farm and business**. They were so selfishly preoccupied with personal concerns for profit that the invitation and the repeated calls of the king to stop work and attend his son’s wedding were altogether ignored. They willingly and purposely forfeited the beauty, grandeur, and honor of the wedding for the sake of their everyday, mundane, self-serving endeavors. They were not concerned about the king’s honor but only about what they perceived as their own best interests.

But another group of guests were worse than indifferent. Rather than being concerned about offending the king, they were themselves offended at his persistence. In an act of unbelievably brutal arrogance, they **seized the king’s slaves and mistreated them and killed them**. Contempt for the king’s **slaves** demonstrated contempt for the king himself, and in mistreating and killing his slaves they committed a flagrant act of rebellion.

As already noted, because Jesus had said that the parable was about the kingdom of heaven, its meaning needed no interpretation to any thinking hearer. The king obviously was God, and the invited guests were His chosen people, Israel, those who already had been called by Him.

God first called His chosen people through Abraham, whose descendants would be blessed and be a channel of blessing to the rest of the world (Gen. 12:2-3). After being captive in Egypt for 400 years, the chosen people were delivered through Moses. Through His prophets the Lord declared, “When Israel was a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son” (Hos. 11:1), and, “You only have I

chosen among all the families of the earth” (Amos 3:2). In one of the most poignant accounts in Scripture, God described Israel as an abandoned newborn, with its umbilical cord untied and squirming in its own blood. To that hopeless infant He had said, “Live!” and it lived and prospered. The Lord bathed it, anointed it with oil, clothed and protected it, and adorned it with jewelry (Ezek 16:4-14).

The wedding feast represented God’s promised blessing to Israel, a figure understood by everyone in the Temple that day. According to talmudic literature, the Messiah’s coming would be accompanied by a grand banquet given for His chosen people.

The **slaves** God sent to call again and again those who had been invited were John the Baptist, Jesus Himself in His preaching-teaching ministry, and the New Testament apostles, prophets, and other preachers and teachers. It would seem that the **slaves** would also have to represent New Testament preachers, because their message pertained to the King’s Son, Jesus Christ. God was saying to Israel, His already-invited guests, much the same as He had said from heaven at Jesus’ baptism: “Here is My Son; come and give Him honor.” But John the Baptist was rejected and beheaded, Jesus was rejected and crucified, and the apostles and prophets were rejected and persecuted, many being put to death.

The indifferent guests in the parable represent people who are preoccupied with daily living and personal pursuits. They are essentially the secular-minded, those who are interested in the here and now and have no interest in spiritual things. They are the materialists, whose primary interest is accumulating things, and the ambitious, whose main concern is “getting ahead.” They are not usually antagonistic to the things of God but simply have no time for them.

Those who are actively hostile to the gospel invariably are people involved in false religion, including the many forms of humanistic religion that parade under a guise of philosophy, mysticism, or scientism. The history of persecution of God’s people shows that the chief persecutor has been false religion. It is the purveyors of error who are the aggressive enemies of truth, and it is therefore inevitable that, as God’s Word predicts, the final world system of the antichrist will be religious, not secular.

The fact that the king sent his messengers on two different occasions cannot be pressed to mean that only two calls were extended or that the first group consisted of John the Baptist and Jesus and the second consisted of the apostles. The parable makes no distinction in the types of slaves, or messengers. The point of the two callings of the invited guests was to illustrate God's gracious patience and forbearance with the rejecters, His willingness to call Israel again and again—as John the Baptist had done for perhaps a year, as Jesus did for three years, and as the apostles did for some forty years, until Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed in A.D. 70.

THE REJECTERS PUNISHED

But the king was enraged and sent his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and set their city on fire. Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. (22:7-8)

The second scene in the parable depicts the punishment of the rebellious subjects who rejected the king's call. As in the parable of the vineyard, God's patience is here shown to have its limit. **The king** would have been perfectly justified in punishing the offenders when they first ignored His call. After His repeated invitations and their repeated wicked responses, He finally became **enraged**. One is reminded of God's statement with regard to the antediluvian generation: "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever" (Gen. 6:3).

The term behind **armies** (*strateuma*) refers to any group of armed forces and is probably better translated "troops," since the king would hardly have needed his full military might to accomplish his purpose. According to the king's instructions, the troops both **destroyed the murderers** responsible for killing his emissaries **and set their city on fire**. The fulfillment of the second prophetic feature in the story occurred in A.D. 70.

When the Roman general Titus conquered Jerusalem in that year, he killed some 1,100,000 Jews, threw their bodies over the wall, and slaughtered countless thousands more throughout Palestine. In his *Jewish War*, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem, graphically chronicled the horrible scene:

That building [the Temple at Jerusalem], however, God long ago had sentenced to the flames; but now in the revolution of the time periods the fateful day had arrived, the tenth of the month Lous, the very day on which previously it had been burned by the king of Babylon. . . . One of the soldiers, neither awaiting orders nor filled with horror of so dread an undertaking, but moved by some supernatural impulse, snatched a brand from the blazing timber and, hoisted up by one of his fellow soldiers, flung the fiery missile through a golden window . . . When the flame arose, a scream, as poignant as the tragedy, went up from the Jews . . . now that the object which before they had guarded so closely was going to ruin. . . . While the sanctuary was burning, . . . neither pity for age nor respect for rank was shown; on the contrary, children and old people, laity and priests alike were massacred. . . . The emperor ordered the entire city and sanctuary to be razed to the ground, except only the highest towers, Phasael, Hippicus, and Mariamne, and that part of the wall that enclosed the city on the west.

The king explained to **his slaves** that **the wedding** was **ready**, **but those who were invited were not worthy** to attend. Their unworthiness was not because in themselves they lacked the required righteousness. Neither the original invitation nor the subsequent calls were based on merit but solely on the king's gracious favor. Ironically and tragically, they were declared to be **not worthy** because they refused an invitation that was in no way based on worth. As the parable goes on to make clear (v. 10), "both evil and good" people were called.

That which makes a person worthy of receiving salvation is not any sort of human goodness or religious or spiritual accomplishment but simply his saying yes to God's invitation to receive His Son, Jesus Christ, as Lord. The people God here declared **not worthy** were His chosen people, Israel, who would not come to Him freely and without merit through His Son. And because they rejected the Son, God rejected them for a season. Because they rejected their own Messiah, they were temporarily cast off as a nation and as God's unique chosen people.

THE NEW GUESTS INVITED

Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast.' And those slaves went out into the streets, and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests. (22:9-10)

The third scene in the parable depicts the guests who were finally invited to replace those who had repeatedly refused the king's call. The wedding feast for the king's son was ready, but there was no one to attend unless new guests were invited.

"Go therefore to the main highways," the king told His servants, **"and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast."** The plan was for them to go everywhere and find everyone they could and **invite** them to come. That is precisely what Jesus commanded in the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19). God had long beforehand predicted through Hosea, "I will call those who were not My people, 'My people,' and her who was not beloved, 'Beloved.' And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not My people,' there they shall be called sons of the living God" (Rom. 9:25-26; cf. Hos. 2:23; 1:10). By the Jews' "transgression," Paul wrote in that same letter, "salvation has come to the Gentiles" (11:11).

Just as their king commanded, **those slaves went out into the streets, and gathered together all they found, both evil and good.** They called the morally **evil** and the morally **good** alike, their being equally unworthy in themselves to come to the king's feast. The original guests had not been invited because of their moral or spiritual superiority, and neither were the newly-invited guests. Among the ancient Jews were those who lived exemplary, upright lives, who were helpful to their neighbors, told the truth, never used the Lord's name in vain, never cheated in business, and never committed adultery or murder or theft. There were also those whose lives were a moral cesspool. But the first kind of person was no more acceptable to God in himself than the second. God has always extended His call for salvation to **both evil and good** people, because neither are righteous enough and both are equally in need of salvation.

Paul makes clear that "neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:9-10). God will not allow those whose lives are characterized by such sins to have any part of His kingdom. But He will receive for salvation a person who is guilty of any or all of those and other sins and who desires to be cleansed from his sins by the redeeming work of Christ on the cross. Therefore Paul could continue to say to his Corinthian brothers in Christ, "And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified" (v. 11).

What makes a person worthy of salvation today is exactly what has made a person worthy of salvation since the Fall, namely, personal faith in God's gracious provision in Christ. All who accept God's invitation to His Son's celebration, that is, who follow the Son as their saving Lord, will be **dinner guests** in His divine and eternally glorious **wedding hall**.

THE INTRUDER EXPELLED

But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw there a man not dressed in wedding clothes, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.” (22:11-14)

The fourth and last scene in the parable focuses on an intruder into the wedding feast, who did not belong because he was **not dressed in wedding clothes**. The man obviously had been included in the general invitation, because the king made no restrictions as to who was invited, having instructed his slaves to call both the evil and good wherever they might be found. He was not a party crasher who came without an invitation, but he had come improperly **dressed**, and he obviously stood out in the great wedding hall, in stark contrast to all the other **dinner guests**.

At first reading, one wonders how any of those who accepted the king’s invitation could have been expected to come properly attired. They had been rounded up from every part of the land, and many had been taken off the streets. Even if they had time to dress properly, they had no clothes befitting such an occasion as the wedding of the king’s son.

But the fact that all of **the dinner guests** except that one man were **dressed in wedding clothes** indicates that the king had made provision for such **clothes**. It would have been a moral mockery, especially for such an obviously kind and gracious ruler, to invite even the most wicked people in the land to come to the feast and then exclude one poor fellow because he had no proper clothes to wear.

That man was fully accountable for being improperly dressed, but the gracious king nevertheless gave him an opportunity to justify himself, asking with undeserved respect, **“Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?”** Had the man had a good reason, he would certainly have mentioned it immediately. But **he was speechless**, unable to offer the king even the feeblest excuse. It is

therefore obvious that he *could* have come in **wedding clothes** had he been willing.

Until that point the man had been utterly presumptuous, thinking he could come to the king's feast on his own terms, in any clothes he wanted. He was proud and self-willed, thoughtless of the others, and, worst of all, insulting to the king. Arrogantly defying royal protocol, he was determined to "be himself."

But his arrogance was short-lived. When, as the king knew in advance, the man could not excuse himself, **the king said to the servants, "Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."** The binding of **hand and foot** probably represents prevention of the man's resisting as well as prevention of his returning. By that time it was night, and although the wedding hall would be well lighted, it was dark outside. The man was permanently expelled from the presence of the king and of the king's people **into the outer darkness**. He would have great regret and remorse, and, with everyone else **in that place**, he would experience perpetual **weeping and gnashing of teeth**. But though he had a great opportunity, he had never had, and did not now have, the godly sorrow that leads to repentance and salvation (2 Cor. 7:10).

Since Cain's first attempt to please God by offering his self-appointed sacrifice, men have been trying to come to the Lord on their own terms. They may fellowship with believers, join the church, become active in the leadership, give generously to its support, and speak of devotion to God. Like the tares among the wheat, they freely coexist for a while with God's people. But in the day of judgment their falsehood will become obvious and their removal certain. Some will dare to say to God "on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then [Christ] will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'" (Matt. 7:22-23).

The proper wedding garment of a true believer is God-imputed righteousness, without which no one can enter or live in the kingdom. Unless a person's righteousness exceeds the hypocritical self-righteousness that typified the scribes and Pharisees, he "shall

not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20). The only acceptable wedding garment is the genuine “sanctification without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14).

Many of Jesus’ Jewish hearers that day would have recalled the beautiful passage from Isaiah which declares, “I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will exult in my God; for He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness” (Isa. 61:10). Sincere Jews knew that, contrary to the man-made, legalistic traditions of their rabbis, God not only requires inner righteousness of men but He also offers it as a gift.

God’s eyes, of course, can see into men’s hearts to know whether their righteousness is of their own making or His granting. But even outwardly a true believer’s life will evidence right living and reflect right thinking. The Lord not only *imputes* but *imparts* righteousness to His children. Only *He* can see the internal righteousness that He imputes, but *everyone* can see the external righteousness that He imparts. A child of God is characterized by a holy life. Peter made that fact clear when he described salvation as “obedience to the truth” which has “purified your souls” (1 Pet. 1:22).

Just before Jesus declared that prophesying, casting out demons, and performing miracles in His name may be false evidence of salvation, He had said that true evidence of salvation will always be apparent. A person’s spiritual condition will be manifested in the fruit of his living. “Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they?” He had asked rhetorically. “Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit” (Matt. 7:16-17, 21-23). A holy, godly life cannot help bearing righteous fruit, because it is the natural outgrowth of the work of the Spirit within (Gal. 5:22-23).

Jesus surely would have been pleased had one of His hearers interrupted and asked, “How can I be clothed in the proper garment? What can I do to keep from being cast into the outer darkness like that man?” He no doubt would have said to that person as He had said many times before in various ways, “Come to Me, that you may have life” (John 5:40). As Paul explained to the Corinthians, God made Christ “who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might

become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). That is the wedding garment that God demands and His Son provides.

Jesus did not ask the Jewish leaders to comment on this parable as He had done with the previous two, where in each case they condemned themselves by their answers (21:31-32, 40-45). He knew they would not be trapped again, because it was now obvious that the whole thrust of the parables was to condemn them. Their only purpose, now heating up to a fury, was to trap and condemn Him to death (22:15; cf. 21:46).

Consequently, the Lord closed with the simple but sobering statement, **Many are called, but few are chosen**. That phrase reflects the scriptural balance between God’s sovereignty and man’s will. The invitations to the wedding feast went out to **many**, representative of everyone to whom the gospel message is sent. **But few** of those who heard the call were willing to accept it and thereby be among the **chosen**. The gospel invitation is sent to everyone, because it is not the Father’s will that a single person be excluded from His kingdom and perish in the outer darkness of hell (2 Pet. 3:9). But not everyone wants God, and many who claim to want Him do not want Him on His terms. Those who are saved enter God’s kingdom because of their willing acceptance of His sovereign, gracious provision. Those who are lost are excluded from the kingdom because of their willing rejection of that same sovereign grace.

30
Our Obligation to
God and
Government
(22:15-22)

Then the Pharisees went and counseled together how they might trap Him in what He said. And they sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any. Tell us therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?” But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, “Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the coin used for the poll-tax.” And they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said to Him, “Caesar’s.” Then He said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s;

and to God the things that are God's." And hearing this, they marveled, and leaving Him, they went away. (22:15-22)

Taxes are of major importance in any developed society, and without them government could not function. They are also a perennial point of contention for those citizens who wonder why their taxes are so high and why they are not spent more wisely.

From time to time certain Christian groups raise an organized protest against a given tax or a particular use of tax money they feel is contrary to biblical principles and the constitution. An outcry was raised some years ago when the United States government ordered churches and other religious organizations to withhold Social Security taxes from the payrolls of all employees except pastors. Some Christians vociferously argued that the law required the church to take money donated to the Lord's work and use it to pay the government.

It is with the ever-present issue of paying taxes that Jesus deals in the present passage.

It was still Wednesday of Passover week, and Jesus was teaching in the Temple, which He had violently cleansed the day before. He had just finished telling and explaining three judgment parables against unbelieving Israel, particularly directed against the Temple rulers who had challenged His authority (21:23). After the second parable the chief priests and Pharisees were so enraged that they would have had Him arrested on the spot had they not feared the multitudes (21:46). It was bad enough that He had devastated the physical domain of their concession booths in the Temple. Now He also devastated their religious domain, exposing their unbelief and ungodliness before all Israel.

The religious leaders resented Jesus because He exposed their pride, hypocrisy, and self-righteousness. They envied His great popularity with the people, especially in light of the fact that He had never sought or received official Sanhedrin certification as a rabbi. Most of all, they were incensed at His claim to be the Messiah and the Son of God, a claim which in their eyes was blatant blasphemy. He even dared to publicly humiliate them in the Temple, the one

place where they thought their honor was sacrosanct and their authority incontestable. Now, after the third scathing parable, they were all the more determined to find a means of doing away with Him.

Following Jesus' series of three judgment parables against them, those religionists responded by confronting Him with a series of three questions, all designed to maneuver Him into condemning Himself either politically or religiously. The first question was devised by the Pharisees but asked of Jesus surreptitiously by their disciples (22:15-22), the second was asked by the Sadducees (vv. 23-33), and the third by the Pharisees directly (vv. 34-40). Instead of taking Jesus' warnings to heart and asking Him how they might avoid the judgment and receive mercy from God, the only word they wanted from Him was that which would bring about His own destruction.

THE ATTACK

Then the Pharisees went and counseled together how they might trap Him in what He said. And they sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any. Tell us therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?" (22:15-17)

The Pharisees had always been Jesus' most vocal and vehement enemies, and at this moment, in response to His powerfully intimidating parables, they now **went and counseled together how they might trap Jesus in what He said**. While Jesus continued to teach the crowds in the Court of the Gentiles, **the Pharisees** gathered privately in another part of the Temple to plan their next move in private. Because they were still afraid to take action against Him directly, they cleverly planned to **trap** Him into making a subversive statement against Rome that would insure His arrest and execution as

an insurrectionist. They wanted to “catch Him in some statement, so as to deliver Him up to the rule and the authority of the governor” (Luke 20:20), who at that time was Pilate. That way they would have Him out of the way without getting their own hands sullied or arousing the anger of the people.

Probably because the Pharisees were easily distinguished by their dress and many of them were known to Jesus by sight, they decided to send **their disciples to Him**. The Pharisees were Jesus’ harshest critics and He theirs, and for them to flatter Him directly would have been ludicrous and self-defeating. Presumably **their disciples** would not be recognized as such and they could pretend simply to be a group of sincere admirers who wanted Jesus’ advice about a question that burned in the minds of most Jews of that day. They hoped He would be caught off guard and entrap Himself before He realized what was happening.

The Herodians were not normal allies of the Pharisees. In fact, the two groups were usually at great odds with each other. Not much is known about **the Herodians** besides what can be inferred from their name. The Herod family was not Jewish but Idumean, descendants of Israel’s ancient enemies the Edomites. Beginning with Herod the Great, they had received favors from Rome in the form of various high political appointments, including rulerships over parts of Palestine.

The Herodians had no love for Jesus and may even have been instructed by Herod Antipas to try to instigate His death or at least imprisonment. It was that tetrarch who had imprisoned and eventually beheaded Jesus’ forerunner and friend, John the Baptist, and when Herod heard of Jesus’ miraculous works, he was afraid that He was John risen from the dead. But he was also curious to see Jesus in order to witness His miracle-working power (Luke 9:7; cf. 23:8). Some time later, certain Pharisees who were friendly to Jesus warned Him to flee Perea because “Herod wants to kill you” (Luke 13:31). Consequently, during the latter part of His ministry Jesus had avoided the territory of Herod because of the hostility toward Him there, “for it cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem” (13:33).

Any **Herodians**, even if they were Jews as these men were, would have had strong allegiance to Rome, and it was doubtlessly for that reason that the Pharisees asked some of them to accompany their disciples as they confronted Jesus. Should Jesus fall into their trap and make the expected objection to paying Roman taxes, the Herodian Roman sympathizers would serve as credible witnesses. Although the Pharisees despised **the Herodians** as irreligious traitors, it well suited their purpose to enlist these men's help in entrapping Jesus.

Just as the Pharisees' praise of Jesus would not have been taken seriously, neither would anything they said in support of Rome. The Pharisees were highly religious and fiercely nationalistic, not unlike the Zealots. But they perhaps despised the Romans more for their paganism than for their military oppression. In any case, their hatred of Rome was no secret, and were they to report a seditious statement or activity to the governor, they would themselves have become suspect. **The Herodians** were therefore useful, even if dishonorable, co-conspirators, and they would make perfect pro-Roman witnesses against Jesus. Although the Pharisees and Herodians violently disagreed about religion and politics, they wholeheartedly agreed about Jesus and were not loath to make common cause against Him.

With the Herodians supporting them, the disciples of the Pharisees, whom Luke describes as "spies who pretended to be righteous" (Luke 20:20), flatteringly said to Jesus, "**Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one: for You are not partial to any.**" To address a Jewish man as **Teacher** was a high form of honor, reserved for rabbis who had distinguished themselves as astute students and interpreters of Jewish law and tradition. The Talmud said, "The one who teaches the law shall gain a seat in the academy on high."

The men outwardly praised Jesus' personal and doctrinal integrity by declaring that He was **truthful** and taught **the way of God in truth**. He was God's Man teaching God's truth, they affirmed. Neither did He **defer to** or become **partial to any**, they added. He would not be swayed by threats or opposition but was known for standing His ground with courage and conviction.

What those men said of Jesus could not have been more accurate, but they did not believe a word of it. Although flattery often involved lying, it is most deceptive and despicable when it employs the truth to achieve its wicked purposes.

Assuming that Jesus was inwardly reveling in their flattery, the men sprang their trap question: **“Tell us therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?”** One of the highest forms of praise is to ask a person’s advice on an important issue. Therefore, after Jesus’ ego was, as they supposed, stimulated by the previous compliments, the questioners were certain that, like most men, He would be eager to display the wisdom for which He had just been praised. In doing so He would blurt out an unguarded answer that would become His death warrant.

Poll-tax translates *kēnsos*, taken from the Latin (i.e., Roman) *censere*, from which is derived the English *census*. Of the many taxes the Romans exacted from occupied territories, none was more onerous to Jews than the **poll-tax**, a tax payable yearly by every individual and therefore sometimes called the head tax. Among other things, it was for the purpose of collecting the **poll-tax** that Rome took a periodic census, such as the one that had required Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem just before Jesus was born (Luke 2:1-4).

Paying for the support of the occupying forces and providing the many beneficial services for which Rome was famous required an enormous amount of money, necessarily supplied by taxation. Consequently, a land tax of one tenth of the grain and one fifth of the wine and oil produced was assessed annually, as was a one percent income tax on wage earners. Customs taxes on merchandise were collected at all ports and major crossroads.

The Romans offered many services to conquered peoples, not the least beneficial of which was the Pax Romana, or Roman peace. Because of their strategic military and commercial locations, many countries of the Near East had had little respite from war for centuries. They fought one invader after another and were ruled by one conqueror after another. At least under Roman protection they were free from war and could travel in relative safety anywhere in the empire. The Romans also provided valuable roads and aqueducts, many ruins of which still exist today.

Although the **poll-tax** may not have been the most costly tax for most people, it was the most resented by Jews. Perhaps it was because they considered themselves as personally belonging to God rather than to Caesar. It was the census tax that incited the insurrection of Judas of Galilee in A.D. 6 that was instrumental in the deposing of Herod Archelaus and his replacement by a Roman governor. Judas's rallying cry was that, because God was their only God and Lord, the census tax would not be paid to Rome. As Gamaliel reminded the Sanhedrin when Peter and the other apostles were being questioned in Jerusalem, the rebel Judas "perished, and all those who followed him were scattered" (Acts 5:37). It was the nationalistic, anti-Roman sentiment of Judas on which the Zealot movement was built and that was behind the rebellion of A.D. 66 that eventuated in the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple four years later.

It was therefore not by accident that the Pharisees had instructed their disciples to induce Jesus to make a statement about the **poll-tax**. If He gave an answer favorable to the tax, He would become despised by the Jewish multitudes who until then highly admired Him. In that case, the Jewish leaders would then be free to arrest and have Him executed without interference from the populace. But they presumed He would answer otherwise and openly declare that the tax was both unjust and ungodly and should not be paid to the oppressive, pagan **Caesar**, thus incurring the wrath of Rome as an insurrectionist.

THE ACCUSATION

But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, "Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites? (22:18)

But by His divine discernment **Jesus perceived their malice**. It was not possible to blind-side Jesus, because "He Himself knew what was in man" (John 2:25). He omnisciently knew the question

they would ask and the reason for asking it even before it came to the minds of the Pharisees who concocted it. He knew the men who posed the question were not the ones who devised it, and that the words of praise they had just showered on Him were not motivated by admiration but **malice**. He knew their flattering tongues were tipped with poison. He also knew exactly the right answer.

Before answering their question, He threw a question of His own in their faces: **“Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites?”** He let them know that their wicked scheme was transparent to Him, that He knew their purpose was to test Him, not to seek His wisdom, and that He was hereby exposing them as the **hypocrites** they were. Although He had never seen them before, He knew they were emissaries of the Pharisees as surely as if He had overheard the plot. That demonstration of omniscience was in itself another marvelous testimony to His deity.

Not only the Old Testament but rabbinic tradition strongly condemned flattery and hypocrisy. Rabbi Eleazar had written in the Talmud, “Any community in which is flattery will finally go into exile. It is written [Job 15:34], ‘For the community of flatterers is [barren]’” (*Sotah* 42a). Rabbi Jeremiah ben Abba had declared that four types of people do not deserve to be blessed by God: scorers, liars, tale-bearers, and hypocrites (*Sanhedrin* 103a).

THE ANALOGY

Show Me the coin used for the poll-tax.” And they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said to Him, “Caesar’s.” (22:19-21a)

Jesus then said, **“Show Me the coin used for the poll-tax.”** Disregarding Jesus’ harsh accusations against them, the men readily **brought Him a denarius**, being more than glad to help Him fall into their snare. The specific **coin used for the poll-tax** was the **denarius**,

which amounted to the daily wage for a soldier or common laborer in Palestine.

Although several coinages, including Greek and Hebrew, were used in Israel at the time, and exchange from one to the other was easy, only the Roman **denarius** could be used to pay the **poll-tax**. It was a silver coin, minted expressly by the emperor, who alone had the authority to issue coins in silver or gold. All such coins, including the **denarius**, bore an engraving of the emperor on one side and an identifying inscription on the other.

That fact made the coins especially offensive to Jews for several reasons. For one thing, the emperor's picture was a reminder of Roman oppression, and for another, the Mosaic law specifically forbade the making of images (Ex. 20:4). In modern Israel, certain extremely orthodox Jews strictly forbid the taking of their photographs, because the resulting picture is considered a graven image.

If the particular coin in Jesus' hand was minted by Tiberius, one side bore an engraving of his face and the reverse an engraving of him sitting on his throne in priestly robes, with an inscription designating him as the high priest. Several emperors, including Julius Caesar, had even accepted appellations of deity for themselves, thereby demanding religious as well as political homage. At the appearance of an unusual star in 17 B.C., Augustus Caesar had proclaimed a twelve-day celebration, at which the Roman college of priests, of which he was chief, granted mass absolution from sin for all the people of the empire. During that same year coins were minted claiming Augustus as the Son of God. And the idea of a divine emperor was inconceivably repulsive to Jews.

Although any child would have known the answer to His question, Jesus held up the coin and asked, "**Whose likeness and inscription is this?**" Thinking that He was at last about to speak the fatal words against Rome, the men eagerly replied, perhaps in unison, **Caesar's**. Because Jesus had claimed deity, calling Himself God's Son, the disciples of the Pharisees confidently expected Him to denounce as a false god and blasphemer the caesar whose **likeness and inscription** He was holding up before them.

THE ANSWER AND THE AFTERMATH

Then He said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s.” And hearing this, they marveled, and leaving Him, they went away. (22:21b-22)

But instead, Jesus **said to them, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s.”** The profundity of that statement is often missed because of its simplicity. *Apodidomi* (**render**) means to pay or give back, implying a debt. It carries the idea of obligation and responsibility for something that is not optional. Jesus’ answer to the original question (v. 17) was therefore, “Yes, it is entirely lawful and right to pay the poll-tax to Caesar, because that tax is **Caesar’s**, belonging to **the things** in his domain.”

Jesus did not use the word *give*, as had the disciples of the Pharisees in asking the question. For them, as for most Jews, paying any tax to Rome was not considered a legitimate duty and was done only with the greatest reluctance. Now Jesus declared that the payment not only was perfectly legal but morally obligatory.

Jesus here declared the divinely-ordained obligation of citizens to pay taxes to whatever government is over them. Paying taxes is a legitimate duty of every person, but is specially binding on believers because they are specially bound to God’s Word. Jesus made no qualifying exemptions or exceptions, even under rulers such as the blasphemous, pagan, idolatrous government that in a few days would nail Him to the cross. The government that executed the Son of God was to be paid taxes by God’s people. The state has the divine right to assess taxes that are within its sphere of responsibility, and its citizens have the divine obligation to pay them.

Giving a universal command, but in the context of living under that same pagan Roman system, Paul wrote, “Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. . . . Wherefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of

wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor" (Rom. 13:1, 5-7). We are not only to respect and submit to such rulers and leaders but also to pray for them. "I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men," Paul wrote to Timothy, "for kings and all who are in authority, in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior" (1 Tim. 2:1-3).

Teaching the same principle, Peter wrote, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men" (1 Pet. 2:13-15).

By God's own sovereign decree, presidents, kings, prime ministers, governors, mayors, police, and all other governmental authorities stand in His place, as it were, for the preservation of society. To resist government is therefore to resist God. To refuse to pay taxes is to disobey God's command. By God's own declaration, to pay taxes to Caesar honors God.

If in an age of pagan despotism and open persecution of the church believers were obligated to pay taxes, how much more obligated are modern Christians who live in free and democratic societies? Regardless of the seemingly spiritual reasons that may be proposed for resisting the payment of taxes, there are none that the Lord recognizes. To argue that paying taxes to a worldly, humanistic government is ungodly and unjustified is spurious and contradicts what God Himself says on the subject. His own Word commands unequivocally that taxes are to be paid because, by His divine ordination, they are a part of **the things that are Caesar's**. All things belong to God, but He has decreed that a certain amount of that which He entrusts to each person is to be paid to human governments as taxes.

But even more importantly, Jesus went on to say, men must render **to God the things that are God's**. He was not separating

secular human society from religion, saying, in effect, that one owes allegiance to human government in regard to material things and allegiance to God in regard to the spiritual. Scripture never makes such a dichotomy, because all things and every area of life belong to God. Jesus was still talking about Caesar, saying that **the things that are God's** do *not* belong to Caesar and should never be offered to him, but only **to God**.

As a representative of human government, Caesar had the right to assess taxes, but as a representative of human religion, as emperors frequently were, they had no right to command worship. Men are to pay taxes to the head of a government as a human ruler but never homage to him as a god. His realm is social and economic, and to the extent that he steps outside that realm, his authority ceases and men's obligation to him ceases. When the Sanhedrin, which had political as well religious authority in Jerusalem, gave the apostles "strict orders not to continue teaching in [Jesus'] name," Peter replied for all of them, saying, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:28-29).

The church in the Soviet Union and other communist countries is persecuted today because it refuses to give total allegiance to the state. Although the majority of Christians in those lands are good citizens in every way, including in the payment of taxes, they will not surrender their souls or the souls of their children to the government, because such homage is solely the prerogative of God.

Upon **hearing** Jesus' response, the disciples of the Pharisees were utterly astonished at His wisdom. **They marveled, and leaving Him, they went away.** They had nothing to say, and had the presence of mind to leave before exposing still more of their ignorance and wickedness.

31
The God of the
Living
(22:23-33)

On that day some Sadducees (who say there is no resurrection) came to Him and questioned Him, saying, “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies, having no children, his brother as next of kin shall marry his wife, and raise up an offspring to his brother.’ Now there were seven brothers with us; and the first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother; so also the second, and the third, down to the seventh. And last of all, the woman died. In the resurrection therefore whose wife of the seven shall she be? For they all had her.” But Jesus answered and said to them, “You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures, or the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken to you by God

saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.” And when the multitudes heard this, they were astonished at His teaching. (22:23-33)

Mankind in general has always anticipated an afterlife of some sort. The idea is built into the heart of man that there must be a continuation of existence when the physical life is over. James Dwight Dana, a nineteenth-century professor at Yale University, said that he could not believe that God would create man and then desert him at the grave. In that statement, Professor Dana summarized the hope that, to one degree or another, has captured virtually every heart in every culture in every time.

The ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead* is filled with ideas and stories about life after death. In the tomb of the great pharaoh Cheops, who died some 5,000 years ago, archaeologists discovered a solar boat intended for him to use in sailing through the heavens during the next life. Ancient Greeks often placed a coin in the mouth of a corpse to pay his fare across the mystic river of death into the land of immortal life. Some American Indians buried a pony and bow and arrows with a dead warrior in order that he could ride and hunt in the happy hunting grounds. Norsemen buried a dead hero’s horse with him so he could ride proudly in the next life. Eskimos of Greenland who died in childhood were customarily buried with a dog to help guide them through the cold wasteland of death.

Benjamin Franklin, who did not claim to be a Christian in the biblical sense, nevertheless had the following epitaph inscribed on his tombstone:

The body of
Benjamin Franklin, printer,
(Like the cover of an old book,
Its contents worn out,
And stript of its lettering and gilding)
Lies here, food for worms!
Yet the work itself shall not be lost,

For it will, as he believed, appear once more
In a new
And more beautiful edition,
Corrected and amended
By its Author!

Despite many strange and unbiblical aberrations regarding the subject, men feel the pull of the afterlife. The Jews of Jesus' day were certainly no exception. Belief in the resurrection of the body is taught throughout the Talmud, the ancient codification of Jewish oral and written tradition. The apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees, written about 100 B.C., describes a Jewish elder named Razis who greatly resented Greek oppression. Rather than be executed by the hated Greeks, he decided to take his own life. Standing on a rock in front of a large crowd, he disemboweled himself with his sword and threw his entrails into the crowd, in vain hope "calling upon the Lord of life and spirit to give [his discarded organs] back to him again" (14:46). In the Apocalypse of Baruch, written nearly 200 years later, the expectation is expressed that when a person dies he will come back to life in the same form in which he died.

The earth shall then assuredly restore the dead, which it now receiveth in order to preserve them. It shall make no change in their form, but as it hath received, so shall it preserve them, and as it delivered them unto it, so shall it restore them. . . . For then it will be necessary to show to the living that the dead have come to life again, and that those who had departed have returned. . . . They shall respectively be transformed . . . into the splendour of angels . . . and time shall no longer age them. For in the heights of that world shall they dwell, and they shall be made like unto the angels, and be made equal to the stars, and they shall be changed into every form they desire, from beauty into loveliness and from light into the splendour of glory. (50:2–51:10)

Much more important and reliable than those writings, of course, were the Old Testament statements regarding life after death. David wrote, “Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; my flesh also will dwell securely. For Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol; neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay” (Ps. 16:9-10). Another psalmist declared, “God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol; for He will receive me” (Ps. 49:15), and still another that, “With Thy counsel Thou wilt guide me, and afterward receive me to glory” (Ps. 73:24). Hosea wrote, “Come, let us return to the Lord. For He has torn us, but He will heal us; He has wounded us, but He will bandage us. He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day that we may live before Him” (Hos. 6:1-2). In perhaps the clearest teaching of resurrection in the Old Testament, the Lord promised through Daniel that “many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:2).

For the most part, therefore, Jews not only believed in life after death but in the resurrection of the body. The one exception were the Sadducees, who in that and other ways were at odds with the rest of Jewish theology and culture. It was representatives of that sect who asked Jesus the second in a series of three questions designed to entrap Him (see also 22:15-22; 34-40).

THE APPROACH

On that day some Sadducees (who say there is no resurrection) came to Him and questioned Him, (22:23)

It was still Wednesday, as Jesus continued to teach in the Temple after having driven the merchants out of it the previous day (21:12, 23). Sometime later **on that day**, after He had put to silence the disciples of the Pharisees and their Herodian co-conspirators (22:16), **some Sadducees** attempted to succeed where the others had failed.

The **Sadducees** were the smallest but by far the most wealthy and influential of the Jewish sects, which included the Pharisees, the Zealots, and the Essenes. The Pharisees were the most numerous, the most popular, the most outwardly religious. They held strongly to external customs and practices and were legalistic to the core, firmly believing that their works gained them acceptance with God. For them, the rabbinical traditions had become more authoritative than Scripture, although many of the traditions were devised simply as accommodations to their sinful desires.

The Zealots were political and often military activists, extremely nationalistic and resentful of Roman control of Israel.

The Essenes were a reclusive sect who spent much of their time copying the Old Testament. It was a group of Essenes living at Qumran, on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, who produced what became known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The **Sadducees** were the aristocrats of Judaism, being largely in control of the Temple and the operation of the priesthood, and it was primarily through the Temple concessions of money changing and sacrifice selling (see 21:12) that they obtained their wealth. The high priest and chief priests were almost invariably Sadducees, as were most members of the Sanhedrin, the high Jewish council.

Despite their great power and influence, and partly because of it, the Sadducees were not respected by most Jews, especially by the Pharisees. They were aloof from the common people and acted superior to them. But they were also disliked for their theology, the most distinct teaching of which was that **there is no resurrection**.

Politically, the Sadducees were pro-Roman, because it was only by Roman permission that they exercised not only their religious but their considerable political control over the people. Because they were valuable in helping keep the people under control, the Sadducees were delegated limited authority by Rome, even to the extent of having their own police force in the form of a Temple guard. Because of their complete dependence on Rome for their power, they were understandably strongly supportive of their pagan rulers. And for that they were also hated by the people.

Because their power and wealth were founded in the Temple and its offerings, sacrificial system, and commercial enterprises,

when the Temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, the Sadducees, like the entire priesthood, ceased to exist.

Religiously, the Sadducees were in some ways extreme fundamentalists. They interpreted Scripture with great literalism and consequently were even more absolutist and rigid on certain matters than the Pharisees. Josephus reported that in rendering judgments in behalf of the people they were more vicious than any other sect (*Antiquities*, XX.ix.i). They refused to acknowledge any worth, much less authority, in the oral or written interpretations of Scripture or in the rabbinical traditions. They were fastidious in Levitical purity and prided themselves as being the preservers of the true faith.

But for some reason they gave unique primacy to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, almost to the exclusion of the rest of Scripture. The other books were considered more or less as commentaries on the five books of Moses. It is therefore because Moses taught nothing directly about the resurrection that the Sadducees denied its reality.

But a person who does not believe in a life after this present life has little motive for living other than he pleases. After death he expects neither penalty nor reward, because he considers the end of this life to be the end of everything. And in spite of the many clear teachings in the Pentateuch about godly living, the Sadducees were perfectly comfortable in their proud and selfish worldliness.

The Sadducees and Pharisees were continually at odds with each other, and it was precisely for that reason that Paul declared his belief in the resurrection when he was on trial before the Sanhedrin. "Perceiving that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul began crying out in the Council, 'Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!' And as he said this, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all" (Acts 23: 6-8).

When challenged by the Sadducees to prove that the resurrection was taught by Moses, the Pharisees apparently could muster only two or three obscure references. They argued that Numbers 18:28 implied resurrection, in that it spoke of giving "the

Lord's offering to Aaron the priest," the present tense indicating that Aaron was still alive. An even more obscure text cited was Deuteronomy 31:16, which speaks of the people arising; but their arising was not to a future life but to harlotry. A third text was Deuteronomy 32:39, in which the Lord says, "It is I who put to death and give life," a reference simply to His sovereign authority over life and death.

The Pharisees and Sadducees had great social and political as well as theological animosity between them. Socially, the Sadducees were aristocratic and the Pharisees were commoners. Politically, the Sadducees were pro-Roman and the Pharisees anti-Roman.

There was one issue, however, that solidly united Pharisees and Sadducees: their intransigent opposition to Jesus.

Until the Lord's coming to Jerusalem on the previous Monday, the Sadducees had shown little interest in Jesus. The fact that He was popular with the people, believed in resurrection, and was opposed by the Pharisees was of little consequence to them as long as what He said and did had no direct, practical effect on them or their activities. Jesus' cleansing the Temple, however, immediately got their attention, because the merchants and moneychangers He drove out of the court of the Gentiles were the financial mainstay of Sadducee power. Jesus had now invaded their territory with a vengeance, disrupting their operation at the most lucrative time of the year, when all the Passover offerings and sacrifices were made.

Jesus' acclamation as the Son of David during His triumphal entry also no doubt had them worried, because any claim to kingship would evoke immediate and harsh repression by the Romans, who would not tolerate the smallest hint of rebellion. Any action against the Jews in general would necessarily threaten the Sadducees' own privileged position and power under the Romans, who expected those leaders to keep Jewish nationalism and resistance in check. Only a few days earlier, "the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, 'What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.' But a certain one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all, nor do

you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish” (John 11:47-50; cf. Mark 14:1-2). “From that day on,” John noted, “they planned together to kill Him” (v. 53).

After Pentecost, the Sadducees continued their strong opposition against Jesus by persecuting His followers. As the apostles “were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees, came upon them, being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead” (Acts 4:1-2). According to Josephus, it was the Sadducees who murdered James, the brother of the Lord.

After the Pharisees had failed through their disciples to trick Jesus into making a traitorous statement against Rome, the Sadducees attempted to make Him discredit Himself in the eyes of the Jewish people. By asking Him what they thought was an unanswerable question, they planned to make Him look the fool, as they perhaps had succeeded, on occasion, in doing with the Pharisees.

THE ABSURDITY

saying, “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies, having no children, his brother as next of kin shall marry his wife, and raise up an offspring to his brother.’ Now there were seven brothers with us; and the first married and died, and having no offspring left his wife to his brother; so also the second, and the third, down to the seventh. And last of all, the woman died. In the resurrection therefore whose wife of the seven shall she be? For they all had her.” (22:24-28)

Like the previous group (v. 16), by addressing Jesus as **Teacher**, the Sadducees thought to put Jesus off guard with condescending flattery, what one commentator has called “polished scoffing.” Their choice of titles was especially duplicitous because it was as a Teacher that they intended to embarrass and discredit Him.

No higher appeal could be made than to **Moses**, not only for the Sadducees but for any Jew He was the great lawgiver, the supreme spokesman for God in the Old Testament. Because the Sadducees were aware of Jesus' high regard for Scripture, they knew that He would not contest the validity of the teaching they were about to cite, namely, the provision for levirate marriage.

The term *levirate* is from *levir*, Latin for "husband's brother." The Mosaic provision is found in Deuteronomy 25:5-6, a summary of which the Sadducees here gave to Jesus. In order that tribal names, families, and inheritances might be kept intact, **If a man dies, having no children, his brother as next of kin shall marry his wife, and raise up an offspring to his brother.**

The custom of levirate marriage had been practiced for many centuries and was honored by God even before He directed Moses to place it in the law. When Judah's son Er was killed by the Lord for his wickedness, Judah told another son, Onan, who was unmarried, "Go into your brother's wife, and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother." But Onan resented the fact the children would not be considered his own and "he wasted his seed on the ground." That act was "displeasing in the sight of the Lord; so He took his life also" (Gen. 38:8-10).

It was in fulfillment of the levirate law that Boaz took Ruth as his wife because her first husband, Mahlon, had died. When a male relative closer to Ruth than Boaz was unable to redeem her, Boaz happily took her as his own bride (Ruth 4:1-10). That beautiful story not only depicts the human preservation of Mahlon's lineage but also the divine preservation of the lineage of Christ (Matt. 1:5).

Whether or not levirate marriage was still practiced in Jesus' day, the custom was well known to every Jew and recognized to be a divine provision. To the Sadducees it seemed the perfect means to prove the absurdity of the idea of resurrection.

In saying, "**Now there were seven brothers with us,**" the Sadducees may have meant they were reporting an actual story, but it is likely they custom-designed it for this occasion. When **the first brother married**, the six others were unmarried, and therefore when he **died . . . having no offspring, he left his wife to his brother.** The

process was repeated with all seven brothers, and eventually everyone, including **the woman**, died.

It is not difficult to imagine the glint in the eyes and the smirks on the faces of the Sadducees as they looked at Jesus and propounded their supposedly unanswerable question: **“In the resurrection therefore whose wife of the seven shall she be?”** If all eight would appear in the resurrection exactly in the condition and circumstances in which they had died—as the Pharisees, and presumably Jesus, maintained—how could their marriage relationships possibly be reconciled? That dilemma proved the idea of resurrection to be patently absurd, as Jesus now would be forced to admit, by His silence if not His words.

THE ANSWER

But Jesus answered and said to them, “You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures, or the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken to you by God saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”
(22:29-32)

The Sadducees probably expected Jesus to say nothing and to walk away in humiliation and disgrace, as they probably had caused the Pharisees to do at times.

But Jesus answered without hesitation and immediately put them on the defensive, saying **to them, “You are mistaken.”** The Sadducees had succeeded only in putting their own ignorance on display for everyone in the Temple to see and hear. “You are dead wrong,” Jesus said, in effect, “and have no idea what you are talking about.”

Planaō, from which **are mistaken** is translated, means to go astray, wander off, or deceive. In its form here it means to lead oneself off course or to stray from the truth. It often carried the idea of being cut loose from reality. Like the false teachers condemned by Jude, the Sadducees were “wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever” (Jude 13).

Jesus next presented the two reasons *why* the Sadducees were **mistaken**. They erred in **not understanding the Scriptures** and in not understanding **the power of God**. Nothing could have cut them to the quick worse than to be accused of not understanding these two areas in which the proud Sadducees considered themselves most authoritative.

The Lord then explains, in reverse order, *how* they misunderstood God’s Word and God’s power.

IGNORANCE OF GOD’S POWER

For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. (22:30)

In exposing the Sadducees’ false notion about **the resurrection**, Jesus also exposed their false notion about **angels**, whose existence those religious leaders denied. In the heavenly state, He declared, men and women **neither marry, nor are given in marriage**. The relationship of **marriage** is beautiful and divinely ordained, but it is an entirely earthly and temporal institution.

Sexual relationships, reproduction, and childbirth have no place in heaven, because there is no death there and no new life born as there is on earth. Nor will there will be any exclusive relationships in heaven, because everyone will be perfectly and intimately related to everyone else, including to the living God Himself. **In heaven**, men will be **like angels**, equally spiritual in nature, equally deathless, equally glorified, and equally eternal. Luke reports Jesus’ additional

statement that resurrected believers “are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection” (Luke 20:36).

No doubt partly because of the influence of Pharisaic teaching about one’s resurrection body being the same as his earthly body had been, the believers in Corinth were confused about the subject. Trying to explain in terms that those immature and misinformed Christians could understand, Paul pointed out that,

all flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one flesh of men, and another flesh of beasts, and another flesh of birds, and another of fish. There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one, and the glory of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. . . . As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy, and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. And just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly. (1 Cor. 15:39-44, 48-49)

God’s limitless power is easily able to transform the earthly into the heavenly. Why should anyone deny the resurrection because of the foolish idea that God is restricted to raising up bodies in the same form as that in which they died? Such a belief foolishly attacks the power of God.

IGNORANCE OF SCRIPTURE

But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken to you by God saying, ‘I am the God of

Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living." (22:31-32)

Knowing that the Sadducees would not be convinced **regarding the resurrection** from any part of Scripture but the Pentateuch, Jesus reminded them of a statement **spoken . . . by God** that is recorded numerous times in the book of Exodus: **I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.**

"That the dead are raised, even Moses showed," Jesus first told the doubting Sadducees (Luke 20:37). The words about His being the God of the patriarchs were first spoken to Moses by God when He appeared to him in the burning bush at Horeb and called him to lead His people out of bondage in Egypt to the Promised Land (Ex. 3:6). And the phrase was repeated many times after that (see, e.g., Ex. 3:15-16; 4:15). Hundreds of years earlier the Lord had declared to Jacob, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac" (Gen. 28:13) long after Abraham had died.

Jesus' excellent exegetical argument is based on the emphatic present tense of the **I am** used in that passage from the Pentateuch. After **Abraham** and **Isaac** and **Jacob** were long dead, the Lord was still their **God** every bit as much as when they were alive—in fact, in many ways even more so, because they had become perfectly sinless and their souls were experiencing the fellowship of His eternal presence.

These three patriarchs are singled out, and each is specifically related to **God**, suggesting His unique personal intimacy with each one. Whether the genitive preposition **of** refers to God's belonging to the patriarchs or to their belonging to God, both meanings are true.

The present tense is used because **God is not the God of the dead but of the living**, and if He is presently the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, then those men obviously are still alive in another realm. They would also still have to be **living** so that God could fulfill His promises to them which were not fulfilled during their lifetimes.

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them. (Heb. 11:13-16)

Jesus had accomplished what the wisest Pharisee or scribe had never been able to do: unequivocally prove the resurrection even from the Pentateuch. And in so doing, “He had put the Sadducees to silence” (Matt. 22:34).

THE ASTONISHMENT

And when the multitudes heard this, they were astonished at His teaching. (22:33)

The multitudes were accustomed to being **astonished at Jesus’ teaching**, and Luke reports that even “some of the scribes answered and said, ‘Teacher, You have spoken well’” (Luke 20:39). But the Sadducees “did not have courage to question Him any longer about anything” (v. 40). Tragically, Jesus had not convinced them, because they would not be convinced.

In the Temple that day Christ again magnificently demonstrated His deity, giving an answer to the unanswerable that could have come only from the omniscient mind of God. Christ demonstrated His absolute commitment to Scripture, an infinitely greater commitment than the biased and self-deceptive commitment of the Sadducees. And our Lord divinely affirmed the reality and glory of the resurrection that awaits those who belong to Him.

32
The Great
Commandment
(22:34-40)

But when the Pharisees heard that He had put the Sadducees to silence, they gathered themselves together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” (22:34-40)

Someone has said that love may not make the world go around but it makes the trip worthwhile.

Those words perhaps gather up the sentiment of the world that the sweetest and most exhilarating of all emotions and experiences is love. In whatever age or with whatever group of people, it has been the almost universal belief that love is the greatest thing in life, the summum bonum, the virtue par excellence. Consequently, volumes upon volumes of poems, songs, plays, novels, and films have been produced about love.

God's Word concurs that love is the greatest virtue, but the love which it elevates as supreme is of a much deeper and more substantive kind than that which the world understands and admires. In response to the third in a series of three questions posed by His adversaries for the purpose of discrediting and entrapping Him (see also 22:15-17, 23-28), Jesus declared that *agapē* love is the supreme divine requirement of men, both in regard to Himself and in regard to other men.

THE APPROACH OF THE PHARISEES

But when the Pharisees heard that He had put the Sadducees to silence, they gathered themselves together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, (22:34-35)

The first test of Jesus by the Pharisees, made through their disciples and the Herodians, was political, dealing with the payment of the despised poll-tax (v. 17). The second test, by the Sadducees, was theological, pertaining to the reality of the resurrection, which they denied (vv. 23, 28). Now **the Pharisees** were about to test Him again in the area of theology.

When Jesus answered the absurd question about the seven brothers by showing that even Moses taught the resurrection, **He had put the Sadducees to silence**. The verb *phimoō* (**put . . . to silence**) literally means to muzzle, to forcefully restrict the opening of the mouth. The term is used of the muzzling of an ox (1 Cor. 9:9) and of Jesus' silencing a demon (Mark 1:25) and a storm (Mark 4:39). The

Sadducees were verbally incapacitated by the Lord, rendered utterly speechless, just like the man who was rebuked by the king for coming to the wedding feast without proper clothes (Matt. 22:12).

When the Pharisees heard about Jesus putting **the Sadducees to silence**, they decided to have another try themselves at entrapping Him, this time directly by one of their own number rather than through their less capable disciples. The Pharisees doubtlessly had mixed feelings when they **heard** the news. They must have been pleased that the Sadducees had been proved wrong about Moses not teaching resurrection. But that feeling was far outweighed by a sense of dismay and frustration at still another failure to discredit their common enemy, Jesus.

Consequently, **the Pharisees** again (see v. 15) **gathered themselves together** clandestinely somewhere in the Temple to plan their next strategy. In doing so, they unintentionally and unknowingly fulfilled prophecy by plotting together “against the Lord, and against His Christ” (Acts 4:26-28). Out of that conclave came the third and final question to test Jesus.

The particular **one of them** that they chose to confront Jesus was **a lawyer**. The man was a scribe (Mark 12:28) but was called **a lawyer** by Matthew to indicate his unusual expertise in the Mosaic law and perhaps also his renown in adjudicating religious and social disputes. He was probably the most learned and astute expert on scriptural and rabbinical law in their ranks, and if anyone would be a match for Jesus, they thought, this man would be.

This **lawyer**, however, also seems to have been a cut above his fellow religious leaders in honesty and humility. Like that of a few of the other scribes, his acknowledgment that Jesus had answered the Sadducees wisely seems to have been genuine (Mark 12:28; cf. Luke 20:39). Obviously the man was not totally straightforward, because he allowed himself to be used in **testing** Jesus in order to discredit Him. But apparently his duplicity was mixed with a measure of sincere concern for what Jesus would say in response to the test **question**.

THE QUESTION BY THE LAWYER

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” (22:36)

In his addressing Jesus as **Teacher**, the lawyer was probably not being scornful, as the previous questioners had been (see vv. 16, 24). As already noted, he seems to have had respect for Jesus and may have felt somewhat guilty at being used to ensnare Him.

In asking, **“Which is the great commandment in the Law?”** the lawyer was asking what was the greatest commandment of Moses. Although the scribes and Pharisees considered the whole Old Testament to be authoritative, and not just the five books of Moses as did the Sadducees, they nevertheless considered Moses to be the supreme human figure in Scripture. Moses had spoken with God face to face, was the humblest man on earth, and had taken the engraved tablets of the law directly from the hand of God, as it were. He was also the great deliverer whom God called to lead Israel out of Egypt to the Promised Land. He was therefore without peer among those the Lord chose to be human instruments of His divine revelation and activity.

The scribes and Pharisees were said to sit in Moses’ seat (Matt. 23:2) because that represented the ultimate authority in Judaism. One rabbi said that by referring to Moses as “faithful in all My household” (Num. 12:7), the Lord ranked Moses above the angels. From the beginning of His ministry, Jesus assured His hearers that, far from seeking “to abolish the Law or the Prophets,” He had come to fulfill them, and that “until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:17-18). He made clear that, although He was the Messiah and God’s own Son, He was not preaching and teaching anything that obviated the law of Moses or any other part of Scripture.

But because Jesus’ teaching of Scripture was so utterly contrary to theirs, which for centuries had been encrusted by thousands of humanly-devised rabbinical interpretations, the

Pharisees were convinced that He must be teaching a message He considered to be greater than that of Moses. And it was evidence to that effect that they now hoped Jesus would disclose, because to contradict Moses was to contradict God and be guilty of heresy. Their purpose was to expose Him as an apostate and thereby turn the people against Him.

Over the years, the rabbis had supposedly determined that, just as there were 613 separate letters in the Hebrew text of the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments, in the book of Numbers, there were also 613 separate laws in the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses. Such letterism, as it is sometimes called, was extremely popular and was considered to be a valuable exegetical tool for interpreting Scripture. The rabbis had divided those 613 laws into affirmative and negative groups, holding that there were 248 affirmative laws, one for every part of the human body, as they supposed, and 365 negative laws, one for each day of the year. The laws were also divided into heavy and light, the heavy ones being absolutely binding and the light ones less binding.

There had never been unanimity, however, as to which laws were heavy and which were light, and the rabbis and scribes spent countless hours proudly debating the merits of their particular divisions and the ranking of laws within the divisions.

It was doubtlessly that superficial and fanciful orientation to the law that led them to think Jesus had his own scheme. Because He considered Himself to be the Messiah, they assumed that surely Jesus had devised a system to display His erudition in the law just as they were accustomed to doing. And judging by the lawyer's single and extremely simple question, they assumed that His naming the *one great commandment in the Law* would be sufficiently unorthodox to condemn Him.

THE RESPONSE OF THE LORD

And He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is

the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” (22:37-40)

Jesus responded without hesitation, and the answer He gave was in total accord not only with Mosaic law but with an ancient Jewish custom based on that law. The command, **You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind**, was part of the Shema (Hebrew for “Hear”), so named because it began with, “Hear, O Israel!” The Shema comprised the texts of Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21; and Numbers 15:37-41—by far the most familiar, most quoted, and most copied Scripture passages in Judaism. In Jesus’ day, every faithful Jew recited the Shema twice a day.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21 were two of the four Scripture texts (with Ex. 13:1-10 and 13:11-16) that were copied on small pieces of parchment and placed in phylacteries that were worn on the foreheads and left arms of Jewish men during prayer. The practice was based on the admonition of Deuteronomy 6:8, “You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead” (cf. 11:18). It was for the ostentatious display of phylacteries that Jesus rebuked the scribes and Pharisees only a short while later, while He was still teaching in the Temple (Matt. 23:5). In a similar way, copies of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21 were placed in mezuzahs, small boxes that Jews attached to their doorposts, following the instruction of Deuteronomy 6:9 and 11:20. Both phylacteries and mezuzahs are still used by many orthodox Jews today.

“I am declaring to you,” Jesus was therefore saying, “that **the great commandment** is the commandment of Moses that all of you recite every day and that many of you bind on your arms and foreheads every day.”

Aheb, the Hebrew word for **love** used in Deuteronomy 6:5, refers primarily to an act of mind and will, the determined care for the welfare of something or someone. It might well include strong

emotion, but its distinguishing characteristics were the dedication and commitment of choice. It is the **love** that recognizes and chooses to follow that which is righteous, noble, and true, regardless of what one's feelings in a matter might be. It is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek *agapaō* in the New Testament, the verb of intelligent, purposeful, and committed **love** that is an act of the will. This love is in contrast to the emotion and tender affection of *phileō* and the physical, sensual love of *eros* (which is not used in the New Testament).

To **love the Lord with all** one's **heart, . . . soul, and . . . mind** (Mark's account adds "strength," 12:30) does not express separate and technical definitions of each element of human nature or a compartmentalizing of love into three or four categories, but rather connotes comprehensiveness. We are to **love the Lord** our **God** with every part of our being.

On the other hand, the areas are listed distinctly, each one preceded by its own **with all your**. It is therefore helpful to look at some distinctions in each of them in order to understand the fullness of what **love** for God should include.

To the ancient Hebrews, **heart** referred to the core of one's personal being. The book of Proverbs counsels, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life" (4:23). The term **soul** is closest to what we would call emotion and is the word Jesus used when He cried out in the Garden of Gethsemane the night He was arrested: "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death" (Matt. 26:38). **Mind** corresponds to what is usually translated "might" in Deuteronomy 6:5. The Hebrew term had a broad connotation and carried the general idea of moving ahead with energy and strength. **Mind** is used here in the sense of intellectual, willful vigor and determination, carrying both the meaning of mental endeavor and of strength.

Genuine **love of the Lord** is intelligent, feeling, willing, and serving. It involves thought, sensitivity, intent, and even action where that is possible and appropriate. God has never sought either empty words or empty ritual. His desire is for the person himself, not simply what the person possesses. If He truly has the person, He inevitably has all that the person possesses as well. And just as God loves us

with His whole being, we are to return His love with our whole being. His love for mankind was so great “that He gave His only begotten Son” for their redemption (John 3:16). Godly love, whether as His love for man or man’s love for Him, is measured by what it gives, not by what it might gain. It does not love because love is beneficial but because love is right and good.

God requires more than bare belief. James reminds us that even the demons believe that God exists; but instead of rejoicing in that belief, they shudder (James 2:19). The distinguishing mark of saving belief in God is love of God. Faith in Jesus Christ that is not characterized by a consuming love for Him is not saving faith but simply an acknowledgement of His divinity such as even the demons make.

I believe that the transforming new creation that takes place at salvation produces a new will, desire, and attitude deep within the person that can best be described as love for God. John makes love for God the true mark of the believer (see John 14:23-24; 1 John 2:5; 3:17; 4:12-13, 16-21). Peter declares that God is precious to those who believe (1 Pet. 2:7), pointing to the same truth that love for God and Christ characterize a true Christian.

The Ten Commandments themselves make clear that love for and obedience to God are inseparable. The Lord shows His “lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love [Him] and keep [His] commandments” (Ex. 20:6; cf. Deut. 7:9; Neh. 1:5). Jesus declared, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15), and John wrote, “And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him” (1 John 2:3-5). A person who belongs to God loves God and therefore obeys God. One of the most beautiful descriptions of a Christian is one who loves “our Lord Jesus Christ with a love incorruptible” (Eph. 6:24). And one of the most sobering descriptions of an unbeliever is “anyone [who] does not love the Lord” (1 Cor. 16:22).

True love of God declares with Paul, “For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate” (Rom. 7:15). In essence he was saying that, even though he did not always do what was right, he always loved what was right and longed to do what was honoring to God. That was the opposite attitude of the scribes and Pharisees, whom Jesus repeatedly condemned for making great pretense of love for God on the outside while having no inward love for Him at all. They were interested only in the outward religious ceremonies and actions that fed their self-righteousness, self-satisfaction, and hypocrisy. Although they recited the Shema with meticulous regularity, that verbal declaration of love for God was hollow and meaningless.

Just as belonging to God is loving God, not belonging to Him is hating Him (Ex. 20:5). God’s people are those who love Him, and the unsaved are those who hate Him and are His adversaries (Deut. 32:41; Prov. 8:36).

The person who truly loves **the Lord** with all his **heart** and **soul** and **mind** is the person who trusts Him and obeys Him. That person demonstrates his love by meditating on God’s glory (Ps. 18:1-3), trusting in God’s divine power (Ps. 31:23), seeking fellowship with God (Ps. 63:1-8), loving God’s law (Ps. 119:165), being sensitive to how God feels (Ps. 69:9), loving what God loves (Ps. 119:72, 97, 103), loving whom God loves (1 John 5:1), hating what God hates (Ps. 97:10), grieving over sin (Matt. 26:75), rejecting the world (1 John 2:15), longing to be with Christ (2 Tim. 4:8), and obeying God wholeheartedly (John 14:21).

Above all, the one who truly loves God is the one who truly obeys God. Like Paul, he knows his love is imperfect and his obedience is imperfect, but he presses “on in order that [he] may lay hold of that for which also [he] was laid hold of by Christ Jesus,” pressing “on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:12, 14).

To say that Jesus died for man’s sin is to say that He died for man’s hatred of God, which is the essence of all sin. Christ died for man’s lack of love for God. And just as He offers forgiveness for past lack of love for God, Christ also provides for future love for God. The

great Forgiver is also the great Enabler, because through Christ, “the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom. 5:5).

Even before Christ came to earth, God’s way was the way of love, which was the way of obedience. The Jews of Jesus’ day should have been convicted of their lovelessness and their disobedience, because the Old Testament was clear—and nowhere more clear than in the Shema—that the person without obedience for God was without love for God and was therefore without God Himself.

After stating the first and greatest commandment, Jesus did the Pharisees one better and added **the second** as well: **You shall love your neighbor as yourself**. Not surprisingly, **the second** greatest commandment involves the same virtue as the first, namely, **love**. The command for genuine love of God, Jesus declared, is next followed in importance by the command for a **love of your neighbor** that is of the same order as the love you already have for **yourself**.

Just as the Pharisees had no genuine love for God, neither did they have genuine love even for their Jewish **neighbor**, not to mention their Gentile **neighbor**. Instead, as Jesus reminded the multitudes a short while later, the scribes and Pharisees “tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger” (Matt. 23:4). Like the mercenary Sadducees who extorted the Temple worshipers in the selling of sacrifices and exchanging of money, the scribes and Pharisees also abused and made religious merchandise of their fellow Jews.

Genuine **love** for one’s **neighbor** is of the same kind as genuine love for God. It is by choice purposeful, intentional, and active, not merely sentimental and emotional. And it is measured, Jesus said, by your love for **yourself**. When a person is hungry, he feeds himself; when he is thirsty, he gets himself a drink; and when he is sick, he takes medicine or sees a doctor—all because he is so consumed with caring for himself. He does not simply think or talk about food or water or medicine but does whatever is necessary to provide those things for himself. A person never simply says to himself, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” without doing anything to secure his needed clothing and food (see James 2:16).

Contrary to some contemporary interpretations of this passage, Jesus was not commanding that a person love himself but assumed he already does love himself. “No one ever hated his own flesh,” Paul states, “but nourishes and cherishes it” (Eph. 5:29). And just as a person looks out for his own welfare, both by the legitimacy of natural design as well as because of sinful selfishness, he will also look out for the welfare of others if he truly loves them.

The basic requirements both of Judaism and of Christianity are summed up in the same dual command: to love God and to love one’s fellow man. **“On these two commandments”** Jesus said, **“depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”** Everything else in the Old Testament that God required of believers hung on those two commands. Likewise, every New Testament requirement of believers is based on them. “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God,” John declares; “and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:7-8). “He who loves his neighbor,” Paul says, “has fulfilled the law. For this, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law” (Rom. 13:8-10).

If people loved perfectly there would be no need for law, because the person who loves others will never do them harm. In the same way, the believer who loves God with all his being will never take His name in vain, will never worship idols, and will never fail to obey, worship, honor, and glorify Him as Lord.

The lawyer was favorably, and no doubt surprisingly, impressed by Jesus’ answer. “Right, Teacher,” he said; ““You have truly stated that . . . to love Him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as himself, is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.’ And when Jesus saw that he had answered intelligently, He said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God’” (Mark 12:32-34).

33
Whose Son Is
Christ?
(22:41-46)

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, “What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?” They said to Him, “The Son of David.” He said to them, “Then how does David in the Spirit call him ‘Lord,’ saying, ‘The Lord said to my lord, “Sit at My right hand, until I put Thine enemies beneath Thy feet””? If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his son?” And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question. (22:41-46)

The most important question in the world is, “Who is Jesus Christ?” And the world has never lacked for ideas and opinions about the answer. Certain Pharisees in Jesus’ own day accused Him of

casting “out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons” (Matt. 12:24). A second-century A.D. comment in the Talmud said Jesus practiced magic and led Israel astray (*Sanhedrin* 43a). Julian the Apostate, emperor of Rome from A.D. 361-363, declared, “Jesus has now been celebrated about three hundred years; having done nothing in his lifetime worthy of fame, unless anyone thinks it a very great work to heal lame and blind people and exorcise demoniacs in villages of Bethsaida and Bethany” (quoted by Cyril, a fifth-century bishop of Alexandria, in *Contra Julian*, lib. vi., p. 191).

In modern times, most people have tended to be complimentary of Jesus, although their opinions are frequently condescending and naive. The radical French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote, “When Plato describes his imaginary righteous man loaded with all the punishments of guilt, yet meriting the highest rewards of virtue, he describes exactly the character of Jesus Christ. . . . The life and death of Jesus are those of a God” (*Oeuvres complètes* [Paris, 1839], tome iii, pp. 365-67). The famous poet Ralph Waldo Emerson held Jesus to be the most perfect of all men who have appeared on earth, and Napoleon said, “I know men, and I tell you that Jesus Christ was not a man.”

The English philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill said Jesus was “the pattern of perfection for humanity,” and the Irish historian and essayist William E. Lecky said Jesus was “the highest pattern of virtue.” French philologist and historian Ernest Renan said Jesus “will never be surpassed,” and American Unitarian clergyman Theodore Parker called Jesus the youth with God in His heart. German theologian and philosopher David Strauss, a staunch critic of biblical Christianity, said Jesus is the “highest model of religion within the reach of [human] thought.” English novelist H. G. Wells wrote, “When I was asked which single individual has left the most permanent impression on the world, the manner of the questioner almost carried the implication that it was Jesus of Nazareth. I agreed. . . . Jesus stands first.”

As those testimonies give evidence, many people who do not trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior still rank Him as the highest model of humanity. But beneath most such compliments is the incipient, if not specific, denial that He was anything more than a

man. And many of those who highly praise Him nevertheless deny much of what He taught, especially what He taught about Himself and His work.

Christianity has always found its most violent detractors and enemies in those who deny the divinity of Jesus Christ. Many of those detractors presume to go under the name of Christian. Some years ago a Washington State newspaper reported that the minister of a liberal church had begun a sermon series emphasizing that Jesus Christ was merely a man and not God. He said that the reason there is any controversy at all on this issue is because “there is always a bunch of people who say Jesus is God.” The minister suggested that Jesus was simply like Mother Teresa or Caesar Chavez.

Many religions and cults teach that Jesus was a prophet of God, or at least a great religious teacher, but that He was not the Savior of the world and was not divine to any greater degree than they consider all men to be divine.

The battle lines of biblical Christianity are inevitably drawn at the issue of Jesus’ divinity. That is the one doctrine apart from which all others are meaningless, because if He were not divine He could not be the Savior of the world, and men would have no way of becoming reconciled to God.

It is that supreme issue of Jesus’ full identity with which Matthew 22:41-46 deals.

THE INCISIVE QUESTION

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, “What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?” (22:41-42a)

After irrefutably answering the three questions the Jewish leaders had designed to entrap Him (Matt. 22:15-40), Jesus continued teaching in the Temple, where He had been since early that Wednesday morning (21:23). **The Pharisees were gathered together**

by themselves, no doubt more perplexed than ever as to what they could do to discredit and eliminate **Jesus**. They were obviously standing nearby, and while they were pondering what to do next, Jesus **asked them a question about the Christ**.

He did not, however, ask directly about Himself. Although He often had declared His messiahship and His divinity, He now wanted the Pharisees to focus on what they already believed about the identity of the Messiah, **the Christ**, God's promised Anointed One. Specifically, He asked, "**Whose son is He?**" That is, from what Jewish line was He to be descended?

THE INADEQUATE ANSWER

They said to Him, "The Son of David." (22:42*b*)

To the Pharisees, as well as to most other Jews, the answer was obvious and simple. Because they were convinced the Messiah was no more than a man, the only identity of the Messiah they took seriously was that of his being **the Son of David**. The scribes had long taught that "the Christ is the son of David" (Mark 12:35), a teaching that was perfectly true. Through the prophet Nathan, the Lord had promised David, "When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. . . . My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam. 7:12-13, 15-16).

That promise could not have applied to Solomon. He did build a house for God in the form of the Temple, but his kingdom did not last forever. Nor could any other descendant (note the singular in 2 Sam. 7:12) of David claim an everlasting throne. After Solomon, the Davidic kingdom was divided and has never been restored.

Psalm 89 makes repeated references to the Messiah as the unique descendant of David: “I have made a covenant with My chosen; I have sworn to David My servant, I will establish your seed forever, and build up your throne to all generations. . . . I have found David My servant; with My holy oil I have anointed him, with whom My hand will be established; My arm also will strengthen him. . . . And My faithfulness and My lovingkindness will be with him, and in My name his horn will be exalted. . . . I also shall make him My first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth. My lovingkindness I will keep for him forever, and My covenant shall be confirmed to him. So I will establish his descendants forever, and his throne as the days of heaven” (vv. 3-4, 20-21, 24, 27-29).

Amos prophesied, “In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David, and wall up its breaches; I will also raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old” (Amos 9:11). Through Micah the Lord declared, “As for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity” (Mic. 5:2).

God commanded Ezekiel to write,

Thus says the Lord God, “Behold, I will take the sons of Israel from among the nations where they have gone, and I will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king will be king for all of them; and they will no longer be two nations, and they will no longer be divided into two kingdoms. . . . I will deliver them from all their dwelling places in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. And they will be My people, and I will be their God.

“And My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd; and they will walk in My ordinances, and keep My statutes, and observe them. And they shall live on the land that I gave to Jacob My servant, in which your fathers lived; and they will live on it, they, and their sons, and their sons’ sons, forever; and David My servant shall be their prince forever.” (Ezek. 37:21-25)

Starting at the millennial kingdom and sweeping into eternity, David's greater Son, often called David by extension of the ancestral name, will rule an everlasting kingdom. "When I shall raise up for David a righteous Branch," the Lord said, "He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, The Lord our righteousness" (Jer. 23:5-6).

Throughout his gospel, Matthew focuses on Jesus' being the Son of David. He begins with an abbreviated genealogy that establishes Jesus' direct lineage from David (1:6; cf. Luke 3:31). He reports Jesus' frequently being hailed by various individuals and groups as the Son of David. The two blind men in Galilee cried out to Him, "Have mercy on us, Son of David" (9:27), clearly acknowledging Him as the promised Messiah, the Christ. The two blind men of Jericho made the same plea: "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David" (20:30). After Jesus healed the demon-possessed man who was also blind and dumb, "all the multitudes were amazed, and began to say, 'This man cannot be the Son of David, can he?'" (12:23), a question equivalent to, "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" And it was the fact the multitudes had acclaimed Jesus as the Son of David that the religious leaders were so indignant, because He was being hailed as the Messiah and would not renounce the acclaim (21:9, 15-16).

It was partly because Jesus' lineage from David was incontestable that the Jewish authorities were so distressed. Until the Temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, meticulous genealogical records of all Jews were kept there. That information not only was essential to establish levitical and priestly lineage, for the men as well as for their wives, but for many other purposes as well. No one could hold a position of responsibility in Israel whose genealogy was unverified. It is therefore certain that the authorities had carefully checked Jesus' genealogy and discovered that His descent from David was legitimate. Otherwise, they would simply have exposed Him as having no claim to Davidic heritage and all discussion about His possible messiahship would have ended.

Yet true as it was that the Christ would be **the Son of David**, that answer was partial and inadequate. Rather than that title's being too great for Jesus, as the Jewish leaders contended, it was much too limited. As He proceeded to explain, the Messiah had a claim to greatness that far exceeded His descent from David.

THE INFINITE REALITY

He said to them, “Then how does David in the Spirit call him ‘Lord,’ saying, The Lord said to my lord, “Sit at My right hand, until I put Thine enemies beneath Thy feet””? If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his son?” (22:43-45)

The terms *kurios* (**Lord**) and its corresponding Hebrew word אֲדֹנָי *dōnāy* are among the most common designations for deity in the New and Old Testaments, respectively. Because God's covenant name, Yahweh, or Jehovah, was considered too holy to be spoken, the Jews always substituted the word אֲדֹנָי *Adōnāy*. In many English translations that unique use of “Lord” is indicated by its being printed in large and small capital letters (LORD), meaning that the Hebrew text actually reads *Yahweh*. When God is called “Lord” as a title, rather than as a substitute for His covenant name, the word is printed simply with capital and lower case letters (Lord), meaning that the Hebrew text reads *Adōnāy*.

Jesus' argument, therefore, was this: “If the Messiah, the Christ, is no more than a man, the human the son of David, **Then how does David in the Spirit call him ‘Lord,’ saying, ‘The Lord said to my lord.’”**

First of all, Jesus declared that **David** was speaking under the inspiration of God's **Spirit** when he wrote those words of Psalm 110:1. The Greek phrase behind **in the Spirit** is identical to that used by John of his vision on Patmos, when he “was in the Spirit on the Lord's day” (Rev. 1:10; cf. 4:2). It refers to being under the control of the Holy Spirit in a unique and powerful way. And as Mark makes

clear in his account of this incident, Jesus' full statement was, "David himself said in the Holy Spirit" (Mark 12:36), ruling out the possibility that Jesus was referring to David's human spirit.

Second, every Jew recognized Psalm 110 as being written by David and as being one of the clearest messianic passages in the Old Testament. Consequently, there could be no argument—and there was none by Jesus' opponents—that David was speaking here about the Messiah, the second **lord** mentioned in verse 1. The first **Lord** in the Hebrew text is *Yahweh*, whereas the second is *Ādōnāy*. The idea is: **the Lord (Yahweh) said to David's lord (Ādōnāy), "Sit at My right hand, until I put Thine enemies beneath Thy feet."** In other words, David addressed the Messiah as his **Lord**.

Third, and most importantly, Jesus was declaring the Messiah's deity. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, David had declared that God told the Messiah to **sit at His (God's) right hand**, a place recognized by Jews to be a designation of coequal rank and authority. The verb behind **sit** in the original text indicates continuous sitting in the place of exaltation. God was going to bring the Messiah to a place of equality with Himself in honor, power, and glory.

At God's **right hand**, the Messiah would be invincible, because God would **put His enemies beneath His feet**, a figure of abject, helpless subjugation. When a defeated enemy was brought before an ancient oriental monarch, the ruler would make the prisoner prostrate himself at his feet. The king would then place his foot on the neck of the vanquished enemy as if he were a footstool (see Josh. 10:24). All the detractors, deniers, and other **enemies** of the Messiah are doomed to subjugation beneath His control.

Liberal critics have long maintained that David could not have written Psalm 110, arguing that the Hebrew language in David's time had not developed to the level found in the psalm and that David would not have been familiar with the priest-king relationship expressed in verse 4. But historical and archaeological discoveries have proved both of those assumptions to be unfounded. Some critics also deny the messianic character of the psalm, largely because they discount all supernatural revelation and consequently all predictive prophecy. If a "prediction" came true, they argue, it was obviously written after the fact. But that humanistic approach not only makes

Scripture out to be intentionally deceptive but makes Jesus Himself a liar or a dupe. He could hardly have been the model for the highest level of human virtue, as many of those same critics claim, if He declared Himself to be divine but was not. Or if the gospel writers misrepresented what He said about Himself, how can anything else they reported about Him be considered reliable?

If David then calls Him “Lord,” Jesus asked the Pharisees, **how is He his son?** Jesus’ point was that the title “Son of David” alone was not sufficient for the Messiah, that He is also the Son of God. **David** would not have addressed a merely human descendent as **“Lord.”** Jesus was saying, in effect, “I am not giving you any new teaching or revelation. You should have been able to figure it out for yourselves, and would have done so if you truly believed Scripture.” The religious elite of Judaism had never seen that obvious truth, because, like many people today, they did not look to Scripture for truth. When they looked to it at all, it was for the purpose of trying to shore up their humanly devised religious traditions and personal preferences.

Jesus did not mention the most important conclusion the Pharisees should have made from what He had just said: that He Himself was the divine Messiah, the Son of David and Son of God. It was unnecessary for Him to do that, because He had been presenting His divine messianic credentials for three years. He had done so many things to prove He was the Son of God that unbelievers had to deny the obvious to conclude anything else. The signs and miracles recorded in the gospels are but a part of the countless others than He performed. “Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book,” John tells us; “but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:30-31; cf. 21:25).

Although Jesus was correcting the Pharisees’ incomplete concept of who He was, He also seems to have been giving them still another invitation to believe in Him. Several of the scribes, including the lawyer who had asked Jesus about the greatest commandment, commended Him for His wise answers to the questions given to test Him (Mark 12:32; Luke 20:39). Jesus even told the lawyer that he

was not far from the kingdom (Mark 12:34). There doubtlessly were others in the Temple that day who were tender-hearted and open to God's truth and who might be led to trust in Him and follow Him as Lord if they were convinced He were truly God's Son.

Jesus was obviously no phantom, as some heretics in the early church proposed. He ate, drank, slept, felt pain, bled, and died. He was even "tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). He was the Son of Man in every way. That He was specifically the Son of David was obvious and provable by the Temple records. And that He was the divine Son of God was obvious from the miracles that He performed without number for everyone to see.

Jesus shares with God all the attributes of omnipotence. He is the Creator, the controller of the heavens and the earth and all its creatures. He is the provider of food, the healer of the sick, the raiser of the dead, the forgiver of sin, the giver of eternal life, and the judge of all men and angels.

Jesus shares with God all the attributes of omnipresence. Wherever "two or three have gathered together in My name," He declared, "there I am in their midst" (Matt. 18:20).

Jesus shares with God all the attributes of omniscience. He knew what His disciples were thinking and what His enemies were thinking. "He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man" (John 2:25).

The New Testament consistently presents Christ as Son of David and Son of God. The gospel message Paul preached and wrote about was promised by God "beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 1:2-4). Paul admonished Timothy to "remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David" (2 Tim. 2:8).

In his letter to believers at Philippi, Paul wrote,

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with

God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil. 2:5-11)

“The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us,” John declared, “and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

In his classic apologetics work *Protestant Christian Evidences*, Bernard Ramm gives a series of incisive answers to the question he himself propounds: “If God became incarnate, what kind of man would He be?” In abbreviated form, six of the answers are: we would expect Him to be sinless; we would expect him to be holy; we would expect His words to be the greatest words ever spoken; we would expect Him to exert a profound power over human personality; we would expect Him to perform supernatural doings; and we would expect Him to manifest the love of God. Of all human beings who have ever lived, Jesus Christ alone met all of those criteria ([Chicago; Moody, 1953], pp. 166-75).

THE INAPPROPRIATE RESPONSE

And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question. (22:46)

It is probable that some of the leaders who heard Jesus that day eventually believed in Him. But when Jesus finished His short but irrefutable proof of the Messiah’s divinity, there is no indication that anyone profited from that great truth.

Mark reports that “the great crowd enjoyed listening to Him” (Mark 12:37); but that sentiment was far from saving trust. The initial response of the people was favorable, but in two days many of them would cry out with the chief priests and elders who incited them, “Let Him be crucified!” (Matt. 27:22).

The Pharisees and other religious leaders there that day were dumbfounded but not convinced, silenced but not convicted, humiliated but not humbled, reluctantly impressed but still unbelieving. Doubtlessly they were thinking that they had been intimidated and embarrassed for the last time by the uneducated, unordained, and in their minds unorthodox rabbi from Nazareth.

Self-righteous religion has always been and will always be the greatest enemy of the gospel. Secularism generally is indifferent, whereas human religion invariably is hostile.

The Samaritan woman whom Jesus met at the well outside Sychar was the first person to whom He directly revealed His messiahship. After she commented “that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ),” Jesus then “said to her, ‘I who speak to you am He’” (John 4:25-26). That woman trusted in Christ herself and immediately went into her village and witnessed to others, many of whom also believed (vv. 39-42). But most of the Samaritans did not believe and down through the centuries have not believed. Today they number perhaps fewer than 500, and, like their Jewish counterparts, they are still looking for a Messiah who has already come. Like so many people, they failed to believe the truth, though the testimony of Scripture is overwhelmingly convincing.

34
The Character of
False Spiritual
Leaders
(23:1-12)

Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying, “The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them. And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels of their garments. And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi. But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher,

and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted. (23:1-12)

Matthew 23 records Jesus' last public sermon. It was not a sermon on salvation, on the resurrection, or on principles for living the kingdom life but rather a vital and sobering message of condemnation against false teachers. In verses 1-7 He warns the people about false religious leaders in Israel, and in verses 8-12 He admonishes the disciples and other true spiritual leaders not to emulate them. He then turns His attention directly to the false leaders themselves, epitomized by the scribes and Pharisees, and gives them His final and most scathing denunciation (vv. 13-36). In His closing comments (vv. 37-39) He expresses His intense compassion for unbelieving Israel and gives the assurance that one day, in fulfillment of God's sovereign promise, His chosen people will turn back to Him in faith.

Since the Fall, the world has always had false religious leaders, pretending to represent God but representing only themselves. False leaders were active in the rebellious scheme to erect the tower of Babel. Moses came into serious conflict with the religious sorcerers and magicians of Egypt when he demanded the release of God's people by pharaoh, who probably considered himself to be a god (see Ex. 7:11-12, 22; 8:7). Ezekiel faced the false prophets in Israel, whom God called "foolish prophets who are following their own spirit and have seen nothing" (Ezek. 13:3).

Jesus referred to spurious religious leaders as "false Christs and false prophets [who] will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect" (Matt. 24:24). Paul called them preachers of a perverted gospel (Gal. 1:8) and purveyors of the doctrines of demons (1 Tim. 4:1). Peter spoke of them as those who "secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them" (2 Pet. 2:1). John called them

antichrists who deny that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ (1 John 2:18, 22). Jude called them dreamers who “defile the flesh, and reject authority, and revile angelic majesties” (Jude 8). As Paul declared to the Ephesian elders in his brief and touching reunion with them on the beach near Miletus, false religious leaders are “savage wolves” of the spirit world whose purpose is to corrupt and destroy God’s people (Acts 20:29).

The religion pages of major newspapers in our day are filled with advertisements for every kind of sect and false religion, including deviant forms of Christianity as well as cults and the occult. Many of those groups masquerade as forms of Christianity and claim to teach a new and better gospel. But while purporting to offer spiritual life and help, they instead teach the way of spiritual death and damnation. While claiming to lead people to heaven, they usher them directly into hell.

Scripture makes clear that as the second coming of Christ comes near, counterfeiters of the gospel will proliferate and amass to themselves great followings and immense influence (see, e.g., 2 Thess. 2:3-4; 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:1-9; 2 Pet. 2:1-3;). The only time in history equal to what that future demon-inspired age will be like was the time of our Lord’s ministry on earth. At that time all hell garnered its forces in a three-year assault against the Son of God in a desperate effort to contradict what He taught and to counteract what He did. It is against the human instruments of that satanic attack that Jesus addresses this last public and permanently instructive message, given near the end of a long and grueling day of teaching and confrontation in the Temple.

Dialogue between Jesus and the Temple authorities had ended, because “no one was able to answer [Jesus] a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question” (Matt. 22:46). Although the Lord had frequently spoken against the unbelieving religious leaders (see Matt. 5:20; 15:1-9; 16:6-12; John 8:44), it was necessary to give a final word, a last comprehensive warning, to them and to everyone else, about the eternal danger of their perverse teachings. Jesus also no doubt wanted to give those unbelieving leaders themselves opportunity to turn from their falsehood and follow Him to forgiveness and salvation.

It seems evident that many hearts were softened to the gospel that day, including the hearts of some of the leaders. On the day of Pentecost alone some three thousand souls came to the Lord (Acts 2:41), and it may well have been that eight or ten times that number believed within a few more months, as the apostles “filled Jerusalem with [their] teaching” (Acts 5:28). We can be certain that many, and perhaps most, of the converts in those early days had seen and heard Jesus personally and been drawn by the Holy Spirit to His truth and grace. Perhaps for some, this message was the point of initial attraction to Jesus Christ.

THE DESCRIPTION OF FALSE SPIRITUAL LEADERS

Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying, “The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them. And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels of their garments. And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi. (23:1-7)

At this time **Jesus spoke directly to the multitudes and to His disciples**, but the religious leaders, most particularly **the scribes and the Pharisees**, were within earshot nearby (see v. 13).

When the Jews returned to Palestine after the seventy years of captivity in Babylon, the Scriptures for a while regained their central place in Israel’s life and worship, humanly speaking due largely to revival under the godly leaders Nehemiah and Ezra (see Neh. 8:1-8).

Ezra was one of the first Jewish scribes in the sense in which the title was used in Jesus' day.

An ancient Jewish saying held that God gave the law to angels, angels gave it to Moses, Moses gave it to Joshua, Joshua gave it to the elders, the elders gave it to the prophets, and the prophets gave it to the men of the synagogue who were later called **scribes**. Over the course of the years, those synagogue scribes became responsible not only for copying and preserving but also for teaching and interpreting God's law. There were no more prophets after the Exile, and the scribes inherited the primary role of spiritual leadership in Israel. In Jesus' day **scribes** were found among both the Pharisees and Sadducees but were more commonly associated with the Pharisees.

Although the precise origin of **the Pharisees** is unknown, they appeared sometime before the middle of the second century B.C. Numbering perhaps as many as six thousand, many of them were also scribes, authorities in Jewish law, both scriptural and traditional. As has been noted many times in this study of Matthew, **the Pharisees** were by far the dominant religious group in Israel in Jesus' day and the most popular with the masses. The other major party, the Sadducees, were largely in charge of the Temple, but their driving concern was not for religion but for money and power. As their name suggests, the Herodians were a political party loyal to the Herod family. The Essenes, which are not mentioned in Scripture, were a reclusive sect who devoted much of their efforts to copying the Scriptures, and the Zealots were radical nationalists who sought to overthrow Rome militarily. Like the Sadducees, the Herodians' and Zealots' interest in religion was motivated primarily by desire for personal and political gain. Consequently, it was to **the scribes and the Pharisees** that the people looked for religious guidance and authority, a role those leaders greatly cherished.

William Barclay, who devoted many years to biblical research in Palestine, reports that the Talmud (*Sotah*, 22b) speaks of seven kinds of Pharisees.

The first group Barclay calls "shoulder Pharisees," so named because of their custom of displaying accounts of their good deeds on their shoulders for other people to see and admire. When they prayed,

they put ashes on their heads as an act of humility and wore sad expressions on their faces to suggest piousness.

The second group he calls “wait a little,” due to their clever ability to come up with a fabricated spiritual reason for putting off doing something good. Pious excuses were their stock in trade.

The third group were the “bruised and bleeding.” In order not to commit the sin of looking at a woman lustfully, those Pharisees closed their eyes whenever women were around. Understandably, they received many bruises and abrasions from bumping into walls, posts, and other objects. They measured their piousness by the number and severity of their injuries.

The fourth group were the “humpback tumbling.” In order to show off their supposed humility, they slouched over with bent backs and shuffled their feet instead of taking normal steps, leading to frequent stumbles and tumbles.

The fifth group were the “ever-seeking,” named because of the meticulous record keeping of their good deeds in order to determine how much reward God owed them.

The sixth group were the “fearing” Pharisees, whose terror over the prospect of hell motivated everything they did.

The seventh and last group were the “God-fearing,” those whose lives were motivated out of genuine love for God and a desire to please Him. The Pharisee Nicodemus (see John 3:1; 19:39) would doubtlessly have been classed in this group.

But Nicodemus and the few other Pharisees who believed in Jesus were very much the exceptions. For the most part, the Pharisees were the Lord’s most strident critics and implacable enemies. In Matthew 23:2-7, Jesus presents five characteristics of the unbelieving **scribes and the Pharisees**, characteristics that typify all false spiritual leaders.

FALSE LEADERS LACK AUTHORITY

[they] **have seated themselves in the chair of Moses;** (23:2b)

The initial characteristic describing false religious leaders is lack of divine authority. The key to our Lord's point is the fact that the scribes and Pharisees had **seated themselves**. They were not appointed by God to sit **in the chair of Moses** and had not even been elected by the people. They had simply arrogated to **themselves** that position of authority, which was therefore spurious.

Chair is from *kathedra*, the Greek term from which we get *cathedral*, which originally referred to a place, or seat, of ecclesiastical authority. The same idea is found today in such expressions as "chair of philosophy" or "chair of history," which refer to the most esteemed professorships in a college or university. When the pope of the Roman Catholic church speaks in his full ecclesiastical authority, he is said to be speaking *ex cathedra*.

For Jews, **Moses** was the supreme law giver, the supreme spokesman for God. Therefore to sit **in the chair of Moses** was tantamount to being God's authoritative spokesman, and it was that very claim that many of the scribes and Pharisees made for **themselves**.

It was for that reason they were envious of Jesus and so determined to undermine Him. They were infuriated because the people discerned that Jesus taught with an authority that seemed genuine (Matt. 7:29). Even to the uneducated masses, something about the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees did not ring true, whereas Jesus' teaching did. Jesus was therefore a threat to those leaders and to their heretofore unchallenged religious authority.

Jeremiah was confronted by false prophets in his day, prophets the Lord repeatedly said were not sent by Him and were not preaching His word. "I have neither sent them nor commanded them nor spoken to them," God declared to the prophet; "they are prophesying to you a false vision, divination, futility and the deception of their own minds" (Jer. 14:14). "I did not send these prophets, but they ran," the Lord later said to Jeremiah. "I did not speak to them, but they prophesied. . . . 'Behold, I am against those who have prophesied false dreams,' declares the Lord, 'and related them, and led My people astray by their falsehoods and reckless boasting; yet I did not send them or command them, nor do they furnish this people the

slightest benefit,' declares the Lord" (23:21, 32; cf. 27:15; 28:15; 29:9).

God told Isaiah that many of the people would not listen to his words. "For this is a rebellious people," He said, "false sons, sons who refuse to listen to the instruction of the Lord; who say to the seers, 'You must not see visions'; and to the prophets, 'You must not prophesy to us what is right, speak to us pleasant words, prophesy illusions'" (Isa. 30:9-10). Sinful people resist God's truth because it is a rebuke to them, and they just as naturally turn to false religions and philosophies because those systems in one way or another approve and indulge their wicked inclinations and desires. They are therefore easy prey for false teachers who appeal to their base natures.

Jesus warned that such teachers and leaders are lying shepherds who do not enter the sheepfold by the door but climb in surreptitiously over the fence to wreak havoc among the flock. They are thieves who come "only to steal, and kill, and destroy" (John 10:1, 10). They do not represent God or speak in His name or in His authority but are deceivers, usurpers, and destroyers of God's Word, God's work, and God's people.

They are in marked contrast to those who are genuinely sent by the Lord as ministers of His gospel, which He has committed to them (Gal. 1:15). Like Timothy, they have been called and set apart by God by the laying on of hands as confirmation of their divine commission and authority (1 Tim. 4:14). They are like the apostles, on whom the Lord breathed, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22) and to whom He later said, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:18-19).

False leaders, on the other hand, lack divine authority in what they say and do. They are self-appointed ministers of human ideas and traditions, and as they promote their false notions they obscure God's truth and pervert God's righteousness for their own selfish purposes.

As in the prophets' times and in Jesus' time, the world still abounds with teachers who claim to speak in God's name and power but do not. They usurp the place of the Lord's true shepherds with

lies, false promises, delusions, dreams, visions, and usually are guilty of immoral living.

FALSE LEADERS LACK INTEGRITY

therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them.
(23:3)

Second, false religious leaders are characterized by lack of integrity, hypocritically demanding of others many things they never do themselves.

In exhorting His followers, **“All that they tell you, do and observe,”** Jesus obviously was not speaking comprehensively of the lies and errors they taught but only of their instructions that conformed to Scripture. He had made clear that the righteousness acceptable to God must exceed the hypocritical, works-oriented self-righteousness the scribes and Pharisees advocated and practiced (Matt. 5:20). In His following comments He also made clear that their countless man-made traditions, many of which actually contradicted God’s law, were absolutely worthless and led people away from God rather than to Him. They were wrong about murder, fornication, divorce, adultery, swearing, praying, worship, and virtually every other area of living (see 5:21-48). They “invalidated the word of God for the sake of [their] tradition” (15:6).

Jesus was not giving blanket approval for following the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees but was rather warning against throwing the baby out with the dirty bath water. In other words, if they speak God’s truth, you should **do and observe** it, Jesus was saying. The Word of God is still the Word of God, even in the mouth of a false teacher. Insofar as the scribes and Pharisees accurately taught the law and the prophets, their teaching was to be heeded.

The verb *poieō* (**do**) is an aorist imperative and demands an immediate response. *Tēreō* (**observe**) is a present imperative and carries the idea of continuing action. Jesus was therefore saying, “Immediately obey and keep on obeying whatever the scribes and Pharisees teach if it follows God’s Word.”

But do not do according to their deeds. When the scribes and Pharisees did occasionally teach God’s truth, they did not obey it themselves. “**They say things, and do not do them,**” Jesus declared. They were religious phonies, consummate hypocrites who did not practice what they preached.

The unbelieving religious leaders did not have the ability to keep God’s law even had they genuinely wanted to, because they possessed no spiritual resources to make such obedience possible. Being unredeemed, they lived only in the flesh and by the flesh’s power, and the flesh is not capable of fulfilling God’s law (Rom. 3:20). It has no power either to restrain evil or to do good. It can develop impressive and sophisticated systems of external morality and ethical codes of conduct, but it cannot empower men to live up to them. It may talk much about God’s love and about His will for man to live in love, but it cannot produce love in a sinful heart. It may talk much about serving the poor and living in peace, but it cannot produce genuine love for the poor or genuine peace in the heart, much less in the world. Many religions, sects, and cults have high moral standards, promote close family ties, and advocate generosity, neighborliness, and good citizenship. But because all such systems are man-made, they work entirely in the power of the flesh, which can only produce the works of the flesh. Only the new person in Christ can “joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man” (Rom. 7:22), and only the redeemed life, the life “created in Christ Jesus for good works” (Eph. 2:10) is able to do good works.

Later in this diatribe against the scribes and Pharisees the Lord speaks of their carefully tithing “mint and dill and cummin” but neglecting “the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness” (Matt. 23:23). Mint, dill, and cummin were not farm crops grown for profit but were garden spices used in cooking, and a tithe of those herbs was therefore worth very little. But whereas those leaders were meticulous in giving every tenth herb seed to the

synagogue or Temple, they were totally unconcerned about fulfilling the moral demands of God's law, represented by justice, mercy, and faithfulness. They were adroit at making good appearances of right living, of cleaning the outside of the cup. But inside, Jesus declared, they were nothing but self-indulgent thieves, the decaying carcasses of spiritually dead men. You "outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (vv. 25-28).

The false religious leader tries, often unsuccessfully, to put a cap on his wicked behavior to keep it out of view, but in so doing he merely traps it underneath the surface, where it festers, putrefies, and becomes still more corrupt. Paul speaks of such hypocrites as being "seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron" (1 Tim. 4:2). They have sinned so long and so willfully that their consciences have lost all sensitivity to truth and holiness, just as scar tissue loses sensitivity to pain.

Peter vividly portrays the nature of false prophets and teachers, about whom he solemnly warns believers. They "secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them," he said, "bringing swift destruction upon themselves." They "follow their sensuality and because of them the way of the truth [is] maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words" (2 Pet. 2:1-3). He further describes them as,

those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed, . . . unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, . . . stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, . . . having eyes full of adultery and that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children, . . . springs without water, and mists driven by a storm, . . . speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption. (vv. 10, 12-14, 17-19)

As noted earlier, Jude refers to them in similar terms, calling them dreamers of wicked dreams, defilers of the flesh, rejecters of authority, and revilers of angelic majesties, unreasoning animals, hidden reefs, clouds without water, “trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever” (Jude 8, 10, 12-13).

In the unregenerate heart, vice cannot be restrained and virtue cannot be produced. That is why even the best man-made system, even one that espouses many standards that Scripture itself espouses, cannot keep its followers from doing wrong or empower them to do what is truly right—for the simple reason that it cannot change their hearts. That is also why every system that gives man the duty to make himself right before God is doomed to hypocrisy and sham, because the best it can produce is outward righteousness, outward good works, outward love, outward peace, while the depraved inner person remains unchanged.

FALSE LEADERS LACK SYMPATHY

And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. (23:4)

Third, false religious leaders are characterized by lack of sympathy. They not only are usurpers and hypocrites but are loveless and uncaring.

The picture Jesus gives here reflects the common custom of that day, and of people in many underdeveloped countries today, of loading up a donkey, camel, or other beast of burden to the point where it can hardly move. As they traveled down the road, the owner would walk alongside, carrying nothing himself, berating and beating the animal if it happened to stumble or balk, with no concern for the animal’s feelings or welfare.

That, Jesus said, is exactly the way the scribes and Pharisees treated their fellow Jews. They piled **up heavy loads** of religious regulations, rules, and rituals **on men's shoulders** until they were unbearable and impossible to carry. And when the people failed to keep all of the requirements, as they were doomed to do, they were chided and rebuked by the leaders, who thereby added the burden of guilt to those of weariness and frustration.

The people were taught that it was only by their own good works they could please God. If at the end of life the good works outweighed the bad, then God would grant entrance into heaven. But the scribes and Pharisees offered the people no help in achieving even those fleshly goals, much less any spiritual ones. **They themselves were unwilling to help move** those unbearable burdens **with so much as a finger**. Consequently, Judaism had become insufferably depressing and debilitating.

The good news that Jesus brought, on the other hand, was that He would take away the load of sin that always outweighed their good works. That is why Paul was infuriated with the Judaizers, who tried to draw the Galatian believers back into legalism. He did not care who they were or claimed to be. "Even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8-9). "It was for freedom that Christ set us free," he said later in the same letter; "therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (5:1).

The scribes and Pharisees had no interest in God's grace, forgiveness, and mercy, because those divine provisions make no allowance for human merit or good works. They could not comprehend and were utterly offended by a gospel that did not credit their own goodness. And they were scandalized by a gospel that declared, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God" (1 Pet. 5:6).

They did not feel they needed God's grace for themselves and did not want it preached to others, because that liberating truth

undercut the entire system of works-righteousness by which they kept the people in subjection to their own human authority.

Certain false leaders in the early church forbade marriage and the eating of particular foods, which Paul declared “God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth” (1 Tim. 4:3). Under the name of Christ, Roman Catholicism still forbids marriage of their clergy and teaches abstinence from certain foods on certain days and other legalistic and unscriptural doctrines.

Peter declared of false teachers that “in their greed they will exploit you with false words” (2 Pet. 2:3). Those under the care of such a fleshly, ungodly leader are no more than merchandise to be exploited to feed his ego and his wallet.

For centuries Israel had been stumbling and falling under the burden of unscrupulous, hardened religious leaders who, although they claimed to minister in God’s name, had love neither for God nor for His people. Long before the time of Christ, the Lord spoke to Ezekiel about such men, saying,

Son of Man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, “Thus says the Lord God, ‘Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. And they were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered.’” (Ezek. 34:2-5)

False religious leaders today are still building empires and amassing fortunes by fleecing those they pretend to serve. It would be impossible to determine the millions of believers and unbelievers alike who are misled spiritually, abused emotionally, and bilked financially in the name of Christ. Like the false shepherds of ancient Israel, they feed on their own sheep.

Earlier in His ministry, as He looked out over the multitudes who had so long been exploited by the corrupt religious leaders of Israel, Jesus “felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36). It must have been gloriously refreshing for those people to hear Jesus say, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light” (Matt. 11:28-30).

Following the spirit and example of his Master, the apostle Paul always ministered to those under his care like the gentlest of shepherds, even like the most caring of mothers. “We proved to be gentle among you,” he reminded the Thessalonians, “as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having thus a fond affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us. For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to the gospel of God” (1 Thess. 2:7-9).

FALSE LEADERS LACK SPIRITUALITY

But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels of their garments.
(23:5)

Fourth, false religious leaders are characterized by lack of spirituality, by the absence of a genuine desire to please God. Like the scribes and Pharisees, the motivation for all their pretentious religious activities and **deeds is to be noticed by men**. Everything is done for outward show rather than from the heart, for fleshly gratification of ego rather than selfless service to God and to others in His name. The issue for them is not godly character but fleshly

appearance, the making of “a good showing in the flesh” (Gal. 6:12). Their purpose is to glorify themselves, not God.

The Jewish religious leaders paraded their piosity everywhere they went. The center of their living was “practicing [their] righteousness before Men to be noticed by them” (Matt. 6:1). When they prayed in the synagogue or on the street corner, they did so with great ostentation (v. 5), and when they fasted, they went out of their way to call attention to the sacrifice they were making (v. 16).

Such people, Jude says, are “worldly-minded, devoid of the Spirit” (Jude 19). They follow their natural appetites and ambitions without restraint or shame, considering themselves to be the spiritually elite with a favored status before God as well as before men.

Hundreds of such fleshly frauds without the Holy Spirit still proclaim themselves as representatives of God and are followed by millions of gullible people who support them with hundreds of millions of dollars every year. In order to feed their egos and to amass wealth and power, these false leaders sometimes pastor huge churches, head colleges and seminaries, direct radio and television empires, and promote many other personally-oriented activities in the name of the gospel.

In Jesus’ day, the means for being **noticed by men** were much more limited and less sophisticated, but false leaders then reflected the same fleshly desire to elevate self. Everything they did was to advance themselves and to foster the admiration of men.

To flaunt their religiosity, the scribes and Pharisees would **broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels of their garments.**

Four times in the Pentateuch (Ex. 13:9, 16; Deut. 6:8; 11:18) the Lord commanded that His law was to be upon the hands and foreheads of His people as a reminder of Him. The ancient Jews understood that command as it was given, not to be taken literally but as symbolic of God’s law being the controlling factor in their lives, not only in what they did, represented by the hand, but in what they thought, represented by the forehead. Both their thoughts and their actions were to be directed by God’s Word. Far from having the purpose of promoting external human pretense and pride, that

instruction was meant to elevate the Lord and to draw His people closer to Himself.

As the centuries passed, many Jews came to look on the injunction not as a means of making God's Word dominant in their lives but of making themselves dominant in the eyes of their fellow Jews. They literalized and externalized the command and turned it into a means of feeding their own egos.

Phylacteries were sometimes called *tephillin*, a name derived from the Hebrew word translated "frontals" in Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:18 (cf. Ex. 13:16). Phylacteries were small square boxes made of leather from a ceremonially clean animal. After being dyed black, the leather was sewn into a box using twelve stitches, each stitch representing one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Placed into each phylactery were copies of Exodus 13:1-10 and 13:11-16 and of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21. The phylactery worn on the head had four compartments, each containing one of the texts on a small piece of parchment. The phylactery worn on the hand contained a single piece of parchment on which all four texts were written. The Hebrew letter shin (y) was inscribed on both sides of the box worn on the head, and the head strap was tied to form the letter dalet (d) and the hand strap to form the letter yodh (j). The three letters together formed *Shaddai*, one of the ancient names of God usually translated "Almighty." Long leather straps were used to bind one box to the forehead and the other to the arm and left hand, because the left side was considered to be closer to the heart.

In Orthodox Judaism still today, every boy is given a set of phylacteries when he comes of age on his thirteenth birthday. Like the other Jewish men, he then wears his phylacteries at morning prayer, as was the general custom in Jesus' day.

There is no record of the use of **phylacteries** until about 400 B.C. during the intertestamental period. Relics of them were found in the Essene community at Qumran near the Dead Sea. **Phylacteries** is a transliteration of the Greek *phylaktēria*, which referred to a means of protection or a safeguard. In pagan societies it was sometimes used as a synonym for amulet or charm. Although trust in such magical protection was clearly condemned in the Old Testament, as apostate Jews drifted away from God's Word—the very Word of which the

phylactery was meant to remind them—they invariably picked up pagan beliefs. Consequently, some Jews came to look on their phylacteries as magical charms for warding off evil spirits and other dangers.

The story is told in rabbinical literature of a rabbi who had an audience with a king. Ancient custom dictated that a person who left the king's presence always walked away backwards while bowing, since it was considered a mark of great dishonor to turn one's back on a monarch. That particular rabbi, however, simply turned around and walked away, apparently to demonstrate his conviction that, because of their high standing before God, rabbis were superior to royalty. When the irate king ordered his soldiers to kill the man for his effrontery, the straps of his phylacteries were said to blaze with fire, putting fear into the hearts of the soldiers and the king and thus saving the rabbi from death.

Some scribes and Pharisees held the phylacteries to be even more sacred than the golden head plate worn by the high priest, because God's name was written twenty-three times in the phylacteries but only once on the golden head plate. God had been so made over into their own image that many Pharisees believed the Lord Himself wore phylacteries. Some Jewish writings from intertestamental and New Testament times give the impression that God was often thought of as little more than a glorified rabbi who studied the law three hours a day.

Rather than wearing their phylacteries only at prayer time, as the custom was for most Jewish men, the Pharisees wore them continually as a sign of superior spirituality. They also would **broaden their phylacteries**, making them larger than normal to signify supposed greater devotion to God. In a similar way and for the same purpose, they would **lengthen the tassels of their garments**.

As with phylacteries, the use of **tassels** had its origin in Scripture. The Lord instructed Moses to tell the sons of Israel "that they shall make for themselves tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and that they shall put on the tassel of each corner a cord of blue. And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the Lord, so as to do them and not follow after your own heart and your own eyes, after

which you played the harlot, in order that you may remember to do all My commandments, and be holy to your God” (Num. 15:38-40).

Jesus Himself wore **tassels**, and it was these tassels, or fringes, on His cloak that the woman with the hemorrhage touched (Matt. 9:20). In later Judaism the tassels were worn on the man’s inner garments, and today the remnant of the tassel tradition is seen in the prayer shawls, called tallithim, worn by Orthodox Jewish men.

The purpose of both the **phylacteries** and **the tassels** was ostensibly to remind the people of God and His Word and to set them apart as His people (cf. Zech. 8:23). Both of those outward symbols were intended to be inward reminders and motivators. They were given a means of calling attention to God, but the scribes and Pharisees turned them into a means of calling attention to themselves. Because of their misuse, the broadened phylacteries and lengthened tassels became marks of carnality rather than spirituality.

FALSE LEADERS LACK HUMILITY

And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi. (23:6-7)

Fifth, false religious leaders are characterized by lack of humility. As with their modern counterparts, the scribes and Pharisees loved **the place of honor at banquets**. They vied with each other for a place at the host’s table in order to be in the center of attention. They gloried in being given places of prestige and eminence. It was that ego-centered spirit that led James and John to ask their mother to request of Jesus that they be appointed to sit at His right and left hands in the kingdom (Matt. 20:20-21).

Out of the same motivation the scribes and Pharisees prized **the chief seats in the synagogues**. As in most churches today, synagogues typically had a raised platform in front where the worship

leaders would sit. Visiting rabbis and other religious dignitaries were often asked to participate by reading Scripture and giving a homily. It was on the basis of that custom that Jesus was asked to read and expound the text from Isaiah 61:1-2 in His home synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21). Far from having Jesus' humble spirit, however, the religious leaders often used such opportunities to ostentatiously display themselves before the congregation.

Christian pastors are tempted at times to use their positions and the Christian activities in which they are involved for their own gratification and glory. Unfortunately, many congregations encourage ostentation and show by providing elaborate and ornate pulpits and other platform furnishings and by treating their pastors with unjustified distinction.

In addition to having seats of honor, the scribes and Pharisees also loved to have **respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi**. As they traveled through town they doted on being treated with special honor. Rabbinical writings report that a certain pagan governor in Caesarea flatteringly spoke of the rabbis' faces as faces of angels.

They especially loved the formal and respectful title **Rabbi**, which was used in that day much as "doctor" is today. In fact, the Latin equivalent of rabbi comes from *docere*, which means to teach and is the term from which the English word *doctor* is derived. In Jesus' day, the title **Rabbi** carried the exalted ideas of "supreme one, excellency, most knowledgeable one, great one," and such. One rabbi insisted that he be buried in white garments when he died, because he wanted the world to know how worthy he was to appear before the presence of God.

Rabbinical writings included detailed systems of protocol for such things as addressing, consulting with, and entertaining rabbis and scribes. They were held in such high regard that, according to one passage in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin*, 88b), it was considered more punishable to act against the words of the scribes than against the words of the Scripture.

THE DECLARATION TO TRUE SPIRITUAL LEADERS

But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted. (23:8-12)

Contrary to the proud and ostentatious practices of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus declared, true spiritual leaders are to avoid elevated titles and be willing to accept lowly service.

TRUE LEADERS AVOID ELEVATED TITLES

But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. (23:8-10)

Godly spiritual leaders are to shun pretentious titles such as **Rabbi**, which carried the basic idea of teacher but had come to signify much more than that. Jesus Himself is the believer's only true **Teacher** in the elevated sense in which rabbis and scribes were commonly addressed and treated in Jesus' day. He is the supreme and only source of divine truth, for which human teachers are but channels of communication.

Human teachers who faithfully proclaim and interpret God's Word are to be appreciated, loved, and highly esteemed by those they serve (1 Thess. 5:12-13). But they are not to seek honor, much less

demand it or glory in it. They need to remember that they are neither the source of truth, which is God's Word, nor the illumination of truth, which is God's Spirit. Human teachers, including the apostles whom Jesus addressed on this occasion, **are all brothers** with every other believer. No man's calling, however unique, justifies his being given a title intended to portray him as being spiritually superior.

Consequently, the Lord went on to command, **"Do not call anyone on earth your father."** Jesus was of course using the sense of spiritual **father**, indicating a superior spiritual position and even suggesting one's being a source of spiritual life. Members of the Sanhedrin, the high Jewish council, loved to be called by the title **father**, especially when acting in official capacities.

In direct contradiction of Jesus' prohibition, the Roman Catholic Church and even some formal Protestant churches use the term father as an official form of address for their clergy. Even the titles *abbot* and *pope* are forms of father.

"For One is your Father, He who is in heaven," Jesus said. The title of **Father** in a spiritual sense is to be reserved for God, who alone is the source of all spiritual life and blessing. To call any human being by that name is a clear violation of Scripture.

And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. As with the other titles, this one is forbidden when used in the formal, exalted sense that was common in ancient Judaism and is still common today in many religious circles. When wrongly used, such titles can place barriers between those in leadership positions and others in the church but, even worse, they arrogate for God's human instruments the honor and glory that belong only to Him.

TRUE LEADERS ACCEPT LOWLY SERVICE

But the greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted. (23:11-12)

Godly leaders not only avoid elevated titles but also willingly accept lowly service in their Lord's name, following their Lord's example.

As Jesus Himself beautifully exemplified, **the greatest** person is the one who is a willing **servant**. Jesus' human greatness not only was manifested in His perfect sinlessness and love but in His being the perfect **servant**. In His humanity He was the Servant of servants just as in His divinity He is the Lord of lords and the King of kings. His mission on earth was not to be served but to serve, He said, "and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

During His last time alone with the disciples in the Upper Room, Jesus reiterated the lesson of servanthood He had taught and demonstrated so often. In the midst of the supper He arose,

and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself about. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. . . . And so when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments, and reclined at the table again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master; neither is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." (John 13:4-5, 12-17)

The greatest person in God's sight is not the one with the most degrees or titles or awards but the one who serves in genuine humility as a selfless **servant**.

Jesus sums up the teaching about true and false teachers by declaring, "**And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.**" That is the opposite of the world's standard for exaltation. The world teaches that it is the one who **exalts himself** who gets ahead and the one who **humbles**

himself who loses out and gets pushed aside. Looking out for number one is the accepted principle for success.

But in His sovereign wisdom God has decreed otherwise, and self-exaltation has no place in those who represent Christ. The paradox Jesus teaches here represents God's absolute truth, and a life that does not conform to that truth is doomed to failure and insignificance, no matter what human accomplishments, titles, and recognition may be achieved. The proud, ostentatious, arrogant, self-serving person ultimately **shall be humbled**. And just as assuredly, the humble, unpretentious, self-giving, serving person ultimately **shall be exalted**.

Peter exhorted elders in the church: "Shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:2-3). To all leaders in the church, both young and old, he then gave the admonition: "Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time" (vv. 5-6).

The nineteenth-century Scottish preacher and author Andrew Bonar said he knew a Christian was growing when he talked more of Christ than of himself. The maturing Christian, Bonar said, sees himself growing smaller and smaller until, like the morning star, he gives way to the rising sun. Thomas Shepherd, founder and first president of Harvard University, wrote in his diary for November 10, 1642, "Today I kept a private fast to see the full glory of the gospel and to seek the conquest of the remaining pride in my heart."

Unlike the proud and arrogant scribes and Pharisees, the true spiritual leader works in God's authority, and he lives in integrity, sympathy, spirituality, humility, and lowly service. He is filled with grace, mercy, love, and willing self-giving. Like his Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, he manifests the heart of a servant who humbles himself and exalts God.

35
The Condemnation
of False Spiritual
Leaders—part 1
Expressing the
Condemnation
(23:13-33)

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from men; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. [Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, even while for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you shall receive greater condemnation.]

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he

becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obligated.’ You fools and blind men; which is more important, the gold, or the temple that sanctified the gold? And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering upon it, he is obligated.’ You blind men, which is more important, the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore he who swears, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And he who swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. Even so you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, ‘If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ Consequently you bear witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.

Fill up then the measure of the guilt of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell? (23:13-33)

Throughout its pages, Scripture highly honors genuine spiritual leaders who rightly and faithfully represent God and seek no self-glory. God lifts up His true servants and presents them as examples for others to follow and respect. The Christians of Galatia must have greatly pleased God's heart when they received the apostle Paul "as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself" (Gal. 4:14). Paul called upon the Philippian church to receive Epaphroditus "in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard; because he came close to death for the work of Christ" (Phil. 2:29-30). He implored the Thessalonians: "Appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and . . . esteem them very highly in love because of their work" (1 Thess. 5:12-13). He advised Timothy, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). The writer of Hebrews exhorts believers: "Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you" (Heb. 13:17).

On the other hand, no one in Scripture is more condemned than the religious charlatan who teaches and practices falsehood. God's most furious wrath is reserved for those men who parade themselves as His servants but who are servants only of evil and falsehood, liars and deceivers whose own spiritual father is Satan himself (John 8:44).

The seventeenth-century Puritan preacher Richard Baxter wrote, "Many a tailor can go in rags while making costly clothes for others. Many a cook may scarcely lick his fingers when he has prepared the most sumptuous dishes for others to eat" (*The Reformed Pastor* [Portland, Ore.: Multnomah, 1982], p. 28). His point was that many religious leaders supposedly offer spiritual provision for those

in their care but are themselves spiritually shabby and starving. Such were most of the Jewish religious leaders in New Testament times.

Many Christians today are greatly concerned about the rising influences of communism, humanism, secularism, and social injustice. Yet those evils, great as they are, do not together pose the threat to Christianity that false shepherds and pastors do. Throughout the history of redemption, the greatest threat to God's truth and God's work has been false prophets and teachers, because they propose to speak in His name. That is why the Lord's most scathing denunciations were reserved for the false teachers of Israel, who claimed to speak and act for God but were liars.

Yet for some reason, evangelical Christianity is often hesitant to confront false teachers with the seriousness and severity that Jesus and the apostles did, and that the godly prophets before them had done. Today, more than at any time in modern history and perhaps more than at any time in the history of the church, pagan religions and cults are seriously encroaching on societies that for centuries have been nominally Christian. Even within the church, many ideas, teachings, and philosophies that are little more than thinly veiled paganism have become popular and influential. As in ancient Israel, the further God's people move away from the foundation of His Word, the more false religion flourishes in the world and even in their own midst. At no time have Christians had greater need to be discerning. They need to recognize and respect true godly shepherds who feed them God's Word and build them up in the faith, and they also must recognize and denounce those who twist and undermine God's Word, who corrupt the church and who lead lost people still further away from God's truth and from salvation.

The godly prophets of the Old Testament were constantly opposed and often persecuted by ungodly prophets, who invariably drew many of the people after them. Isaiah declared, "the people will be like the priest" (Isa. 24:2). Jeremiah wrote, "The prophets prophecy falsely, and the priests rule on their own authority; and My people love it so!" (Jer. 5:31) and "Many shepherds have ruined My vineyard, they have trampled down My field; they have made My pleasant field a desolate wilderness" (12:10).

In Matthew 23:13-33 Jesus relentlessly condemned the false spiritual leaders of Israel, in particular the scribes and Pharisees, who then held the dominant power and influence in Judaism. Jesus warned about them in His first sermon, the Sermon on the Mount (see, e.g., 5:20; 7:15), and His last sermon (Matt. 23) consists almost entirely of warnings about them and to them. In this final public message, the Lord wanted to draw the people away from those false leaders and turn them to the true teaching and the godly examples of His apostles, who would become His uniquely commissioned and endowed representatives on earth during the early years of the church. He also gave the apostles themselves a final example of the confrontational stance they would soon find it necessary to take in their proclamation and defense of the gospel.

The unbelieving scribes and Pharisees whom Jesus addressed in the Temple stood alone in their sin and were condemned alone in their guilt for misappropriating and perverting God's law and for leading Israel into heresy, just as the false prophets among their forefathers had done (vv. 30-32). But they also stood as models of all false spiritual leaders who would come after them. Therefore what Jesus said about them and to them is of much more than historical significance. It is essential instruction for dealing with the false leaders who abound in our own day.

In the first twelve verses of chapter 23, Jesus had declared that the scribes and Pharisees, typical of all false spiritual leaders, were without authority, without integrity, without sympathy, without spirituality, without humility, and therefore without God's approval or blessing. Now speaking to them directly, He asserts they are under God's harshest condemnation.

In verses 13-33 Jesus pronounces seven curses, or woes, on those wicked leaders. If verse 14 were included there would be eight woes, but that verse is not found in the best early manuscripts of Matthew (as indicated by its being set off by brackets in the NASB text). It was probably added later by a well-meaning copyist who picked it up from Mark 12:40 or Luke 20:47. Although the statement is genuine, it will not be discussed here, because originally it was not likely a part of this passage.

The scene in the Temple that day had become volatile in the extreme, in some ways more volatile than when Jesus had cast out the merchants and moneychangers the day before. At that time Jesus' anger was vented against what the religious leaders were doing outwardly, and that attack had outraged them (21:16, 23). Now, however, He attacked what they were inwardly, and that infuriated them even more.

In our day of tolerance and eclecticism, the kind of confrontation Jesus had with the scribes and Pharisees seems foreign and uncharitable. A person who speaks too harshly against a false religion or unbiblical teaching or movement is considered unkind, ungracious, and judgmental. Jesus' indictments in Matthew 23, as well as in other parts of the gospels, are so inconsistent with the idea of Christian love held by some liberal theologians and Bible scholars, for example, that they conclude He could not have spoken them. What Jesus really said, they maintain, was modified and intensified either by the gospel writers or the sources from whom they received their information.

But the nature of Jesus' condemnation of those corrupt religious leaders is perfectly consistent with the rest of Scripture, both the Old Testament and the New. Not only that, but Jesus' words in this passage fly from His lips, as someone has said, like claps of thunder and spears of lightning. Out of His mouth on this occasion came the most fearful and dreadful statements that Jesus uttered on earth. They do not give the least impression of being the afterthought of an overzealous writer or copyist.

Matthew 23 is one of the most serious passages in Scripture. Jesus here makes the word *hypocrite* a synonym for scribe and for Pharisee. He calls them sons of hell, blind guides, fools, robbers, self-indulgent, whitewashed tombs, full of hypocrisy and lawlessness, serpents, vipers, and persecutors and murderers of God's people. He uttered every syllable with absolute self-control but with devastating intensity.

Yet Jesus was never cold or indifferent, even toward His enemies, and on this occasion His judgment is mingled with sorrow and deep pathos. It is not the Son's will any more than the Father's that a single person perish, because it is the gracious divine desire

that everyone would come to repentance and salvation (2 Pet. 3:9). At the end of His denunciation, Jesus extended by implication another last invitation for belief, suggesting that He would still gladly gather any unbelievers under His wings as a mother hen gathers her chicks, if only they would be willing (Matt. 23:37).

As Jesus had approached Jerusalem during His triumphal entry, “He saw the city and wept over it, saying, ‘If you had known in this day, even you the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes’” (Luke 19:41-42). He knew of the coming judgment on Israel and its leaders, and He was deeply grieved. There was therefore much pain involved in the curses He would soon pronounce. On the one hand is the fiery righteousness of God that yearns for rectification, and on the other is His sympathetic love, as His heart aches over the doom of His people.

In His castigation of the false Jewish leaders, Jesus repeatedly used two words, **woe** and **hypocrites**, that are keys to understanding Matthew 23:13-33. **Woe** is from *ouai*, which is not so much a word in the ordinary sense as an onomatopoeic interjection, suggesting a guttural outcry of anger, pain, or both. It is used in the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) to express grief, despair, sorrow, dissatisfaction, pain, and fear of losing one’s life. In the New Testament it is used to speak of sorrow and of judgment, carrying the mingled ideas of punishment and pity, cursing and compassion.

But Jesus used **woe** against the scribes and Pharisees not as an exclamation but as a declaration, a divine pronouncement of judgment from God. He did not use the term in the sense of the profane phrase “Damn you!” He was not wishing for the damnation of those false leaders but certifying it. As already noted, it was not His desire that they be condemned but rather that they repent and come to salvation. But He knew that if they did not repent and believe they were doomed to hell under God’s righteous and just wrath. When God utters **woe** against evil men He sets divine judgment in motion.

Hypocrites is from *hupokritēs*, whose original meaning was that of answering or replying. It later came to refer to actors, who answered one another back and forth in dialogue, and from there it came to mean deceitful pretense, the putting on of a false front. It was

used to describe what might be called theatrical goodness—pretended goodness that is simply for show.

In His series of seven curses, or woes, against the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus condemned by extension all false spiritual teachers. He condemns them for their exclusion of people from God's kingdom, for their subversion of the people, for their perversion of truth, for their inversion of God's priorities, for their extortion and self-indulgence, for their contamination, and for their pretension.

FALSE LEADERS ARE CURSED FOR THEIR EXCLUSION

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from men; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. (23:13)

First Jesus cursed the **scribes and Pharisees** for their exclusion of **men** from **the kingdom of heaven**. The chief evil of every false religion is that it shuts people out of God's kingdom.

Regardless of the appealing, benign, and promising front that a false system of religion or philosophy may have, its ultimate accomplishment is to **shut off the kingdom of heaven from men**. It may feed their bodies, stimulate their minds, and calm their emotions, but it will inevitably damn their souls. It may raise their moral standards, increase their worldly success, overcome practical problems, and improve their outward relationships with other people, but it will not remove their sin or improve their relationship to God. It may promise heaven, but it can only deliver hell.

“You do not enter the kingdom yourselves,” Jesus said, **“nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.”** In their hypocrisy, the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees pretended to know God but did not, pretended to be His spokesmen but were not, pretended to be in

His kingdom but were not. In their boundless pride they even believed they themselves were the doorkeepers of the kingdom.

In his letter to the Roman church, Paul said:

If you bear the name “Jew,” and rely upon the Law, and boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth, you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? . . . You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you. (Rom. 2:17-21, 23-24)

The scribes and Pharisees, and all other Jews who followed their hypocritical traditions, lived under the delusion that, because they were His called People and the receivers and human custodians of God’s law (Rom. 3:2; 9:4-5), they were somehow automatically destined to live under God’s approval. In their spiritual darkness they confused merely knowing the law with keeping it, and merely knowing about the light with living in it.

But Jesus declared that they had no part in God’s **kingdom**, which is the sphere of His reign and power and, in this context, especially refers to the sphere of salvation in which His redeemed people live.

The picture Jesus gives here suggests the idea of the scribes and Pharisees standing just outside the gates of the **kingdom** and slamming them shut in the faces of those who were about **to go** in. People who came to those religious leaders for direction and help in finding God were actually being **shut off** from Him even while they were on the verge of salvation.

In the immediate historical context, Jesus was saying that He had come to Israel to proclaim the kingdom of God and to provide entrance for all who would believe in Him. But as soon as a Jew

showed interest in the gospel, the scribes and Pharisees would step between that person and Christ, as it were. Tragically, they succeeded in turning many seekers away. They had done the same thing to those who were drawn to God through the preaching of John the Baptist, and they would soon do the same thing to those who were drawn to God through the preaching of the apostles.

As soon as men and women from Jerusalem and from “all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan” went out to hear John the Baptist and “were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins,” the unbelieving and unrepentant Pharisees and Sadducees showed up, attempting to corrupt John’s work and confuse the people by pretentiously submitting to baptism but without genuine confession of their sins. Discerning their hypocrisy, John called them a “brood of vipers” who were under the judgment of God’s fiery wrath (Matt. 3:5-8; cf. w. 10, 12), using virtually the same words Jesus was now about to use against them in the Temple (23:33).

It is painful to consider—and was immeasurably more painful for Jesus to consider—the countless thousands who had been **shut off** from His **kingdom** by Israel’s false religious leaders. In his parallel passage Luke reports Jesus as saying, “Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered” (Luke 11:52).

The false leaders took away the key of knowledge by misinterpreting the Word of God, by denying the Messiah, by denying the need for repentance, and by denying salvation by grace. Their work-righteous system had no place for the gospel of grace, which is the only way into the kingdom. By drawing people away from Jesus Christ, those leaders thwarted their salvation and confirmed their damnation.

That is why the greatest battle in the world is not against communism or humanism or secularism or social injustice. The greatest battle by far is the battle for men’s souls, a battle which could be lost even if somehow all those other battles were won. The great challenge of the church in our day is to clearly and boldly articulate God’s truth and just as clearly and boldly to expose Satan’s

falsehoods. The great need of the world today is to turn from its falsehoods and to hear and heed God's truth and be saved.

When men's eternal souls are at stake, the church cannot be passive and indifferent. Nor can it hide behind false humility that fears being judgmental or behind false love that fears offending. Christ was supremely humble, yet He never called evil anything but what it was. Christ was supremely loving, yet He never withheld a warning that might save His hearers from hell. And He had nothing but intense anger for those who by their false teachings led men away from God and directly toward hell.

Nowhere is the Pharisees's hardness of heart more graphically portrayed than in the account of the blind man Jesus healed on the Sabbath. When the healed man was brought to the Pharisees and they heard he had been healed on the Sabbath, their sole concern was for Jesus' breaking one of their Sabbath traditions (John 9:16). The fact that this man who had lived all his life in blindness and despair had now been given sight was of no consequence to them. Nor was the fact that Jesus had obviously performed the healing by divine power of any consequence to them. They were utterly devoid of compassion and blind to the truth. They were indifferent to the confirmation by the man's parents that their son was indeed born blind (v. 20) and impervious to the man's own astute arguments about the divine source of his healing (vv. 30-33). The factualness of his healing was not a consideration to them. They had made up their minds that Jesus was not the Christ (see v. 22), and no evidence to the contrary carried any weight with them. In this one incident the Pharisees conclusively demonstrated their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah, their rejection of His divine nature and power, and their contempt for His divine grace and for the souls of men.

When the church began to move with great force after Pentecost, proclaiming Christ's power to save men's souls and demonstrating His power to heal men's bodies, the Jewish religious leaders again demonstrated their hardness of heart. "What shall we do with these men?" they said of Peter and John after the healing of the lame man outside the Temple. "For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But in order that it may not spread any further

among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to any man in this name” (Acts 4:16-17). In their minds, neither the power the apostles manifested nor the truth they proclaimed was of any relevance. They themselves had rejected the kingdom and, just as during Jesus’ ministry, they were determined to prevent others from **entering**.

Paul reminded the Thessalonian believers that they suffered persecution at the hands of their own unbelieving countrymen just as the believing Jews in Judea had suffered at the hands of theirs. Those Jewish leaders “both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins” (1 Thess. 2:14-16).

Some years ago, a young man called and informed me that he was planning to leave our church and join Mormonism, two workers from which were going to visit him again shortly. I immediately drove to his house and confronted him with the extreme peril of what he was about to do. I told him that if he was not now a true Christian, they would damn his soul by leading him away from Christ and that if he were a Christian they would make a shambles of his spiritual life. When the workers arrived I refused to discuss doctrine with them but rather in the spirit of Matthew 23 presented the true gospel of Christ and denounced the unbiblical and damning errors that their sect taught. However, the young man fell into the cult and was not able to escape for a number of years.

Every non-Christian religion is a works-righteous religion, and works righteousness is inherently at mortal enmity with the gospel of God’s grace. By their very nature such belief systems exclude people from God’s kingdom.

FALSE LEADERS ARE CURSED FOR THEIR SUBVERSION

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves, (23:15)

Second, Jesus cursed the **scribes and Pharisees** for their subversion of the people. They not only excluded them from the true faith but subverted them with false faith.

In New Testament times a great effort was being made to convert Gentiles to Judaism. They worked aggressively, traveling **about on sea and land to make one proselyte**. The word **proselyte** had the basic meaning of a person who has arrived, and came to be commonly used of an outsider who was brought into a religion.

Had that Jewish effort been made in the right way and for the right reasons, it would have been commendable, because Israel had been called to be God's channel for reaching the world for Himself. In His covenant with Abraham the Lord promised that through him and his descendants "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). In the covenant at Sinai the Lord set Israel apart as a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6), who, like her Messiah, was meant to be a light to the nations (Isa. 49:6).

But for most of her history, Israel aspired to do anything but bring Gentiles to God. Like Jonah, they loathed the idea of pagans repenting, being saved, and thereby gaining the same standing before God that they enjoyed. By his own admission, it was for the purpose of forestalling, and no doubt if possible preventing, the repentance and forgiveness of Nineveh that Jonah tried to flee to Tarshish (Jonah 4:2).

By the time Jesus began preaching, however, a different spirit had arisen among some of the Jews, and they were zealously trying to win converts. As the result of those efforts, many synagogues had regular Gentile worshipers who had turned from paganism. Partly because Jews had such an unsavory reputation for exclusiveness and bigotry, Gentile proselytes were not easy to make, and when one of them converted he was considered something of a prize.

There were two kinds of proselytes in the synagogues. One was called “a proselyte of the gate,” a Gentile who only attended the services. He now worshiped the true God, but he had not committed himself to full ritualistic and legalistic Judaism. Such proselytes are referred to in the book of Acts as a person who was devout (10:2, 7; 13:50), as “God-fearing” (10:2, 22, 35; 17:4, 17), or as “a worshiper of God” (16:14; 18:7).

The other kind was referred to as “a proselyte of righteousness,” so called because he became as religiously Jewish as a Gentile could become. They participated in all the ceremonies, rituals, and feasts; they observed all the cleansing and other rites, both biblical and traditional; and if males, they were circumcised. Those converts were even given Jewish names in order to separate them as much as possible from their pagan past. Contrary to their popular appellation, however, they became anything but righteous. Like the scribes and Pharisees who instructed them, they became paragons of self-righteousness.

For obvious reasons there were many more proselytes of the gate than proselytes of righteousness. It was the latter kind in which the scribes and Pharisees delighted, and it was considered a great achievement to initiate a Gentile into all their legalistic practices.

As is often the case with new converts, including true converts to Christ, many of the proselytes of righteousness became extremely zealous for their new faith, some of them even more zealous than those who converted them. But because they were brought into a false religious system that had replaced biblical Judaism, such a **proselyte** became **twice as much a son of hell** as the scribes and Pharisees themselves. They sometimes surpassed their mentors in fanatical zeal, but because their zeal was not godly it simply led them more certainly to **hell**.

Of hell translates a Greek genitive that refers to belonging to or being characterized by. **Son of hell** referred to a person who was especially characterized by hellishness. **Twice . . . a son hell** would be person who was doubly hellish and doubly damned.

Hell is from *geenna*, derived from the name of a valley just outside Jerusalem called Hinnom where refuse was burned. It was considered an accursed place because it was the site where ancient

worshippers of the pagan deity Moloch offered their children as live burnt sacrifices, a hideous practice taken up even by some Israelites (see 2 Chron. 28:3; Jer. 7:31). When King Josiah declared the place unclean (2 Kings 23:10), it became a garbage dump, and because flames and smoke arose from the valley continually, it also became a vivid picture of the eternal fires of hell.

How grateful every believer should be that at some time in His life he was confronted by a spiritual door-opener rather than a spiritual door-closer, someone who shows the way to the kingdom rather than shuts people out of it. And how grateful every believer should be who has the opportunity to hear and study the Word of God in truth. Even a dull presentation of the true gospel is immeasurably superior to the most exciting presentation of a false gospel that damns to hell.

As a citizen of God's kingdom, every believer ought to be one who opens the door of the kingdom to others. All saints have the keys of the kingdom, which is the saving gospel of Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:19), and every false teacher takes away the key of knowledge that leads to the kingdom (Luke 11:52). When Christians are confronted by a representative of a false cult, sect, or religion, they should offer to explain the way of salvation in Christ to him, hoping to snatch him out of the fire, as it were (Jude 23). But they should not debate theology or the merits of various sacred writings or interpretations of the Bible, thereby "casting pearls before swine," but firmly denounce the teachings of that group as ungodly and damning—just as their Lord did with the scribes and Pharisees.

FALSE LEADERS ARE CURSED FOR THEIR PERVERSION

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obligated.' You fools and blind men; which is more important, the gold, or the temple that sanctified the gold? And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears

by the offering upon it, he is obligated.’ You blind men, which is more important, the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore he who swears, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And he who swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it. (23:16-22)

Third, Jesus cursed the scribes and Pharisees for their perversion of truth. God is the God of truth and cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18), and His people are therefore to be people of truth. On the other hand, there is no truth at all in Satan. “Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature,” Jesus says; “for he is a liar, and the father of lies” (John 8:44). His followers are also skilled in lying, and perversion of truth is the hallmark of every false religious system. From the beginning, those who have rejected God have rejected His truth. They have “exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25).

In this particular indictment, Jesus did not call His opponents hypocrites but **blind guides**, emphasizing their unawareness that they were ignorant of the truth. As God’s chosen people who were entrusted with His revelation, the Jews had long considered themselves as guides to the blind, lights to those in darkness, correctors of the foolish, and teachers of the immature (Rom. 2:19-20; cf. 3:2). But as Jesus had declared earlier in His ministry, they were “blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit” (Matt. 15:14). The scribes and Pharisees prided themselves in their superior religious knowledge and understanding, but they were blind leaders trying to lead blind Israel, and together they were doomed to judgment if they would not come to the light.

Among their many perversions of truth was the teaching that **Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obligated.** The very fact that they had developed such a double standard for swearing gives

evidence that their concern was not for truth but for the evasion of it when it did not suit their selfish interests. The underlying purpose behind the first part of the standard was to provide sanctimonious justification for lying with impunity. A person could lie all he wanted, provided he swore **by the temple** and not **by the gold of the temple**. Since no society can survive without some provision for verifying and guaranteeing such things as promises and contracts, the second part of the standard was developed as a necessary expediency. If a person wanted to make absolutely certain that someone was telling the truth or would live up to an agreement, he would make him swear **by the gold of the temple**, which supposedly made his word binding. A person who broke his word after taking such an oath was subject to penalties under Jewish law.

Societies have had various means of trying to make its people keep their word. In some, the most sacred and binding vow was sealed with the blood of the parties involved. In others, an agreement is written in a contract, which each party signs and which often specifies penalties for defaulting. Until recent years, many western courts of law required those giving testimony to swear to tell the truth by placing their right hand on a copy of the Bible and invoking God's help.

The use of oaths had become so perverse in Israel that they were used even to renege on promises made to God. If a person, for example, vowed to give a certain amount to the Lord's work, he would often swear to his vow **by the temple**. If he later decided he had pledged too much, or if he never intended to give the full amount, he had an out, because that vow was considered to be **nothing**.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus condemned all swearing of vows. "But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes,' or 'No, no'; and anything beyond these is of evil" (Matt. 5:34-37). A godly person will always tell the truth, and for him a simple yes or no is sufficient, because his virtuous character is his bond.

Jesus was not teaching a new principle. The psalmist declared, “Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High” (Ps. 50:14). In other words, a vow made is a vow to be kept. David testified, “Thy vows are binding upon me, O God; I will render thank offerings to Thee” (Ps. 56:12), and again, “I will sing praise to Thy name forever, that I may pay my vows day by day” (Ps. 61:8; cf. 66:13; 76:11). It is significant that in each of those quotations the keeping of vows to God is directly related to praise and thankfulness to Him.

The great offense of Ananias and Sapphira was not in giving less to the Lord’s work than they were able to give but in lying about it. When Peter confronted them, he charged them with lying to the Holy Spirit and putting God to the test. The Lord takes lying very seriously, and for their deception those two believers lost their lives. It is not surprising that, as a result, “great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard of these things” (Acts 5:1-11).

The idea that swearing by the gold in the Temple was binding but swearing by the Temple itself was not binding was moral chicanery and logical absurdity. **“You fools and blind men”** Jesus said; **“which is more important, the gold, or the temple that sanctified the gold?”** In other words, by what perverted logic had it been determined that making a vow on something lesser was more binding than one made on something greater? The only reason **the gold** could be thought of as sacred, and thereby make the vow supposedly more obligatory, was **the temple that sanctified the gold**.

The religious leaders applied the same twisted logic to swearing **by the altar**, which was considered to be **nothing**, that is, nonobligatory, and to swearing by **the offering upon it**, which was thought to make a person **obligated** to keep his vow. **“You blind men,”** Jesus said, **“which is more important, the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering?”** The whole idea was both theologically and logically preposterous. Those standards were nothing more than wicked pretenses for using holy things to disguise their unholy propensity to lie.

As Jesus went on to point out, to swear **by the altar** was to swear **by everything on it**; to swear **by the temple** was to swear **by**

Him who dwells within it, namely, God Himself; and to swear by **heaven** was to swear **both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it**. In other words, everything involved with **the temple** and everything involved with **heaven** involved God. In fact, since God is the creator of everything, to swear by anything at all involves God.

FALSE LEADERS ARE CURSED FOR THEIR INVERSION

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! (23:23-24)

Fourth, Jesus cursed the **scribes and Pharisees** for inverting divine priorities. They magnified the insignificant and minimized the essential.

Mint and dill and cummin were garden herbs used as kitchen spices, and were not generally considered farm produce, of which the Mosaic law required a **tithe** be paid to the treasury in Israel (Lev. 27:30). Because it helped support the government, which was a theocracy operated to a great extent by the priesthood, the tithe was a form of taxation. A second tenth was to be paid each year for support of the various worship ceremonies and national festivals (Deut. 12:11, 17). Another tithe was to be paid every three years for a type of welfare, to support the Levites, aliens, orphans, and widows (Deut. 14:28-29), which amounted to an additional 3.3 percent a year. Israelites were therefore required to pay just over 23 percent of their income a year in taxes to fund the theocracy.

The instructions for tithing produce (see also Deut. 14:22) related to marketable farm crops such as grains, olive oil, wine, fruits, and vegetables. But the legalistic scribes and Pharisees

extended the provision to include the smallest potted plant grown in a kitchen window. As today, herbs then were grown mostly for their leaves and seeds, and when the scribes and Pharisees picked leaves from a **mint** plant or gathered seeds from the **dill and cummin** plants, they would carefully count out the leaves and seeds, separating out one for God from each ten counted. They gloried in the self-righteousness of subscribing to such minutiae.

But with all their carefulness in such insignificant and often noncompulsory matters, they **neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness**. They were obsessed with counting leaves and seeds but indifferent to basic ethics.

Jesus borrowed the word **weightier** from the rabbinical tradition, which had divided the law into light and heavy categories. In their inverted priorities the scribes and Pharisees had reduced such matters as **justice and mercy and faithfulness** to the light category, and elevated the tithing of garden herbs to the **weightier** category. In His reference to the truly weightier matters, Jesus paraphrased the words of Micah. Some 700 years earlier that prophet had declared, “[The Lord] has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic. 6:8).

The scribes and Pharisees were inequitable, unfair, unjust, unmerciful, brutal, unforgiving, unkind, greedy, and abusive of others. They were everything that is contrary to the **weightier provisions of the law**. Worst of all, they walked by sight rather than faith, trusting in their own works rather than God’s grace.

Jesus did not denounce the tithing of herbs, which would have been perfectly acceptable if done in sincerity and faith. And because tithing was at that time still a valid requirement under the Old Covenant, He certainly did not reprove tithing in general. “**These are the things you should have done**” He said, “**without neglecting the others.**” In light of the fact that such garden plants had not generally been considered covered under the Mosaic laws of tithing until rabbinical times, it seems likely that by **these . . . things** Jesus was referring to tithing in general. In other words, while being faithful to tithe according to scriptural instruction, they should not have **neglected** the Lord’s much **weightier** demands.

The tithe, however, was strictly a requirement of the Old Covenant. It is mentioned only six times in the New Testament, three times each in the gospels and in the book of Hebrews. In the gospels it is always used, as here, in regard to its abuse by the scribes and Pharisees (see also Luke 11:42; 18:12). In the book of Hebrews the Mosaic tithe is mentioned only in regard to its use in ancient Israel (Heb. 7:8-9; vv. 5-6). At no time in the New Testament is tithing mentioned as binding on the church or even recommended as the standard for Christian giving. This is easy to understand if one recognizes that tithes were a form of taxation to support the national life of Israel (see the author's *1 Corinthians* [Chicago: Moody, 1984], pp. 454-55). The closest New Testament parallel is the requirement to pay taxes indicated in Romans 13:6-7.

Almost without exception, false religions strongly magnify the insignificant and minimize or entirely ignore the truly spiritual. The worldly is idolized; the spiritual is disregarded.

It is also possible for true believers to become caught up in minutiae. Some Bible students, for instance, claim to have ascertained the meaning of virtually every obscure sign and symbol in Scripture yet give scant attention in their lives to the Bible's clear and unambiguous moral truths.

Jesus graphically illustrated the scribes' and Pharisees' inversion of priorities by saying that they would **strain out a gnat and swallow a camel**. The **gnat** and the **camel** represented the smallest and the largest, respectively, of the ceremonially unclean animals (see Lev. 11:4, 42). Fastidious Pharisees would drink their wine through clenched teeth in order to filter out any small insects that might have gotten into the wine. In their typical reversal of values, those Jewish religious leaders were more concerned about being contaminated by a tiny **gnat** than by a huge **camel**. They were painstaking about formal, ceremonial trivialities but were unconcerned about their hypocrisy, dishonesty, cruelty, greed, self-worship, and a host of other serious sins. They substituted outward acts of religion for the essential virtues of the heart.

FALSE LEADERS ARE CURSED FOR THEIR EXTORTION AND SELF-INDULGENCE

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. (23:25-26)

Fifth, Jesus cursed the **scribes and Pharisees** for their extortion of others and indulgence of themselves.

To illustrate again their hypocrisy, Jesus used the figure of cleaning the **outside of a cup and . . . dish, but not the inside**. The Greek phrase behind **dish** was often used of a platter on which exquisite delicacies were served. The idea is of a person who offers a guest a seemingly lovely meal served with the best wine. But it turns out that, although the utensils are beautiful and ceremonially purified, the food served on them was putrid.

Outwardly, the religious leaders gave the appearance of pious devotion to the Lord, but inwardly they were **full of** the moral and spiritual filth of **robbery and self-indulgence**. They were ceremonially immaculate and attractive but spiritually squalid and repulsive.

Harpagē (**robbery**) carries the ideas of plundering, pillaging, and extortion, and *akrasia* (**self-indulgence**) has the basic meaning of lack of self-control and was often used to denote unrestrained self-gratification. The unscrupulous religious leaders robbed the people they were supposed to serve in order to satisfy their own greed. They plundered both the souls and the wallets of the people and used the ill-gotten gains to serve themselves.

Making the accusation more personal and direct, Jesus said, **“You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.”** No utensil is clean that holds ill-gotten food or drink.

Throughout history, false religious leaders have become rich and fat by fleecing those they pretend to serve. Outwardly they appear righteous, caring, and exemplary, but inwardly they are rapacious wolves.

FALSE LEADERS ARE CURSED FOR THEIR CONTAMINATION

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. (23:27-28)

Sixth, Jesus cursed the **scribes and Pharisees** for spiritually contaminating everyone they touched.

After the spring rains had ceased, Palestinian Jews in New Testament times had the custom of whitewashing houses, walls, and particularly **tombs**. They began this task on the fifteenth of Adar, which roughly corresponds to March, in order to make their communities more attractive for Passover pilgrims. They had an additional purpose for whitewashing grave sites, however, especially those in and near Jerusalem. Because a person became ceremonially unclean for seven days if he touched a dead body or even a grave (Num. 19:16), all **tombs** were carefully whitewashed to identify them to unwary travelers. They would be prevented from inadvertently touching the tombs and becoming defiled and thereby disqualified to participate in many of the Passover activities, including the offering of sacrifices. In some cases the entire tomb was painted, and in others drawings of bones were painted on it to mark it as a sepulcher. Because of all the whitewash, Jerusalem and its environs glistened in the sunlight during the Passover season.

Like the **whitewashed tombs**, the scribes and Pharisees **on the outside** appeared **beautiful, but inside they** were also like the

tombs, **full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness**. They were spiritually dead and had no genuine regard for God's law, despite their outward praise of it and claim to be its true interpreters and teachers. In an infinitely worse way than the tombs ceremonially defiled those who touched them, the scribes and Pharisees spiritually defiled those whom they touched.

FALSE LEADERS ARE CURSED FOR THEIR PRETENSION

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' Consequently you bear witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up then the measure of the guilt of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell? (23:29-33)

Seventh and last, Jesus cursed the **scribes and Pharisees** for their pretension in presuming to be superior to others, including their forefathers.

For many hundreds of years these leaders had been in the vanguard of ventures to **build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous** saints and heroes of Israel. They would have been on the speaker's platform in ceremonies honoring the great men of the past and would have voiced the loudest adulations.

Realizing that many of those saints had been persecuted and martyred by their own forefathers, the scribes and Pharisees made vehement disclaimers for themselves, asserting self-righteously: **"If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets."**

But Jesus repudiated their pretension and exposed their true character, declaring that **“consequently you bear witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.”** At that very moment they were plotting to kill Jesus, their Messiah and the Prophet of prophets, proving they were even more wicked than their ungodly ancestors. They were so consumed by hatred of the truth and righteousness of God that they were totally blinded to the fact that they were about to crucify the very Son of God.

“Fill up then the measure of the guilt of your fathers,” Jesus said. “Your scheming to put to death the greatest prophet of all,” He declared in effect, “will be the final **measure** of the murderous conspiracies of your **fathers** against God’s messengers.” They were about to culminate all the guilt of those in the past who killed God’s messengers. This was the supreme act of sin against God’s prophets, as they murdered the Prophet-Messiah.

In a final curse Jesus exclaimed, **“You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell?”** The question was rhetorical, meaning that they could not possibly **escape the sentence of hell** if they carried out the evil intent that now poisoned their hearts.

Ophis (serpents) was a general word for snakes, but *echidna (vipers)* referred to small poisonous snakes that lived primarily in the desert regions of Palestine and other parts of the eastern Mediterranean. Because they looked like a dried twig when they were still, a person collecting wood for a fire would often pick one up inadvertently and be bitten, as happened to Paul on the island of Malta. That particular viper was deadly, and when Paul suffered no harm from the bite, the superstitious islanders thought he was a god (Acts 28:3, 6). **Vipers** therefore had the understandable reputation for being both deadly and deceitful.

At the beginning of his ministry John the Baptist had called the unbelieving and unrepentant Pharisees and Sadducees who came to him for baptism a “brood of vipers” (Matt. 3:7), using exactly the same phrase used now by Jesus at the end of His ministry to describe those same false leaders. Neither the messages of John the Baptist nor of Jesus had any positive effect on those men, but served only to

harden them in their unbelief and in their opposition to the gospel and to God's righteous messengers.

In pagan Greek culture, the *echidna* had long been associated with evil. In their mythology the name was given to a monster deity that was half snake and half woman and that gave birth to other monsters, including the murderous sphinx of Thebes.

By the time of Christ, *echidna* was universally associated with extreme wickedness and danger. Therefore when Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees a **brood of vipers**, He was declaring them to be both evil and deadly.

As explained earlier in this chapter, the term *geenna* (**hell**) was derived from the name of a valley near Jerusalem where trash and garbage continually burned. Jesus' relating **vipers** to **the sentence of hell** suggests the common practice of a farmer's burning the dried stubble in his field to prepare the land for the next planting. As the flames approached their dens, **vipers** would try to scurry away but were usually unsuccessful and consumed by the fire. Jesus said, in effect, "You wicked, deceitful men, do you really think you can outrun God's fire of judgment?"

As Jesus had just reminded them, those false leaders were guilty of keeping people out of the kingdom, guilty of subverting the people, guilty of perverting God's truth, guilty of inverting God's priorities, guilty of extorting God's people, guilty of spiritually contaminating everyone they touched, guilty of pretending to be righteous while being malevolent, and worst of all guilty of preparing to execute God's own Son.

36
The Condemnation
of False Spiritual
Leaders—part 2
Proclaiming the
Judgment
(23:34-36)

Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I say to you, all these things shall come upon this generation. (23:34-36)

For centuries the Jews had awaited the arrival of their Messiah. The abiding hope in the heart of the Jew was that the day would soon come when the Messiah's arrival and establishment of His kingdom would usher in the enduring age of promised blessing for God's people. Every Jewish woman longed to be mother of that Messiah, and every Jewish man thought of rising to that place of prominence, honor, and service.

Yet when the Messiah did come and did offer His kingdom and did promise blessing and hope and salvation, instead of receiving Him in faith and love His people rejected Him in unbelief and abhorrence. They so despised Him that they murdered Him and persecuted and often murdered His followers.

In that grievous epoch in the history of Israel, God's uniquely chosen and blessed people confirmed that they preferred falsehood above truth, darkness above light, iniquity above righteousness, their own worthless works above God's divine grace, damnation above salvation, Satan's way above God's. They were called out by God's grace and given His promises and covenants and laws. Yet when those blessings came to perfect consummation in the coming of their long-promised Messiah, the Lord and Savior, they rebelled against Him and put Him to death.

Leading that rejection were the scribes and Pharisees, the epitome of false spiritual leaders. Those self-righteous, legalistic, hypocritical haters of God hungered and thirsted not for righteousness but for the blood of the righteous. At the very moment Jesus addressed them face to face in the Temple, they were plotting His arrest and murder. In so doing, they were, as Jesus had just declared, filling "up then the measure of the guilt of [their] fathers" (Matt. 23:32).

The phrase "fill up" is often used in Scripture in relation to sin, wrath, and judgment when those have reached their full limit. It depicts a cup filled to the brim with sin, which becomes a cup of condemnation. The cup that is full of sin is full of punishment to the same level. When sin is full it brings wrath, which when full brings judgment, which when full brings eternal destruction. Isaiah exclaimed, "Arise, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the Lord's hand the cup of His anger; the chalice of reeling you have drained to

the dregs” (Isa. 51:17). Jeremiah declared, “For thus the Lord, the God of Israel, says to me, Take this cup of the wine of wrath from My hand, and cause all the nations, to whom I send you, to drink it” (Jer. 25:15). Habakkuk warned Judah that “the cup in the Lord’s right hand will come around to you, and utter disgrace will come upon your glory” (Hab. 2:16). In the seventh bowl judgment in the final days, God will give Babylon, the paradigm of false religion, “the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath” (Rev. 16:19).

The scribes and Pharisees, and with them most of Israel, were about to fill up the limit of their sin. When man irrevocably rejects God, God irrevocably rejects him, giving him over to his own willful wickedness. When men “did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer,” Paul says, “God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, . . . and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them” (Rom. 1:28, 32). Because Pharaoh had irrevocably hardened his heart against God, God confirmed that hardening (Ex. 9:34-35; cf. 4:21; 7:3, 13; 10:1). When Judas had irrevocably committed himself to betraying Christ, Jesus told him, “What you do, do quickly” (John 13:27), not approving what Judas had determined to do but divinely confirming that decision.

Ever since there have been righteous men there have been persecutors and murderers of righteous men, who are a rebuke to unrighteousness. Whenever a society has the opportunity to express its hatred of righteousness, which reflects its hatred of God, it will abuse and, if possible, destroy the righteous people who belong to God.

After Jesus finished His series of seven curses against the scribes and Pharisees (vv. 13-33), He added another word of warning, declaring that their judgment was both inevitable and imminent.

JUDGMENT WAS INEVITABLE

Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. (23:34-35)

Because the cup of their sin and the cup of God's wrath would very shortly be filled up (vv. 32-33), **therefore** the judgment of the scribes and Pharisees was inevitable.

“As evidence and verification of that judgment,” Jesus said, **“Behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city.”** In other words, after they crucified Him, their Messiah, they would proceed to **kill and crucify** His followers, especially the godly men He would send as His emissaries—the New Testament **prophets and wise men and scribes**.

In mentioning both **kill** and **crucify**, Jesus was probably referring to Jewish and Roman means of execution, respectively. Jesus was crucified, of course, as also was Peter according to tradition. Stephen was stoned, and James was put to death by the sword (Acts 7:58-60; 12:2). Other believers in the early church were murdered by those and countless other methods.

“**Some of My followers,**” Jesus predicted, **“you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city.”** All of the apostles experienced abuses for their faith, as did most other believers. “Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes,” Paul recounted. “Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned” (2 Cor. 11:24-25). Before his conversion, Paul had himself been in the vanguard of those who persecuted Christians **from city to city** (Acts 8:1-4; 9:1-2), and after his conversion he was the recipient of such persecution. He was opposed in and frequently driven out of many cities, including Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:45, 50), Iconium (14:1-2), Lystra (14:19-20), Thessalonica (17:5-10), Berea (17:13-

14), Corinth (18:12-18), Jerusalem (21:27; 23:12), and Caesarea (24:1-9). Believers in the early church were continually hounded by the false spiritual leaders of Israel, who sought to stamp out the gospel of Christ.

Characteristic of Matthew's gospel, the three titles **prophets and wise men and scribes** were uniquely Jewish. Although He was speaking of the apostles and other teachers, preachers, and writers of the New Testament age, Jesus used Old Testament terms His hearers would be sure to understand. Those Spirit-endowed leaders would be used of God to minister His gospel to the world and to complete His written Word in order that men might accurately hear the full message of His grace and be saved.

But those men would also fulfill another purpose, less consciously but as divinely ordained as that positive one. Just as they would be ministers of salvation they would also be ministers of judgment. Just as they would lead many to accept Jesus as Savior and Lord, they would also lead others to confirm their rejection of Him as Savior and Lord. **"I am sending them to you,"** Jesus said to the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees, **"that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth."** While others were having the opportunity to receive Him, they would have further opportunity to reject Him—which they would do. They would have additional chances to reject Him in order that they might pile upon themselves an even greater weight of guilt, which would earn them even more severe judgment (cf. Rom. 2:5).

Hopōs (**that**) relates to purpose, meaning "in order that" or "for the purpose of." It was fully within God's purpose that the wicked leaders of Israel, along with all other Jews who rejected Christ, have **the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth** come down on their heads. As far as the hardened scribes and Pharisees were concerned, the only gain they would receive from hearing more of the gospel would be more **guilt** and greater judgment.

It is not that God desires for men to reject His grace and be condemned (2 Pet. 3:9) but that when they persist in rejecting Him, they bring upon themselves the righteous outpouring of His wrath. The more they hear of His truth, the more accountable and guilty they become if they continue to reject it.

The scribes and Pharisees had all the accumulated revelation of the Old Testament, and for three years they had even received the perfect revelation of God's own Son. And the more they accumulated God's revelation without believing and following it, the more they accumulated God's wrath and judgment in direct proportion. They and their generation could be held guilty for **all the righteous blood shed on earth**, because no generation in history has had or will ever have more of God's light. They had God incarnate in their midst, who was Himself all truth and all light, yet they would not have Him.

The western world today is in a similar situation. The church has not always witnessed to Christ as clearly, fully, or lovingly as it might, but no generation in history, outside of that of Jesus' own day, has had more access to God's truth and the way of salvation than twentieth century western man. In addition to having great light, we have had benefit of the accumulated light, power, and blessing of the gospel for 2,000 years. Yet each successive generation seems to reject the gospel more vehemently, amassing for itself greater guilt and therefore greater judgment.

Paul testified, "For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing." The great difference, he went on to explain, was that to the saved they were "an aroma from life to life," whereas to the lost they were "an aroma from death to death" (2 Cor. 2:15-16). In other words, every time the gospel is proclaimed, it either draws men to Christ or drives them further away. Because it runs so contrary to popular notions about God, that truth is difficult for many Christians to accept. But the New Testament makes abundantly clear that the purpose of the gospel is not always to bring salvation; it has the equally divine purpose of bringing judgment. As the saying goes, the same sun that softens the wax hardens the clay. God not only is a God of love, mercy, and grace but of holiness, wrath, and judgment; and Scripture is equally emphatic about both aspects of His nature.

When men receive God's Son and are saved, He is glorified because His grace is vindicated; and when they refuse His Son and are condemned, He is glorified because His holiness is vindicated. Knowing how troublesome the second part of that truth is even for many believers to accept, Paul went on to assert that he was "not like

many, peddling the word of God” in ways that were pleasing to men, “but as from sincerity, but as from God, [he spoke] in Christ in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 2:17). Lest any of his readers think he was simply expressing personal fanaticism, the apostle categorically asserted that he was speaking not only sincerely but from God and in God’s sight.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul presents the same truth in a somewhat different light. He anticipated that some people would object to his teaching that God “has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires,” and would ask, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?” (Rom. 9:18-19). In reply the apostle said,

On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, (vv. 20-23)

God is God, and whatever He does is right by definition, because He is both the source and the measure of what is right.

In God’s final word to mankind in Scripture, He declared, “Let the one who does wrong, still do wrong; and let the one who is filthy, still be filthy; and let the one who is righteous, still practice righteousness; and let the one who is holy, still keep himself holy” (Rev 22:11). As men are in the end, so they will be forever. And whether in His gracious saving of those who receive His Son or in His holy judgment of those who do not, He will be glorified forever.

From the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the Jews had been killing God’s people and storing up greater and greater wrath and judgment. Unrighteous Cain slew **righteous Abel**, his brother. He could not tolerate his brother’s purity

and godliness, because righteousness itself is a type of judgment on sin, exposing it for what it is.

The identity of **Zechariah, the son of Berechiah**, has long been debated among Bible students. According to 2 Chronicles 24:20-21, Zechariah the son of Jehoiada was stoned to death by order of King Joash for his relentless stand against idolatry. His murder “in the court of the house of the Lord” occurred about 800 **B.C.**, long before the end of the writing of the Old Testament.

Over twenty men by the name of **Zechariah** are mentioned in Scripture, indicating that it was a very popular name. Among the hundreds or perhaps thousands of Zechariahs who had lived before Christ it would not be surprising if more than one had been killed in the Temple. Because Jesus was pointing out the extensiveness of persecution of righteous people, beginning with **Abel** and ending with **Zechariah**, it would suggest that He was covering the whole of Old Testament history, from creation to the end of the prophetic period. It is also significant that **Zechariah** wrote more of the coming Messiah than did any other prophet except Isaiah.

The prophet **Zechariah**, whose father’s name was **Berechiah** (Zech. 1:1), was among the last prophets of Israel and apparently the last to be martyred. And although the Old Testament does not report his being **murdered between the temple and the altar**, it seems certain he was the **Zechariah** to whom Jesus referred.

It is significant that Jesus said, **whom you murdered**, speaking directly to the scribes and Pharisees but including all unbelieving Israel (v. 36). Although the murder of the prophet had been over 500 years earlier, the wicked leaders the Lord now addressed had participated in it. By their murdering Jesus, the incarnation of righteousness, they proved their complicity in and solidarity with the persecution and murder of every righteous person who has ever suffered at the hands of evil men.

JUDGMENT WAS IMMINENT

Truly I say to you, all these things shall come upon this generation. (23:36)

All these things—that is, the multiplied guilt and judgment that unbelieving mankind had been accumulating since the Fall—was about to **come down upon** the head of **this generation**. There is no reason to believe Jesus was speaking any way but historically when He spoke of **this generation**. It would be that generation who would experience the total destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple less than forty years later, in A.D. 70., a time Jesus called the “days of vengeance” (Luke 21:22). He had in mind not only those to whom He was then speaking but all other false leaders and unbelieving Jews living at that time—in other words, the nation of Israel as a whole. In a tragic chronicle, its people have continued in suffering from then until now.

In the year 66, Jewish revolution again broke out against Rome. Having taken as much as they could tolerate of Roman oppression, injustice, and pagan ways, the Jews turned against their rulers. Largely inspired by the Zealots, the party of radical nationalists known for their guerilla tactics and frequent terrorism, many Palestinian Jews took up whatever arms they could find and joined in rebellion. Rome struck back by slaughtering thousands of Jews in northern Galilee, and eventually Titus came down to Jerusalem with an army in excess of 80,000 men. After stationing his army throughout the city as well as all around it, the general demanded its immediate surrender. When the Jews replied with mocking laughter and attacks on the soldiers, the troops began a massacre that almost defies description. (See chapter 29 of this volume for a vivid eye-witness account by the famed Jewish historian Josephus.)

About that same time, the Gentile inhabitants of Damascus are said to have slit the throats of ten thousand Jews living among them. Several centuries later, the Roman emperor Theodosius II enacted a legal code that declared Jews were inherently inferior and did not deserve the same legal protection and privileges as other people. Tragically, those anti-Semitic views came to permeate subsequent

western culture and law. In A.D. 630, the Byzantine emperor Heraclitus banished from Jerusalem the Jews who had begun to resettle there.

During the first crusade, which began in 1096, the established church in Europe instigated what was declared to be a holy war to deliver the Holy Land from the Muslim Turks who had ruled it for many centuries. Fearing Jews would want to resettle and reclaim the land for themselves, many crusaders engaged in brutal massacres of European Jews, supposedly in the name of Christ, as they marched toward Palestine. Sometimes the soldiers would herd all the Jews in a town or city together and give them an ultimatum to confess Christ and be publicly baptized or else be killed. Some Jews made a verbal profession merely to save their lives, while others refused and were slain where they stood. The atrocities included trampling Jews under their horses' hooves as well as other means of execution too brutal to mention. Rather than face such humiliation and horror, many Jews committed suicide when they were informed that crusaders were approaching.

For many years Jews had experienced a relatively safe and untroubled asylum in England. But when a Dominican monk in the thirteenth century began to study the Hebrew Scriptures in order to be better able to witness to Jews, he himself converted to Judaism and was circumcised. In an irate reaction, the Roman Catholic Church had all Jews expelled from Cambridge.

In other parts of Europe Jews were falsely accused of counterfeiting coins and other serious crimes. After sham trials or no trial at all, the accused would be tortured, imprisoned, exiled, or executed. Sometimes all Jews in a community would be required to wear identifying arm bands or badges to set them apart. In London a group of Jews had their arms and legs tied to horses that were then driven off in opposite directions, and after the bodies were ripped apart, the remains were draped on gallows for the townspeople to see.

When the black plague swept across Europe in the fourteenth century, killing hundreds of thousands, many people blamed the Jews. In France they were accused of poisoning water wells, and in one town a synagogue filled with worshipers was burned to the ground. In

desperation, many Jews fled to Poland and Russia in the farthest reaches of Europe, where many of their descendants still live today.

Having considerable freedom in Poland, they established several outstanding Talmudic schools and seminaries. They were later oppressed by the church for a while, but nevertheless joined the government and the church in fighting the Russian Cossacks. When the Cossacks were victorious, they vengefully massacred thousands of Jews.

Jews who fled to Spain found poor refuge. Among their worst persecutors were King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, the two monarchs who commissioned Christopher Columbus's first ventures to the new world. That country was described by one Jewish poet as the hell of the Jews. During the Spanish Inquisition, the graves of those who had converted to Judaism were dug up and the bodies desecrated. The heirs of those proselytes had their property confiscated as a warning to others who might consider converting. Every Jew was made to wear a symbol of burning crosses, and in 1492, the year Columbus began his first voyage, most of them were expelled from the country. A large number emigrated to Russia, where persecution in varying degrees has persisted to this day.

In medieval Germany, Jews were accused of using the blood of Christian children in their Passover rites. Some were even charged with stabbing the host (the bread served in the Catholic mass and believed to turn into the actual body of Christ) to make it bleed—thereby reenacting His crucifixion. Those accused of such things were tortured and killed in a variety of cruel ways.

For many centuries anti-Semitism polluted most of western civilization. In 1894 a Jewish army officer named Alfred Dreyfus was falsely accused and convicted of treason simply because he was Jewish. His conviction precipitated the removal of all high-ranking Jews from the French army.

Despite the continued persecution, twenty million Jews still lived in Europe at the outbreak of World War II. In what has come to be termed "The Holocaust," Adolph Hitler hideously exterminated at least six million Jews in Germany and Nazi-occupied territories. Those demon-inspired atrocities were not grounded so much in

religious as racial prejudice, with Jews being declared racially inferior.

With little respite, for two thousand years the Jews have endured persecution after persecution, being maligned, falsely accused, treated unjustly, denied dignity and jobs and schooling and citizenship, driven out of country after country, and not infrequently massacred without mercy—for no other reason than being Jewish.

The modern state of Israel bears the marks of much of that persecution, including Titus's destruction of the Temple, the excavated partial western wall of which is now called the wailing wall. There are also more modern relics there, such as tanks and other armored vehicles intentionally left to rust in public view as reminders of the costly battles Israelis have fought and continue to fight in defense of their new nation since it was founded in 1948.

Through all those horrors and systematic attempts at their extermination, the Jews remain. They remain because the holy God who preserves them will not be thwarted by the evil hosts of both men and demons who seek to destroy them.

Yet as Jesus gravely declares in this passage, the divine preservation of the Jews is not only for God's purpose of ultimately redeeming His chosen people but is also a perpetuation of their punishment. It is a continuing chastening that they will endure until Israel declares in faith, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord" (Matt. 23:39; cf. Ps. 118:26).

37
Jesus' Last Words to
Israel
(23:37-39)

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’” (23:37-39)

Since the call of Abraham, the Jews have been God’s special people, and a Christian who truly loves God cannot help loving the Jewish people. He has deep concern for their plight in our day and a heavy burden for their salvation in Christ, their Messiah.

Throughout all the centuries of their oppression, including attempts to exterminate them, as in the Nazi holocaust, they have survived and been divinely preserved in their racial identity. Although they have been scattered to every part of the world, have become citizens in countless different countries, have intermarried with Gentiles, and even have differing opinions among themselves as to who a real Jew is, they continue as a distinct people.

To those who know and believe Scripture, their perpetuation is not surprising, because, since He made His covenant with Abraham some four thousand years ago, God has pledged to preserve His chosen people and one day to call them permanently back to Himself.

In the meanwhile, they cry out to a God who never answers. They wonder why, if they are indeed His chosen people, they have suffered so much at the hands of the world's most wicked people? Why, if their Scriptures are truly the oracles of God, have they been so abandoned by God, who in those oracles so often promised to be their Provider and Deliverer? Why, if He called all of His holy prophets from among them, has He since deserted them to the prejudice and malice of ungodly men? If they are the apple of God's eye, why has so much hatred arisen specifically against them and caused them incalculable misery and anguish?

In the close of this His last public message, Jesus gave the sobering answer to such questions, yet He gave it with intense compassion and with the assurance of Israel's ultimate conversion.

THE INTENSE COMPASSION

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! (23:37-38)

As Jesus had entered Jerusalem the morning before, “He saw the city and wept over it, saying, ‘If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for Peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes’” (Luke 19:41-42). Jeremiah expressed similar grief when He considered the prospect of Judah’s being taken captive by Babylon because of her defiance of God: “My soul will sob in secret for such pride; and my eyes will bitterly weep and flow down with tears” (Jer. 13:17).

Now Jesus expresses grief at the hardness of His people. There was great pathos as well as rebuke in His repeating the name, **Jerusalem, Jerusalem**. It was much as when He had said, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things” (Luke 10:41); and when He had said, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat” (Luke 22:31); and when He would say some years later, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:4). The name **Jerusalem** means “city of peace,” and it was often called the holy city. But over many centuries it had become the city of violence and of unholiness. In the book of Revelation it is called, “the great city which mystically is called Sodom and Egypt” (11:8), Sodom representing moral perversion and Egypt representing pagan religion. The city of God had become the city of Satan.

Using **Jerusalem** as representative of all Israel, the Lord again reminded the people of their rebellion against Him, manifested in their killing **the prophets** and stoning the other messengers He **sent to her**. The verbs **kills** and **stones** translate two Greek present active participles and could be rendered, “who are killing . . . and stoning,” indicating a process that was still continuing. Unbelieving, rebellious Israel had been killing God’s righteous people from Abel to Zechariah (v. 35), and they would soon kill God’s Son and then continue to kill the “prophets and wise men and scribes” that the Son Himself would send to them (v. 34). In the parable of the vineyard grower, Jesus described them as tenants who beat and killed the servants the owner sent to them and even killed the son and heir when he came (Matt. 21:33-39).

It was never God’s ultimate plan and desire for His people to be punished but for them to return to Him in faithfulness and devotion. “**How often I wanted to gather your children together,**

the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings,” Jesus lamented. He longed to draw Israel to Himself and protect her just as a mother **hen gathers her chicks under her wings** to protect them from a storm that would batter them or a hawk that would devour them. There was a beautiful intimacy and tenderness in Jesus’ words and no doubt in His voice as He mourned over His people. He had come “to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11).

David exulted, “How precious is Thy lovingkindness, O God! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Thy wings” (Ps. 36:7). It was God’s great desire that all men, especially His beloved **children** Israel, would take refuge under His **wings**. At many times and in many forms Jesus had **often** given invitations such as, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:28-29).

But **you were unwilling**, He said. He came to His people in truth and light and love and offered them the kingdom God had long promised, but they rejected the King and forfeited the kingdom. Instead of inheriting the blessing God proffered for their faith, they inherited the judgment He promised for their unbelief.

Nothing in Scripture is more certain than the truth that God is sovereign over all things; but God’s Word nowhere teaches determinism, as this verse makes clear. God was abundantly willing for Israel and all men to receive and follow His Son, but most of them **were unwilling**. They did not turn from Christ because of fate but solely because of their own unwillingness. When a person rejects Christ, it is never God’s desire or God’s fault but always his own.

A privilege was given to Israel that is absolutely unique in the history of mankind, and with that privilege came great opportunity and responsibility. The incarnate Son of God came into her midst as the Son of David, her own Messiah, Lord, and Savior. He taught and healed and exhorted and entreated. In His unparalleled truth and love He demonstrated God so perfectly that He could say, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9; cf. 12:45). Yet Israel

rejected that revelation and forsook that opportunity, and in so doing brought upon herself God's wrath and judgment.

Because Jews are God's chosen people they are the objects of Satan's fiercest hatred. Therefore when God removed His protective hand from Israel it was to expose her to the worst furies that Satan could bring upon a people. It is Satan's continual desire to eliminate them, because they are specially beloved by God and because to destroy them would be to frustrate God's promise of bringing them back to Himself (Rom. 11:26) and giving them to Christ as an inheritance.

Yet although Israel as a people has suffered because God withdrew His blessing from them, many individual Jews have come and continue to come to Christ in saving faith. God has never been without a chosen remnant (Isa. 10:22; Jer. 23:3; Ezek. 6:8; Zech. 8:12; Rom. 9:27).

During the days of Isaiah the Lord reminded Israel of His great love and care in calling them out and building them up as a people, using the figure of a grower who carefully planted and cultivated a vineyard only to find that it produced worthless grapes. Because of their unfaithfulness and unfruitfulness, the Lord declared that He would remove the protective hedge around the vineyard, break down its wall, and lay it waste. God went on to explain through the prophet, "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah His delightful plant. Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress" (Isa. 5:1-7). That prediction was fulfilled when Judah was conquered by Babylon in 586 B.C. and had many of its inhabitants, including three of its kings, taken into exile by Nebuchadnezzar over a period of years.

In declaring, "**Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!**" Jesus was saying that, much as in that earlier time of judgment, Israel would be **left** devastated and **desolate**. Only a few days earlier Jesus had referred to the Temple as His Father's house (Matt. 21:13; cf. 12:4), but it had been so long profaned and desecrated that He now called it **your house**, a reference also to the nation as a whole, the house of Israel. Like the son of Phinehas's widow (1 Sam. 4:21), the Temple and all Israel could soon be called

Ichabod, because God's glory would depart from them. In the present age, while God's glory and protective hand are withdrawn from Israel, the house of God is Christ's church, "the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15).

Early in her history God had warned Israel that if she would not obey Him, "to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes," that the curses He was about to enumerate would come upon her (Deut. 28:15-68). Because she not only had forsaken God's commandments but even His own Son, Israel would now be left **desolate**, subject to the vagaries of an ungodly world that would mock her, despise her, and persecute her people from city to city just as she would soon do with the prophets, wise men, and scribes Christ would send to her (v. 34).

In the end times the persecution of Jews will escalate into a holocaust like no other they have experienced. That suffering will occur in a period called the time of Jacob's distress (Jer. 30:7) and the Great Tribulation, a time "such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall" (Matt. 24:21).

THE INSURED CONVERSION

For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" (23:39)

Jesus' farewell words to Israel were, "**From now on you shall not see Me.**" For the unbelieving Jews listening to Him that day and for all the other unbelieving Jews of that generation (v. 37) and for countless generations to come, those words were final. Because they rejected God, God rejected them. He would no longer be their God, and they would no longer be His people.

Were it not for Jesus' qualifying word **until**, that would have been their final moment in history, and the theology of the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments, would be radically altered. In addition to that, men would have had good reason never to trust God's

word again, because He repeatedly promised that His chosen people would ultimately be saved, restored, and blessed (see, e.g., Jer. 23:5-6; Isa. 66:10-22; Zech. 14:1-11).

Jesus did not say “unless,” making Israel’s restoration only a possibility, but **until**, making it a certainty. Even in the context of His most severe curses upon unbelieving Israel and her false leaders, that word offered hope. One day Israel will finally say in faith, “**Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord,**” and in that day she will be forever redeemed, restored, and blessed.

Only a few days earlier those very words from Psalm 118:26 had been shouted at Jesus by the multitudes as He came into Jerusalem seated on the donkey (Matt. 21:9). They were words that all Jews associated with acclamation of the Messiah when He came to establish His kingdom on earth. But true and appropriate as those words were on the occasion of His triumphal entry, they were not spoken in faith by most of the people who uttered them. The Messiah they wanted was not God’s kind of Messiah but their own, and when Jesus soon demonstrated that He had not come to remove the Roman yoke as they expected, the cries for His coronation turned to cries for His crucifixion.

But one day with those same words Israel will hail her Messiah in faith, and the Lord’s hand of blessing and protection will once again be upon her. “In that day the Lord will defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem,” declared Zechariah, the prophet whom the forefathers of those inhabitants had “murdered between the temple and the altar” (Matt. 23:35). Continuing to describe that great reversal in the last days, He said,

And the one who is feeble among them in that day will be like David, and the house of David will be like God, like the angel of the Lord before them. And it will come about in that day that I will set about to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns

for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born. (Zech. 12:8-10)

When the cup of God's wrath is empty, He will sovereignly overturn and destroy the evil world system of Satan that He has given temporary rein to tyrannize His people. When Israel turns back to Him, He will turn back to them and pour out upon them His Holy Spirit of grace and blessing, and they will both rejoice and weep. They will rejoice in thanksgiving for their new-found Savior and Lord, but they will weep in penitence as they remember what they had done to Him. "In that day there will be great mourning in Jerusalem, . . . And the land will mourn, every family by itself" (Zech. 12:11-12). Their grief will be overwhelming and their sense of sin totally consuming.

In gracious response to that penitential grief, the Lord will pick them up and take them once again to Himself. "In that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for impurity. And it will come about in that day", declares the Lord of hosts, "That I will cut off the names of the idols from the land, and they will no longer be remembered; and I will also remove the [false] prophets and the unclean spirit from the land" (Zech. 13:1-2). "Then the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations, as when He fights on a day of battle. . . . And it will come about in that day that living waters will flow out of Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern sea and the other half toward the western sea; it will be in summer as well as in winter. And the Lord will be king over all the earth; in that day the Lord will be the only one, and His name the only one" (14:3, 8-9).

Speaking of the Jews, who were his own people, the apostle Paul wrote, "I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. Now if their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!" (Rom. 11:11-12).

Israel has not permanently fallen away from God. "They also, if they do not continue in their unbelief," Paul says, "will be grafted

in; for God is able to graft them in again. . . . For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in; and thus all Israel will be saved” (vv. 23, 25-26).

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Preface

It continues to be a rewarding divine communion for me to preach expositionally through the New Testament. My goal is always to have deep fellowship with the Lord in the understanding of His Word, and out of that experience to explain to His people what a passage means. In the words of Nehemiah 8:8, I strive “to give the sense” of it so they may truly hear God speak and, in so doing, may respond to Him.

Obviously, God’s people need to understand Him, which demands knowing His Word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15) and allowing that Word to dwell in us richly (Col. 3:16). The dominant thrust of my ministry, therefore, is to help make God’s living Word alive to His people. It is a refreshing adventure.

This New Testament commentary series reflects this objective of explaining and applying Scripture. Some commentaries are primarily linguistic, others are mostly theological, and some are mainly homiletical. This one is basically explanatory, or expository. It is not linguistically technical, but deals with linguistics when that seems helpful to proper interpretation. It is not theologically expansive, but focuses on the major doctrines in each test and on how they relate to the whole of Scripture. It is not primarily homiletical, although each unit of thought is generally treated as one chapter, with a clear outline and logical flow of thought. Most truths are illustrated and applied with other Scripture. After establishing the context of a passage, I have tried to follow closely the writer’s development and reasoning.

My prayer is that each reader will fully understand what the Holy Spirit is saying through this part of His Word, so that His revelation may

lodge in the minds of believers and bring greater obedience and faithfulness—to the glory of our great God.

1

The Signs of Christ's
Coming—part 1
The Background
(24:1-3)

And Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. And He answered and said to them, “Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down.”

And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (24:1-3)

Jesus' message in Matthew 24-25 is commonly known as the Olivet discourse, so named because it was delivered to the disciples on the Mount of Olives. The theme of the discourse is Christ's second coming at the end of the present age to establish His millennial kingdom on earth.

The message was prompted by the disciples' question in 24:3, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” The answer Jesus gave is the longest answer given to any question asked in the New Testament, and its truths are absolutely essential for understanding His return and the amazing events associated with it. It is the revelation of our Lord, directly from His own lips, about His return to earth in glory and power.

The teaching of the Olivet discourse is much debated and frequently misunderstood, largely because it is viewed through the lens of a particular theological system or interpretive scheme that makes the message appear complex and enigmatic. But the disciples were not learned men, and Jesus' purpose was to give them clarity and encouragement, not complexity and anxiety. The intricate interpretations that are sometimes

proposed for this passage would have left the disciples utterly dumbfounded. It is preferable to take Jesus' words as simply and as straightforwardly as possible.

PROPHETIC EXPECTATIONS IN JUDAISM

In order to understand better the disciples' question on this occasion it is necessary to know something of the basic hopes and aspirations of the Judaism of that day. As always, the historical setting is an important key to the context. Throughout history people have had a strong desire to know the future, and few societies have been without their seers, mediums, fortune-tellers, and other prognosticators. By various means, all of them deceitful and many of them demonic, such futurists have offered gullible inquirers purported revelations of what lies ahead. Although the Mosaic law strictly forbade consulting mediums and soothsayers (Deut. 18:9-14), Israelites had frequently fallen prey to them, the most prominent instance being that of King Saul's consulting the medium of Endor (1 Sam. 28:3-25; see also 2 Kings 21:6).

There is no evidence that many Jews of Jesus' day were guilty of Saul's offense, but they did have an intense interest in the future. They were tired of being under the domination of pagan oppressors and were eager for the divinely-promised deliverance of their Messiah. The Jews were a noble, highly intelligent, and highly gifted people who, humanly speaking, were entirely capable of competent self-rule. Yet for many centuries they had been subdued by one foreign tyrant after another. The northern ten tribes had been conquered by Assyria in 722 B.C., and the southern two tribes fell to Babylon in 586 B.C. Following that were conquests by the Medo-Persians, the Greeks, and finally the Romans.

In their own minds, however, the Jews had always been their own people and had never truly been subjugated to any foreign ruler. It was that abiding and sometimes arrogant spirit of independence even in the midst of oppression that induced some of the Jews to declare before Jesus in the Temple, "We are Abraham's offspring, and have never yet been enslaved to anyone" (John 8:33). They knew all too well, of course, that outwardly they were indeed enslaved, and freedom from that enslavement was the overriding passion of most Jews. Although the majority of them were not

associated with the militant Zealots, they all yearned for Rome to be overthrown and for Israel to become a free nation once again.

The Jews knew intimately the many Old Testament promises of future blessing, deliverance, and prosperity. They knew God had promised to vanquish all the enemies of His chosen people and to establish His eternal kingdom of righteousness and justice on earth. They knew that the Lord's Anointed One—His Messiah, or Christ—would come and establish the rule and reign of David again on earth, a reign of peace, prosperity, and safety that would never end. Their great longing was to see that day when God restored the kingdom as He had promised.

The Jews therefore had great hope for the future. They exulted as they read, “For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this” (Isa. 9:6-7). They thrilled at the promise that “a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord” (Isa. 11:1-2).

Israel took immense encouragement from the words of Jeremiah: “Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I shall raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, ‘The Lord our righteousness’ ” (Jer. 23:5-6; cf. 30:9-10). They longed for the day when the spoil taken from them would be divided among them (Zech. 14:1), when “living waters [would] flow out of Jerusalem” (v. 8), and “there [would] be no more curse, for Jerusalem [would] dwell in security” (v. 11). They rejoiced that “the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people . . . but it will itself endure forever” (Dan. 2:44).

By the time of Jesus, the Jews had formed in their minds a very clear scenario of how they believed those predicted events would unfold. To understand what the Jewish expectations were, it is helpful to read their

literature from that time. In his *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* ([Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1893], pp. 154-87), Emil Schuer gives excerpts from numerous extrabiblical Jewish writings of that era which reveal those expectations.

First, consistent with the teaching of Zechariah 14 and other Old Testament prophecies, they believed that the coming of the Messiah would be preceded by a time of terrible tribulation. Just as a woman experiences intense pain shortly before the delivery of a child, so Israel would experience great torment shortly before the Messiah arrived.

2 Baruch 27 reported,

And honour shall be turned into shame,
And strength humiliated into contempt,
And probity destroyed,
And beauty shall become ugliness . . .
And envy shall rise in those who had not thought aught of themselves,
And passion shall seize him that is peaceful,
And many shall be stirred up in anger to injure many,
And they shall rouse up armies in order to shed blood,
And in the end they shall perish together with them.

According to another source, there would be “quakings of places, tumult of peoples, schemings of nations, confusion of leaders, disquietude of princes” (2 Esdras [4 Ezra] 9:3).

The Jewish *Sibylline Oracles* declared,

From heaven shall fall fiery swords down to the earth. Lights shall come, bright and great, flashing into the midst of men; and earth, the universal mother, shall shake in these days at the hand of the Eternal. And the fishes of the sea and the beasts of the earth and the countless tribes of flying things and all the souls of men and every sea shall shudder at the presence of the Eternal and there shall be panic. And the towering mountain peaks and the hills of the giants he shall rend, and the murky abyss shall be visible to all. And the high ravines in the lofty mountains shall be full of dead bodies and rocks shall flow with blood and each torrent shall flood the plain. . . . And God shall judge all with

war and sword, and there shall be brimstone from heaven, yea stones and rain and hail incessant and grievous. And death shall be upon the four-footed beasts. . . . Yea the land itself shall drink of the blood of the perishing and beasts shall eat their fill of flesh. (3:363ff.)

The Mishna anticipated that just before the coming of Messiah,

arrogance increases, ambition shoots up, . . . the vine yields fruit yet wine is dear. The government turns to heresy. There is no instruction. The synagogue is devoted to lewdness. Galilee is destroyed, Galban laid waste. The inhabitants of a district go from city to city without finding compassion. The wisdom of the learned is hated, the godly despised, truth is absent. Boys insult old men, old men stand in the presence of children. The son depreciates the father, the daughter rebels against the mother, the daughter-in-law against the mother-in-law. A mans enemies are his house-fellows.

Second, the popular eschatology of Jesus' day held that in the midst of that turmoil would appear an Elijah-like forerunner heralding the Messiah's coming. It was for that reason that so many Jews were drawn to John the Baptist. Jewish oral tradition maintained that the ownership of any disputed money or property would have to wait "till Elijah comes" before being finally settled.

The third event of that eschatology was the Messiah's appearance, at which time He would establish His kingdom age of glory and would vindicate His people.

The fourth event would be the alliance of the nations to fight against the Messiah. The *Sibylline Oracles* declared,

The kings of the nations shall throw themselves against this land bringing retribution on themselves. They shall seek to ravage the shrine of the mighty God and of the noblest men whensoever they come to the land. In a ring round the city the accursed kings shall place each one his throne with the infidel people by him. And then with a mighty voice God shall speak unto all the undisciplined, empty-minded people and judgment shall come

upon them from the mighty God, and all shall perish at the hand of the Eternal. (3:363-72)

In 2 Esdras [4 Ezra] is the prediction, “It shall be that when all the nations hear his (the Messiah’s) voice, every man shall leave his own land and the warfare they have one against the other, and the innumerable multitude shall be gathered together desiring to fight against him” (13:33-35). In other words, unbelieving mankind will interrupt all its other warfare in order to unite against the Messiah.

The fifth eschatological event would be the destruction of those opposing nations. Philo wrote that the Messiah would “take the field and make war and destroy great and populous nations.” The writer of 2 Esdras declared that the Messiah “shall reprove them for their ungodliness, rebuke them for their unrighteousness, reproach them to their faces with their treacheries—and when he has rebuked them he shall destroy them” (12:32-33). The book of Enoch reported that “it shall come to pass in those days that none shall be saved, either by gold or by silver, and none shall be able to escape. And there shall be no iron for war, nor shall one clothe oneself with a breastplate. Bronze shall be of no service, and tin shall not be esteemed, and lead shall not be desired. And all things shall be destroyed from the surface of the earth” (52:7-9). All the vast armaments and defenses of the nations will be useless against the Messiah.

Sixth would be the restoration of Jerusalem, either by renovation of the existing city or by the coming down of a completely new Jerusalem from heaven. In either case, the city of the great King would henceforth be pure, holy, and incorruptible. In the book of Enoch, Jerusalem was envisioned as having “all the pillars . . . new and the ornaments larger than those of the first” (Enoch 90:28-29).

Seventh, the Jews scattered throughout the world would be gathered back to Israel. Many Jews today still utter the ancient prayer “Lift up a banner to gather our dispersed and assemble us from the four ends of the earth.” The eleventh chapter of the Psalms of Solomon gives a graphic picture of that regathering:

Blow ye in Zion on the trumpet to summon the saints, Cause
ye to be heard in Jerusalem the voice of him that bringeth
good tidings;

For God hath had pity on Israel in visiting them.
Stand on the height, O Jerusalem, and behold thy children,
From the East and the West, gathered together by the Lord;
From the North they come in the gladness of their God, From
the isles afar off God hath gathered them.
High mountains hath he abased into a plain for them; The
hills fled at their entrance.
The woods gave them shelter as they passed by;
Every sweet-smelling tree God caused to spring up for them,
That Israel might pass by in the visitation of the glory of their
God.

Put on, O Jerusalem, thy glorious garments; Make ready thy
holy robe;
For God hath spoken good for Israel forever and ever,
Let the Lord do what he hath spoken concerning Israel and
Jerusalem;
Let the Lord raise up Israel by his glorious name.
The mercy of the Lord be upon Israel forever and ever.

In the eighth event of the Messiah's coming Palestine would become the center of the world, and all nations would be subjugated to the Lord. "And all the isles and the cities shall say, How doth the Eternal love those men! For all things work in sympathy with them and help them. . . . Come let us all fall upon the earth and supplicate the eternal King, the mighty, everlasting God. Let us make procession to His Temple, for He is the sole Potentate" (*Sibylline Oracles* 3:690ff.).

Ninth and finally, the Jews of Jesus' day believed that with the establishment of the Messiah's kingdom would come a new and eternal age of peace, righteousness, and divine glory.

Those ancient views of the coming of Christ were extrapolated largely from Old Testament teachings, and they closely correspond to New Testament premillennial doctrine about His second coming. The major difference is that those Jews had no knowledge of His coming twice, the first time to offer Himself as a sacrifice for the world's sin and the second to establish His millennial kingdom on earth. The Jewish people were not

looking for inward deliverance from sin but for outward deliverance from political oppression.

In the minds of the Jews of Jesus' day, the time was ripe for the Messiah's coming. They had suffered persecution and subjugation for many centuries and were at that time under the relentless power of Rome. When John the Baptist appeared on the scene, reminiscent of the preaching and life-style of Elijah, the people's interest was intensely piqued. And when Jesus began His ministry of preaching, with unheard of authority and of healing every sort of disease, many Jews were convinced that He was indeed the Messiah. When He rode into Jerusalem on the colt, the crowds were beside themselves with anticipation, and they openly hailed Him as the Messiah, the long-awaited Son of David (Matt. 21:9).

At that point, however, Jesus' ministry rapidly and radically departed from their expectations. According to their thinking, the next steps would be the gathering of the nations against the Messiah and His dramatic and effortless victory over them.

That idea apparently was also still in the minds of the Twelve. Jesus' many predictions that He must suffer, die, and be resurrected had simply not registered with them. In some way or another they either had discounted those teachings or had rationalized and spiritualized them into being something other than literal, physical, and historical realities.

PROPHETIC DISCUSSIONS WITH JESUS

In fairness to the disciples, the Old Testament prophets also saw the Messiah's coming and establishing His kingdom as a single event. The church age was a mystery to them, a mystery, as Paul explained, "which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested" (Rom.16:25-26). Because Israel had obviously experienced tremendous tribulation, because Jesus declared Himself to be the Messiah and identified John the Baptist as His forerunner, and because He had accepted the Messianic acclaim of the people a few days earlier, the disciples understandably thought that the sequence of events would continue as they expected. They were now certain that Jesus' next move would be to demonstrate His inexorable power over the nations that would soon rise up against Him.

It was doubtlessly such thoughts that had kept Judas superficially committed to stay with Jesus. He expected to be in the Messiah's inner circle when the kingdom was inaugurated and to be given power, wealth, and prestige commensurate with that position.

NEAR THE TEMPLE

And Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. And He answered and said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down." (24:1-2)

Jesus had spent all day Wednesday of Passover week in **the temple**, giving His last public teaching and pronouncing His final and most intense judgment on the false religious leaders and on the nation of Israel. Now He **was going away** to the Mount of Olives to be alone with **His disciples**.

As they were leaving Jerusalem, the **disciples came up to point out the temple buildings** to Jesus. The other two synoptic gospels report that they were pointing to **the temple** in admiration, saying, "Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" (Mark 13:1; cf. Luke 21:5).

The temple and its adjunct **buildings** stood on the top of a mount. A massive retaining wall on the south and west sides helped support the mount itself as well as the Temple. The Temple was awe-inspiring by any standards, but to a group of common men from rural Galilee it must have been a breathtaking marvel. They could not conceive how such an enormous structure could have been built or decorated so magnificently. The Roman historian Tacitus reported that it was a place of immense wealth, and the Babylonian Talmud said, "He that never saw the temple of Herod never saw a fine building." Some of the stones measured 40 feet by 12 by 12 and weighed up to a hundred tons, quarried as a single piece and transported many miles to the building site.

The disciples were perhaps wondering how such an amazing edifice, especially one dedicated to the glory of God, could be left desolate, as Jesus had just predicted. They should have remembered Ezekiel's vision of God's glory departing from the Temple and going "up

from the midst of the city” (Ezek. 11:23). The holy sanctuary that had once been God’s house was His no longer. It is now “your house” Jesus had said to the unbelieving Jews before He left **the temple**, and it “is being left to you desolate” (Matt. 23:38), because the glory of the Lord would soon depart from it. The beautiful **buildings** that had been devoted to God’s glory and that should have honored Jesus would henceforth be devoted to desolation and destruction.

Jesus therefore responded to the disciples’ admiring comments by saying, **Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down.** The disciples’ jaws must have dropped when they heard those incredible words. They could not imagine how the Temple could be destroyed or why God would allow such a thing to happen.

Yet that is exactly what God allowed less than forty years later. When the Romans sacked Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and massacred most of its citizens, they also set fire to the Temple and razed it, just as Jesus predicted. The only stones left intact were the huge foundation stones, which were not part of the Temple edifice proper. Josephus commented that a person visiting the site after the destruction could not believe that anyone had ever inhabited the place, much less that one of the most magnificent structures of the ancient world had stood there only a short while before.

Shocked as they were to realize that the Temple would be destroyed, the disciples were no doubt heartened as well, thinking that that event would be related to the Messiah’s expected purification of Jerusalem, which would occur immediately after He destroyed the nations.

ON THE MOUNT

And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (24:3)

Upon leaving the Temple, Jesus and the Twelve left Jerusalem through the eastern gate, crossed the Kidron Valley, and ascended the Mount of Olives. As they traveled that short distance, the disciples were probably discussing the question that Peter, James, John, and Andrew

would ask Jesus on their behalf (Mark 13:3). As the sun was setting over Jerusalem and the Temple was silhouetted by the last rays of sunlight, they asked the Lord, **“Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”**

For some time the disciples had been convinced “that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately” (Luke 19:11). Therefore, in the context of the situation and of the disciples’ probable frame of mind, the word **when** seems to imply immediacy, suggesting the time might be tomorrow, the day after, or no later than the end of Passover.

These things referred to what Jesus had just been talking about, namely, the former house of God that would soon be left desolate (23:38) and destroyed (24:2). The disciples were expecting the final stages of the Messiah’s work to unfold in rather quick succession. The nations surely would rise up against Him, He would defeat them swiftly, purify Jerusalem, regather the Jews from around the world, and establish His glorious kingdom.

“What will be the sign of Your coming?” they now wanted to know. “What would the first indicator be? How will we know when those remaining events will transpire?” They still understood the Messiah’s **coming** as a single continuum of events, having no comprehension of the church age that would intervene between His two comings. And they probably thought that **the sign of Christ’s coming** would be something appropriately spectacular, such as a great darkness at midday, a brilliant light at night, the appearance of an angelic host, or a great blare of heavenly trumpets.

This was possibly the most exciting part of the disciples’ experience with Christ, as they contemplated the imminence of His millennial kingdom. Based on what Jesus had just said, the disciples believed that the next time the unbelieving Jews whom Jesus had just confronted in the Temple would see Him would be when He came in His glory and they would be constrained to declare, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” (23:39). More than ever, they were persuaded that that day could not be far off.

Even after the resurrection, the disciples still held to the same expectation. The last question they asked Jesus before His ascension was, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Jesus’ death and resurrection had not lessened their anticipation but

immensely heightened it. Surely now that He had proved death had no hold over Him it was time to proclaim Himself King, destroy His enemies, and inaugurate His kingdom.

The **coming** that the disciples had in mind was not a second coming. They saw His **coming** just as the Old Testament prophets had seen and predicted it, compressed into an unbroken series of events that would occur over a relatively short period of time.

Coming translates *parousia*, which has the basic meaning of presence and secondarily carries the idea of arrival. The disciples' question might therefore be paraphrased, "What will be the sign of Your manifesting Yourself in Your full, permanent presence as Messiah and King?" They did not use *parousia* in the specific and more technical sense that Jesus used it later in this chapter (vv. 27, 37, 39) and as it is often used elsewhere in the New Testament in referring to His second coming (see, e.g., 1 Thess. 3:13; 2 Thess. 2:8; 1 John 2:28). They were not thinking of Jesus' returning, because they had no idea of His leaving, but were thinking rather of His perfected Messianic presence, which they expected Him to manifest presently.

End translates *sunteleia*, a compound word that refers to completion, as in the final culmination of a planned series of events. In the disciples' minds **the end of the age** would accompany Jesus' full manifestation of His messianic power and glory, bringing to a close the era of man's sin and rebellion against God and ushering in the divine kingdom of righteousness and justice.

Jesus used the phrase **the end of the age** in the parable of the wheat and tares and the parable of the dragnet, where in both cases it represented the gathering of the wicked by God's angels in preparation for judgment (Matt. 13:39, 49). He also used the phrase at the conclusion of the Great Commission, assuring the disciples, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

The disciples' question was about the ultimate **end of the age**, not simply the end of an era or epoch of history, but the final end to the present world system of darkness and sin—an end they expected soon. It was also, of course, a question about the beginning of a new and eternal age of light, righteousness, truth, and justice. The ungodly would be forever damned, and the godly would be forever blessed. When would that transpire, they wanted to know, and what sign would herald its arrival?

The Signs of Christ's
Coming—part 2
The Birth Pains
(24:4-14)

And Jesus answered and said to them, “See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’” and will mislead many. And you will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs. Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of My name. And at that time many will fall away and will deliver up one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many. And because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come. (24:4-14)

Verse 4 begins the Olivet discourse proper, which Jesus gave in response to the disciples’ question, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (v. 3). As discussed in the last chapter, the Twelve “supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately” (Luke 19:11), and the events of the past few days had confirmed that idea even more firmly in their minds. They had long believed that Jesus was the Messiah and that John the Baptist was His prophesied forerunner. The acclaim of the crowds at Jesus’ triumphal entry, at His cleansing the Temple, at His rebuking the religious leaders, as well as at His predicting the destruction of the Temple all

combined to make them think He would soon manifest His messianic glory, subdue the nations that would rise up against Him, and establish His eternal kingdom. They had been unable to accept His numerous predictions that He would first have to suffer, die, and be raised up.

The disciples thought that Jesus' preaching, healing, comforting, rendering judgment, and restoring Israel would occur at the same general time in history. Like the Old Testament prophets who spoke of the Messiah, they saw only a single coming, comprised of a sequence of events (see, e.g. Isa. 61:1-11).

It was when Jesus read from that passage in Isaiah during the synagogue service in Nazareth that He gave perhaps the first clue that His coming would be in two parts. He stopped reading in the middle of verse 2, omitting the phrase "and the day of vengeance of our God." He then explained, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:18-21). He was emphasizing that He had not come at that time to render judgment but only to preach the gospel and heal diseases.

But because they had missed that clue, as well as the many more specific teachings about His coming to die for man's sin, the disciples were expecting Jesus to complete His messianic mission at any moment, perhaps in the next few days or weeks. They were on their tiptoes, as it were, waiting for something dramatic to happen. They sensed that the son of Isaiah 9:6 was ready to take on His shoulders the government of the kingdom of God, that the stone cut out without hands of Daniel 2:34 was ready to crush the power of evil men. The Messiah, the Prince, was ready to make an end of sins, make reconciliation for iniquity, bring in everlasting righteousness, and be anointed the most holy King. They sensed that the Son of Man would very soon be given dominion and glory in an eternal kingdom. They were convinced that very soon Israel would turn back to the Lord and call on His name and that He "will say, 'They are My people,' and they will say, 'The Lord is my God'" (Zech. 13:9).

But in the Olivet discourse, Jesus makes clear that that fulfillment was in the future. The message of Matthew 24-25 is a prophetic sermon that sweeps the Twelve into a time not yet come, a time they themselves would never experience.

There are at least seven indicators in the message itself that it refers to the distant future and could not apply either to the events related

to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, as many interpreters have suggested, or to the church age, as others propose.

The first indicator will be like birth pains, of which the false Christs (Matt. 24:5), international warfare (vv. 67*a*), and famines and earthquakes (v. 7*b*) are “merely the beginning” (v. 8). The figure of birth pains was commonly used by ancient Jewish writers, especially in regard to the end times. The great modern Jewish scholar Alfred Edersheim wrote, “Jewish writings speak very frequently of the labor pains of Messiah.”

Labor pains do not occur at conception or throughout pregnancy but just before birth. The figure of birth pains therefore would not have been appropriate to represent either the destruction of Jerusalem, which occurred very near the beginning of the church age, or the church age as a whole.

Paul reminded the Thessalonians that the return of Christ would come as a thief in the night—unexpectedly, quietly, and suddenly. Using the same figure Jesus used in the Olivet discourse, the apostle said that “while they are saying, ‘Peace and safety!’ then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape” (1 Thess. 5:1-3).

Labor pains do not begin until shortly before delivery time, and they occur with increasing frequency until the baby is born. In the same way, the events connected with the Lord’s return will not begin until just before His return, and they will occur with increasing rapidity, building up to an explosion of catastrophic events. The same epoch is pictured in the book of Revelation, as the seal judgments unfold over a period of perhaps years (see 6:1–8:1-6), the trumpet judgments over a much shorter period of time, perhaps weeks (see 8:7–9:21; 11:15-19), and the bowl judgments over the period of perhaps a few days or even hours (see 16:1-21).

The second indicator that those events are future is found in Matthew 24:13-14, in which Jesus speaks of believers who will endure the birth pains to the end. Since the disciples obviously did not live to the end of the age, the events of chapters 24-25 could not apply to them or to any other believers up to and including the present time. Because all believers living then will be raptured just before the Tribulation (1 Thess. 4:17), the events could not apply to any Christian living before that time. They can apply only to those who come to belief in Christ during the Tribulation,

those whose genuine faith is proved by their endurance to the end (Matt. 24:13).

A third indicator is the worldwide proclamation of the gospel (Matt. 24:14). That event absolutely rules out any time during the apostolic age, when even the Roman empire was only partially evangelized. It could not even apply to modern times, when, despite the spread of the gospel through modern mass media to most parts of the world, there are still billions of people who have never heard the gospel. As implied in Matthew 24:14 and made clear in Revelation 14:6-7, the future worldwide declaration of which Jesus spoke will be miraculous and instantaneous.

A fourth indicator is “the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet” (Matt. 24:15). Daniel predicted that just before the Messiah sets up His kingdom and judges the world, the Antichrist “will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate” (Dan. 9:27). That is yet to occur.

A fifth indicator that Jesus is speaking of a future time is the “great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall” (Matt. 24:21). The terrible events Jesus describes in this message will be the worst of all human history and will occur at the very end of the present age, when God’s full and final judgment is meted out on ungodly men. Jesus is referring to the time predicted by Daniel when “there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time” and which will be accompanied by the resurrection of the righteous to everlasting life and of the wicked to everlasting condemnation (Dan. 12:1-2).

A sixth indicator is that “immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky” (Matt. 24:29-30). Those supernatural events obviously have not yet transpired.

The seventh and last indicator that Jesus was speaking of the distant future is the figure of the fig tree (Matt. 24:32-35). Just as the budding leaves of a fig tree signal that summer is near, so the occurring of the events Jesus mentions here will signal His imminent return. “This

generation,” that is, the generation living during the time of those end-time events, “will not pass away until all these things take place” (v. 34). The signs of Matthew 24-25 will all be fully experienced within one generation, a generation that could be no other than the generation living when Christ returns.

The whole fulfillment of the Olivet discourse, therefore, is future. It is not that most of the circumstances and conditions mentioned here have not been experienced before. There have been wars and rumors of wars virtually since the Fall, and there have been famines and earthquakes since the beginning of recorded history. But the events of Matthew 24-25 will be unique to the end times in detail, in sequence, in scale, and in extent. Some of the events, such as the disruption of the physical universe (24:29), will be completely unique.

The fact that Jesus spoke in the second person, especially in chapter 24, does not prove He was speaking to the disciples about their own generation. The Old Testament prophets frequently addressed messages to people yet unborn, some of whom would live hundreds of years in the future. God picked up the prophet, as it were, and transported him to the time of which he was to prophesy, and he spoke as if he were standing directly before those future generations (see, e.g., Isa. 33:17-24; 66:10-14; Zech. 9:9). Jesus was saying, in effect, “You who are alive at that time, . . .”

Beginning in Matthew 24:4, Jesus answers the disciples’ questions, “When will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (v. 3). He responds to the two parts of the question in reverse order. He does not deal with the “when” until 24:36, saying, “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.” In 24:4-14, He begins to answer the second part of the question by describing the initial group of six signs, the “birth pains” that will occur just before His coming: deception by false Christs (vv. 4-5), dissension among the nations of the world (vv. 6-7a), worldwide devastation (vv. 7b-8), deliverance of believers to tribulation (v. 9), defection of false believers (vv. 10-13), and the declaration of the gospel to the whole world (v. 14).

DECEPTION BY FALSE CHRISTS

And Jesus answered and said to them, “See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ ” and will mislead many. (24:4-5)

The first birth pain to signal Christ’s return will be widespread deception by a proliferation of false Christs. There were false Christs, or Messiahs, before Jesus’ time, and there have been others at various times since, including many in our own day. But in the end times their number and influence will vastly increase.

Jesus is warning those who will be living during the end times, which will not include believers of the church age (who will either have died or been raptured before the Tribulation). The deception of those days will be intensified and escalated as never before, as the Holy Spirit withdraws His restraining power and lets all hell break loose. The evils, deceptions, sorrows, tragedies, conflicts, and animosities of those days will exceed all others the world has ever known.

Because deception will be at its apex, Jesus warns, **See to it that no one misleads you.** *Blepō* (see to it) literally means simply “to see,” but was often used, as here, in the sense of “keep your eyes open,” or “beware.” In his parallel account Luke reports Jesus as saying, “See to it that you be not misled; for many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am He,’ and ‘The time is at hand’; do not go after them” (21:8). Later in the discourse Jesus repeats the warning: “Then if anyone says to you, ‘Behold, here is the Christ,’ or ‘There He is,’ do not believe him. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:23-24). Empowered by demons, the end-time false Christs will manifest supernatural powers that previous ones have not possessed.

As the number of deceivers grows, so will the number of vulnerable people who desperately look for answers to the overwhelming calamities that torment them (see 2 Pet. 2:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:13). The world will begin to disintegrate, suffering will become unbearable, and sin will reach its maximum potential. The moral and spiritual influence of the church will be gone, and even more significantly, the restraining power of the Holy Spirit will be removed (see 2 Thess. 2:7). The world’s systems and institutions will start to self-destruct from unbridled wickedness.

To take advantage of that desperate situation, an abundance of false and cleverly deceptive messiahs will arise, each claiming, **I am the Christ**. Their spurious gospels **will mislead many**, as they promise to deliver men from their problems and troubles. The epitome of that false group will be the Antichrist, the ultimate false messiah and deceiver. As Jesus Christ was righteousness incarnate, the Antichrist will be evil incarnate. In the book of Daniel he is called an insolent king, skilled in intrigue (8:23), a self-willed tyrant who magnifies himself above every god and speaks monstrous evil against the God of gods (11:36). Paul calls him the man of lawlessness and the son of destruction (2 Thess. 2:3), and in the book of Revelation he is called the beast (11:7; 13:1-10).

DISPUTES AND WARFARE AMONG THE NATIONS

And you will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, (24:6-7a)

The second birth pain will involve intensified and unparalleled disputes and warfare among the nations and kingdoms of the world.

You will be hearing translates a form of the future tense of *mellō* that carries the idea of continual hearing. There will be constant talk of actual **wars** and of **rumors of wars**, to a degree the world has never known before. There doubtless will be both hot wars of physical combat and cold wars of economic and political conflict. Following the analogy of labor pains, the implication is that the conflicts will increase both in number and intensity as the return of Christ approaches, until they explode into a grand holocaust of bloodshed and carnage.

But believers during that time should not be **frightened**, Jesus says, because **those things** are certain evidence that God's plan is unfolding according to His will. Those events, ghastly and destructive as they will be, **must take place**, Jesus said. They are harbingers of the end, but they are **not yet the end**.

There seems to be no distinction between **nation** and **kingdom**, unless the former represents countries with a form of democracy and the latter those under a form of autocracy, or dictatorship. The point is that no

group of people will be exempt from war or the threat of war. The conflicts will undoubtedly include racial, ethnic, and cultural as well as national confrontations, much as we see in the world today, except on a vaster and more intense scale. Confrontations of every sort will accelerate throughout the world. The books of Daniel in the Old Testament and Revelation in the New give many details regarding the coming conflict.

From Daniel we learn that “at the end time the king of the South will collide with [the Antichrist], and the king of the North will storm against him with chariots, with horsemen, and with many ships; and he will enter countries, overflow them, and pass through” (Dan. 11:40). The kingdom of the Antichrist will basically comprise the territory once held by the ancient Roman empire, in particular a western confederacy made up of a unified Europe. Daniel mentions that it will be a ten-nation empire (7:24), which cannot help bringing to mind the present European Common Market.

Daniel earlier spoke of Israel’s making a covenant with the Antichrist in order to protect herself from her neighbors (Dan. 9:27). The Antichrist’s confederacy will completely dominate that part of the world and exert an inordinate power over the rest of the world. The king of the South will come from some part of Africa, and the king of the North will likely be Russia, who will enlist the support of Middle East allies. Those vast military forces will converge on the Holy Land, called “the Beautiful Land” (Dan. 11:41). “Many countries will fall,” Daniel goes on to explain, “but these will be rescued out of his [Antichrist’s] hand: Edom, Moab and the foremost of the sons of Ammon. Then he will stretch out his hand against other countries, and the land of Egypt will not escape. But he will gain control over the hidden treasures of gold and silver, and over all the precious things of Egypt; and Libyans and Ethiopians will follow at his heels” (vv. 41-43).

The Antichrist apparently defeats the other great powers, at least temporarily. “But rumors from the East and from the North will disturb him, and he will go forth with great wrath to destroy and annihilate many. And he will pitch the tents of his royal pavilion between the seas and the beautiful Holy Mountain; yet he will come to his end, and no one will help him” (vv. 44-45). The northern and eastern forces regroup, and when the Antichrist goes to meet them he is utterly defeated and destroyed, with no one to help him. Revelation speaks of a great cavalry force of 200 million

that will come from the East and destroy a third of mankind (Rev. 9:14-16). It is interesting that the mainland Chinese army passed that number some years ago.

That clash will be a war of mind-boggling magnitude. All the forces of a confederated Europe to the west, Russia to the north, Africa to the south, and Asia to the east will converge on Israel for an immense battle.

Consistent with Daniel's description, Zechariah prophesied that the Lord "will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city will be captured, the houses plundered, the women ravished, and half of the city exiled, but the rest of the people will not be cut off from the city. Then the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations, as when He fights on a day of battle" (Zech. 14:2-3).

Through Haggai the Lord said, "'I will overthrow the thrones of kingdoms and destroy the power of the kingdoms of the nations; and I will overthrow the chariots and their riders, and the horses and their riders will go down, everyone by the sword of another. On that day,' declares the Lord of hosts, 'I will take you, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, my servant,' declares the Lord, 'and I will make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you,' declares the Lord of hosts" (Hag. 2:22-23). It is as if Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah during Haggai's time and a descendant of David, is pictured as the Messiah, David's greater Son, who will send His own army to destroy the armies of the world and will then ascend His rightful throne on earth.

It is not difficult in our day to see how such a worldwide conflagration could develop. For many decades the world has lived under the threat of nuclear warfare and the anxiety of increasing strife within and among virtually all nations.

The book of Revelation gives parallel and additional details of the wars and rumors of wars in which the nations and kingdoms of the world will be engaged during the end times. Christ, the Lamb, is portrayed with a scroll in His hand, representing, as it were, the Father's will and testament bequeathing the world to the Son (Rev. 6:1). As He opens each of the seven seals, the number required under ancient Roman law to keep a will inviolate, Christ sets in motion one of the God-ordained stages of His taking the world back for Himself.

Opening the first seal unleashes the Antichrist, the rider on a white horse who will go out to deceive with the intent to conquer (v. 2). There will not be open warfare at that time, but a false sense of peace and security. Just as Jesus predicted in the Olivet discourse, the first stage of Satan's final attack will be one of deception and subterfuge. When the second seal is opened, however, the rider on a red horse will be allowed to take that false peace from the world, "that men should slay one another; and a great sword was given to him" (v. 4).

John also saw tremendous conflict generated by three unclean spirits, high-ranking demons of Satan, who will perform great miracles and gather the leaders and armies of the world "together for the war of the great day of God the Almighty. . . . And they gathered them together to the place which in Hebrew is called Har-Magedon [Armageddon]" (Rev. 16:13-14, 16). Those demon-led forces will converge on Israel and on Jerusalem in particular in an intense but futile effort to prevent Christ, the King of kings, from reclaiming His earthly throne. As they fight each other, Christ will come and destroy them all (19:11-20).

But before the Lord comes to accomplish that final conquest, the Antichrist and the forces of the north, south, and east will engage in ruthless combat and succeed in slaughtering a third of the world's population. In the face of that unparalleled carnage man's last vestige of hope will vanish and stark terror will rule the day. Only believers who hold fast to the Lord will have the divinely-given strength and courage to avoid being petrified with fear.

DEVASTATION THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs. (24:7b-8)

The next birth pain of the end time will be worldwide devastation. In addition to the deception of false Christs and warring dissension among the nations there will be **famines and earthquakes**, natural disasters of staggering proportions that will ensue as the cursed earth begins to disintegrate. Luke adds that there will also be plagues and terrors and great signs from heaven (21:11).

Earthquakes, epidemics of deadly disease, dreadful happenings of various sorts, and awesome changes in the sky will torment men. They will see the world begin to disintegrate before their eyes from the unbridled, destructive forces of evil that will ravage it during those indescribable days. The world has witnessed many earthquakes, famines, plagues, and even some heavenly signs, but those will be nothing compared to the calamities of the end times. They will occur **in various places** and apparently simultaneously. As some parts of the earth starve from **famines**, others will be shattered by **earthquakes**, others decimated by plagues, others paralyzed by unspecified terrors, and still others unnerved by changes in the heavens.

John foresaw that when Christ broke the fourth seal of the scroll, authority was given to death and hades “to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth” (Rev. 6:8). When He broke the sixth seal, “there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. And the sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places” (vv. 12-14).

When the Lamb broke the seventh seal, seven angels were revealed standing before God, and they were each given a trumpet of judgment. As the first trumpet was blown,

there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were thrown to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up.

And the second angel sounded, and something like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea; and a third of the sea became blood; and a third of the creatures, which were in the sea and had life, died; and a third of the ships were destroyed.

And the third angel sounded, and a great star fell from heaven, burning like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of waters; and the name of the star is called

Wormwood; and a third of the waters became wormwood; and many men died from the waters, because they were made bitter.

And a fourth angel sounded, and a third of the sun and a third of the moon and a third of the stars were smitten, so that a third of them might be darkened and the day might not shine for a third of it, and the night in the same way. (Rev. 8:7-12; cf. 16:1-11; Joel 2:10; Acts 2:19-20)

Crops and other vegetation will be devastated throughout the world, those who depend upon the sea for food will suffer famine, a third of the world's shipping will be destroyed, countless people will be poisoned from contaminated water supplies, and calendars, seasons, and tides will be thrown out of kilter. The physical and emotional agony will be so excruciating that men will gnaw "their tongues because of pain" (Rev. 16:10). "Their torment [will be] like the torment of a scorpion when it stings a man," and "men will seek death and will not find it; and they will long to die and death flees from them" (9:5-6).

Some time later, when the seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air,

there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder; and there was a great earthquake, such as there had not been since man came to be upon earth, so great an earthquake was it, and so mighty. And the great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. . . . And every island fled away, and the mountains were not found. And huge hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, came down from heaven upon men; and men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail, because its plague was extremely severe. (Rev. 16:17-21; cf. 11:13)

But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs.
There is much more to come.

DELIVERANCE OF BELIEVERS TO TRIBULATION

Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations on account of My name. (24:9)

The fourth labor pain of the end times will be severe persecution of believers by the evil, ungodly world. More than ever before in history, the holy people of God will be treated in an unholy way, and in that sense they will be desecrated.

Paradidōmi (**will deliver**) has the basic meaning of giving over and was often used in a technical sense for arrest by the police or military (see Matt. 4:12). After being taken into custody, believers will suffer extreme **tribulation**. Many will be murdered, and all **will be hated by all nations on account of My name**. In his parallel passage, Mark reports that Jesus said, “They will deliver you to the courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them” (13:9). The courts probably represent Gentile authority, and the synagogues obviously represent Jewish authority, indicating that persecution will come from both groups. Being identified with Christ’s **name** will cost believers their freedom, their rights, their respect, and often their lives.

As already noted, those will be people who are saved after the rapture of the church, having been converted to Christ during the Tribulation. Many will be saved through the preaching of the two witnesses the Lord will send to minister for a period of three and a half years (Rev. 11:3). During that time the witnesses will be supernaturally protected (v. 4), but “when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up out of the abyss will make war with them, and overcome them and kill them” (v. 7). After three and a half days, they will be resurrected and taken up into heaven, and that miracle itself will cause additional people to be saved and to give “glory to the God of heaven” (vv. 11-13).

The persecution will not be directed so much against believers themselves as against God, whom they serve and represent. The unbelieving world will intensify its hatred of God, and because it cannot attack Him directly it will fiercely attack His people. When Paul said he bore in his body “the brand-marks of Jesus” (Gal. 6:17), he was affirming that he had received wounds that were really directed at Christ. Because people could not get to Christ, they abused the one who represented Him.

When the Holy Spirit withdraws His restraint and Satan is allowed greater freedom, the saints will suffer as they never have before. For those who openly profess Christ there will be no place to hide and no way of

escape. They will not be persecuted and martyred for what they do but for who they are. They will suffer **on account of Christ's name**, that is, because they are identified with Him.

When Christ broke the fifth seal of the scroll, John saw those martyred saints under the altar,

the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, should be completed also. (Rev. 6:9-11)

Later John saw a "great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb'" (Rev.7:9-10). One of the elders explained to the apostle that "these are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (v. 14).

The murders of which unbelieving mankind will not repent (Rev. 9:21) will include the killing of other unbelievers, but as with the Antichrist (13:7) and the great harlot (17:6), the most vicious assaults will be on the saints.

DEFECTION OF FALSE BELIEVERS

And at that time many will fall away and will deliver up one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many. And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved. (24:10-13)

The fifth birth pain is a consequence of the fourth. As persecution intensifies in the end times and believers begin to be arrested, hated, and martyred for Christ's sake, many supposed Christians will defect. Although they will have had an outward identification with Christ, they will prove by their desertion that they never belonged to Him. When the persecution becomes too severe, they will forsake Christ and join fellow unbelievers in assailing God's people.

Jesus mentions three reasons for their defection: the price will be too high, the deception of false teachers will be too convincing, and sin will be too attractive.

THE COST WILL BE TOO HIGH

And at that time many will fall away and will deliver up one another and hate one another. (24:10)

Every noble cause has hangers-on who love to be associated with it while it is popular but who fall away as soon as criticism or conflicts arise. Christ's church is no exception. Throughout its history it has had adherents who like to bear the name Christian when it is acceptable and respected in society but who quickly lose their devotion when that name is maligned and those who bear it are persecuted (see Matt. 13:20-21).

The sham Christians who **will fall away** during the Tribulation will not be true believers who are simply weak and cowardly but unbelievers who reveal their true character when they openly reject Christ and viciously betray His people. They will not be like Peter, who in a moment of fear and weakness denied knowing Christ, but like Judas, who because of His inner hatred of Christ betrayed Him to His enemies.

John declares that such pretenders leave Christian fellowship because they were never truly a part of it. "They went out from us," he says, because "they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19). Such people abandon Christ's visible church because they were never a part of His invisible church. They forsake God's earthly family because they were never born into His heavenly family. "If you abide in My word," Jesus said, "then you are truly disciples of Mine" (John 8:31); and on the day of judgment He

will declare to false believers, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matt. 7:23).

“A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master,” Jesus said. “It is enough for the disciple that he become as his teacher, and the slave as his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!” (Matt. 10:24-25). The true disciple of Christ is willing to suffer as Christ suffered, and no amount of affliction will cause Him to renounce his Lord and Savior. “Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven. . . . And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me” (vv. 32-33, 38; cf. 2 Tim. 2:12).

A professed Christian who turns His back on Jesus Christ and refuses to suffer for His sake was not a true believer in the first place. A person who genuinely belongs to Christ may sometimes falter and be disobedient, but he will never reject His Lord. The person who belongs to Christ continues to confess Him, to serve Him, and to suffer for Him when that is necessary. He does not endure because of his own strength and fortitude but because he is indwelt by Christ’s own Spirit, who never fails to give sustaining grace to God’s children.

The writer of Hebrews sounded the warning to those in the early church: “Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God” (Heb. 3:12). Paul declared to Timothy, “It is a trustworthy statement: For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him; if we endure, we shall also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He also will deny us” (2 Tim. 2:11-12).

This text leads us to believe that, just as during the present age, professing Christians living during the Tribulation will not all be authentic. Many will be counterfeit, and when the cost of discipleship becomes too demanding they will abandon Christ and His church. They will be like those would-be disciples who said to Jesus, “I will follow You wherever You go” and “Permit me first to go and bury my father” and “I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home.” They will put their hand to the plow of discipleship, but they will not forsake the old life, demonstrating that they have never received the

new. They are therefore not “fit for the kingdom of God,” Jesus said, because their hearts have never been with Him (Luke 9:57-62).

The defecting false believers in the end time will not be satisfied simply with leaving the church but will join in its persecution. **They will deliver up one another and hate one another.** God’s people will be betrayed by those who once were a part of their fellowship but who become offended at Christ when the cost rises too high. Both to save their own skins as well as to vent the hatred for the things of God they have always had in their hearts, they will turn informer and persecutor. At that time, Jesus said, “brother will deliver brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and have them put to death” (Mark 13:12; cf. Luke 21:16). Not only within the assembly at large but within individual families, those who do not truly belong to Christ will turn against those who do, even to the point of betraying their own children and parents into martyrdom.

THE DECEPTION WILL BE TOO CONVINCING

And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many. (24:11)

Just as some false believers will defect because the cost is too high, others will defect because they are deceived about the gospel.

During the Tribulation **false prophets** will join the false christs (v. 5) in seeking to deceive people about God. They will persuasively teach doctrines that seem true and godly but are, in fact, false and satanic. The end time will be filled not only with overt evil such as the world has never seen before but also with false religion as never seen before. Until the very end, Satan will continue to use the guise of an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14).

From Revelation 17 it becomes clear that false religions, here symbolized by the great harlot of Babylon, will flourish. The figure of a prostitute is used no doubt because the world religious system will prostitute itself, seeking by counterfeit gospels and other means to keep people from the true gospel and salvation. Despite their outward differences, the religions of that day will have one trait in common: hatred for the people of God, the true and purified brothers and sisters of Christ.

It is interesting that a characteristic of end-time false religion will be “sorceries” (Rev. 9:21), which translates *pharmakia*, from which we get

the word *pharmacy*. Both the ancient Greek and the modern English terms relate to the ingestion of drugs. The use of mind-altering drugs was common in many ancient pagan religions, and in light of the modern epidemic of drug abuse and addiction, it would be surprising if the sorceries of the end time did not include the use of narcotics and hallucinogens.

SIN WILL BE TOO ATTRACTIVE

And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved. (24:12-13)

A third cause of defection will be the love of **lawlessness**, which, as it **is increased**, will cause **most people's love** for righteousness, truth, and the things of God to **grow cold**.

Although end-time **lawlessness** will certainly include disregard for human laws, it will be manifested most vehemently in **increased** disregard for God's law. Evil will multiply so rapidly and unashamedly that many people who are initially drawn to the gospel will turn away from it because of the multiplied enticements of sin.

The **lawlessness** will be diabolically aggressive and unabashed. Rather than trying to hide their sins, people will flaunt them, and such gross evil will draw many people, including some professed believers, away from whatever interest in the things of God they may once have had.

Describing the same period Jesus is talking about here, Paul warned,

But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; and avoid such men as these. (2 Tim. 3:1-5)

Global violence, immorality, lewdness, selfish desire, and every other moral vice will run rampant as unbridled sin expresses itself. Men will be engulfed in a tidal wave of corruption and they will glory in it.

But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved, Jesus said. It is not that a person's endurance will produce salvation but that his endurance will be a Spirit-empowered product and proof of the reality that he *is saved*. Neither the high cost of discipleship nor the deception of false prophets nor the enticement of sin will cause true believers to renounce Christ, because He Himself will protect them from defection.

Endurance is always a mark of salvation. "You will be hated by all on account of My name," Jesus said, "but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved" (Matt. 10:22; cf. Luke 21:19). The person who endures in faith whatever hardship or persecution may come to him because of his relationship to Christ demonstrates that He belongs to Christ, and Christ assures that person that **he shall be saved**. He will eventually be delivered out of the present evil system of lawlessness and ungodliness into God's eternal kingdom of righteousness.

The perseverance of the saints in faith is a very basic element of salvation teaching in the New Testament. It states that people who are genuinely saved do not depart from the faith (see John 8:31; 1 Cor. 15:1-2; Col. 1:21-23; Heb. 2:1-3; 3:14; 4:14; 6:11-12; 10:39; 12:14; James 1:2-4).

Reference to salvation in the future tense in such passages as the ones just cited does not indicate its beginning but its completion. Endurance cannot initiate salvation any more than can any other human effort. But it does give evidence of the spiritual life that resides in the believer and is also a reminder to him that "He who began a good work in [him] will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6; cf. John 10:27-29; Rom. 5:8-10; 2 Tim. 1:12; Heb. 7:25; 1 Pet. 1:5; Jude 24).

The one who endures to the end is the overcomer, the beloved child of God who does not fear suffering or death and who will be given the crown of life and will "not be hurt by the second death" (Rev. 2:10-11). Faith that perseveres is faith endowed and sustained by the indwelling Holy Spirit of Christ.

The enduring saints of the end times will be

the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the

Lamb. For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne shall spread His tabernacle over them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; neither shall the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them to springs of the water of life; and God shall wipe every tear from their eyes. (Rev. 7:14-17)

DECLARATION OF THE GOSPEL TO THE WHOLE WORLD

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come. (24:14)

The sixth and last birth pain to indicate that the end time is near will be the worldwide declaration of the gospel to a degree never yet seen. Before the Lord Himself appears, **this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations.**

Despite the deception of false christs and false teachers, the unparalleled warfare and pestilence and disaster, the fierce persecution of the saints, and the defection of false believers, the **gospel of Christ's kingdom** will continue to be proclaimed. Despite the Antichrist's tyrannical rule and hell's belching out its demons to wreak havoc on earth, the Lord Jesus Christ will not be without witness.

Just before the bowl judgments are poured out and the final great holocaust begins, and just before the increasingly rapid birth pains issue in the kingdom, God will supernaturally present the gospel to every person on earth. He will send an angel with "an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people," saying, "Fear God, and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of waters" (Rev. 14:6-7).

That will be the final and total evangelization of the world, miraculously proclaimed from heaven. After that proclamation man's day will be finished, his rebellion will be over, and his opportunity for salvation will be over, because **then the end shall come.**

The Signs of Christ's
Coming—part 3
The Abomination of
Desolation
(24:15)

Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), (24:15)

People have a natural longing for a better day, a time of peace and harmony among nations, of greater economic stability, and of decreased crime, disease, and discord. But Scripture is clear that, despite temporary times of improvement, things are destined to become much worse before they permanently become better. Human society faces a time that is going to be more calamitous than any ever experienced before. “Then there will be a great tribulation,” Jesus said, “such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall” (Matt. 24:21). The Tribulation will encompass the entire world but will focus on the nation and people of Israel. It will mark the end of man’s day and the coming of God’s.

The prediction of the time of trouble did not originate in the Olivet discourse or in Jesus’ previous teaching but in the prophetic teachings of the Old Testament. As Isaiah looked forward to that day, the day of the Lord, the day of great judgment, and the day of Messiah’s establishing His kingdom on earth, he wrote: “Now it will come about in that day that the remnant of Israel, and those of the house of Jacob who have escaped, will never again rely on the one who struck them, but will truly rely on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel” (Isa. 10:20).

A time is coming when most of the people of Israel will be massacred by an enemy they thought was their friend, and only a remnant will elude the slaughter. At the time of the very end, just before the time of

judgment, Israel will suffer vicious betrayal by one they trusted and they will be subjected to a holocaust from which few will escape. Those who are spared will turn back to the Lord and be saved. They will no longer trust in themselves or in any human ally but will henceforth trust only in the Lord. “A remnant will return,” the prophet says, “the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. For though your people, O Israel, may be like the sand of the sea, only a remnant within them will return; a destruction is determined, overflowing with righteousness” (Isa. 10:21-22).

Jeremiah envisioned the same terrible time and presents additional dimensions:

For thus says the Lord, “I have heard a sound of terror, of dread, and there is no peace. Ask now, and see, if a male can give birth. Why do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in childbirth? And why have all faces turned pale? Alas! for that day is great, there is none like it; and it is the time of Jacob’s distress, but he will be saved from it. And it shall come about on that day,” declares the Lord of hosts, “that I will break his yoke from off their neck, and will tear off their bonds; and strangers shall no longer make them their slaves. But they shall serve the Lord their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up for them.” (Jer. 30:5-9)

Excruciating pain, like that of childbirth without anesthetic, will be experienced by all of mankind. Even men will be on their knees as if in labor, holding themselves as they writhe in agony. Yet out of that suffering will come the deliverance, repentance, and salvation of Israel.

Daniel foresaw that the archangel “Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued” (Dan. 12:1).

Zechariah wrote,

“And it will come about in all the land,” declares the Lord, “that two parts in it will be cut off and perish; but the third will be left in it. And I will bring the third part through the fire, refine them

as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on My name, and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are My people,' and they will say, 'The Lord is my God.' ” Behold, a day is coming for the Lord when the spoil taken from you will be divided among you. For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city will be captured, the houses plundered, the women ravished, and half of the city exiled, but the rest of the people will not be cut off from the city. (Zech. 13:8-14:2)

In Matthew 24-25 Jesus was speaking of that coming time of indescribable horror in the world that will focus on the nation of Israel, a time of which Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Zechariah had already spoken in considerable detail. Although Israel as a nation and the Jewish people in general have endured many periods of great suffering throughout history, including the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in A.D. 70 and the extermination of many millions of them by Nazi Germany and communist Russia in modern times, the holocaust of the end time will vastly exceed those.

In 24:4-14 Jesus foretold six signs of His coming again that would be like birth pains, which come at the very end of a pregnancy and with increasing rapidity and severity until the child is born. Now He predicts the sign that will trigger those birth pains.

As explained in the previous chapter, Jesus' use of **you** in the Olivet discourse does not refer to the disciples or to anyone else living at that time but rather refers prophetically to those who will be living in the end time, just before He returns.

The event that activates the birth pain signs will be **the abomination of desolation** and will be like the abomination **spoken of through Daniel the prophet**. In his parallel passage, Luke adds that Jesus said, “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is at hand” (21:20). In other words, it is while Jerusalem is encompassed by enemy nations who threaten to destroy her that this sign will occur.

For several decades, the modern nation of Israel has increasingly become a major focal point of world events, events that involve not only the Middle East but also the great powers of the United States, Russia,

China, and many nations of Europe. Naval fleets from the United States and Russia continue to grow in strength and readiness in the Mediterranean Sea, the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the other great bodies of water in that part of the world.

During the end times, the Antichrist will head a confederacy of ten European nations that will generally correspond to the territory of the ancient Roman empire (see Dan. 7:24; cf. 2:40-43), and he will at first pretend to be Israel's deliverer from her enemies, and she will make an alliance with him (9:27). But after he is victorious over the nations from the south, north, and east who have come against Israel, he will reveal his true evil character and his hatred for Israel and for God (Dan. 11:40-45). It is while occupying Israel under the guise of being her protector that the Antichrist will commit **the abomination of desolation**.

Bdelugma (**abomination**) denotes an object of disgust, repulsion, and abhorrence. In Scripture it is used primarily to denote things associated with idolatry and gross ungodliness. The Hebrew equivalent was often used of rites and paraphernalia associated with the wicked conduct of pagan religions. In the book of Revelation it is used to represent the immoralities and spiritual uncleanness of the false religious system known as "Babylon the great, the mother of harlots" (17:45). In the new heaven and new earth there will be "nothing unclean and no one who practices abominations and lying" (21:27).

The abomination of desolation may be translated, "the abomination which makes desolate, or lays waste." In other words, **the abomination causes the desolation**.

The prophet Daniel referred to the abomination of desolation three times (9:27; 11:31; 12:11). Virtually every Bible scholar, no matter what his views on eschatology, identifies that abomination as the sacrilege committed by Antiochus IV, the Syrian king who ruled Palestine from 175-165 B. C. as a surrogate of the Greek empire. He took to himself the title Theos Epiphanes, which means "manifest god," but his enemies nicknamed him Epimanes, which means "madman" or "the insane one." Ironically, when he died in 163, he was totally insane, outraged to the point of madness because of his military defeats by the Jewish rebel Judas Maccabaeus. The text of Daniel 11:21-35 perfectly describes the rule of Antiochus, who gained his throne "by intrigue" (v. 21), made numerous

excursions into Egypt (vv. 24-27), broke his covenant with Israel (v. 28), and desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem (v. 31).

The apocryphal books of 1 and 2 Maccabees vividly portray the time of Antiochus and the Jews' zealous resistance to his brutal and sacrilegious tyranny. He slaughtered countless thousands of Jewish men, sold many of their wives and children into slavery, and tried to completely obliterate the Jewish religion. He desecrated the Temple by sacrificing a pig, the most ceremonially unclean of all animals, on the altar and forcing the priests to eat its flesh. He then set up in the Temple an idol of Zeus, the pagan deity he fancied himself as manifesting. That horrible defilement by Antiochus was a preview of the even greater **abomination of desolation** to be committed by the Antichrist in the end time.

Daniel had predicted: "Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgressions, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy place" (9:24). "Seventy weeks" is literally "seventy sevens" and refers to years (cf. 9:2). In other words, 490 years would transpire before the Messiah would return to establish His eternal kingdom of righteousness. As Daniel explained in the following verse, that measurement would begin at "the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem," the decree issued by King Artaxerxes in 445 B. C. (see Neh. 2:5-6). The prophet also explained that "seven weeks and sixty-two weeks" (69 weeks, or 483 years) would pass "until Messiah the Prince" (Dan. 9:25). It has been calculated that exactly 483 years elapsed from that decree of Artaxerxes until Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when He was acclaimed Messiah and King by the multitude (for detailed explanations of those dates, see Sir Robert Anderson's *The Coming Prince* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1954] and Harold Hoehner's *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977]).

After that time and before the seventieth and final week of years, "the Messiah will be cut off and have nothing, and the people of the prince who is to come will destroy the city and the sanctuary" (Dan. 9:26). That is a picture of Jesus' crucifixion and of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70.

Then the deceitful prince "will make a firm covenant with the many for one week, but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to

sacrifice and grain offering; and on the wing of abominations will come one who makes desolate, even until a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate” (v. 27). That last week, or seven-year period, of the seventy weeks will begin when Israel makes a covenant with the Antichrist, thinking he will be her great deliverer.

In modern Israel, fear of the Arabs and the Russians runs very deep. Not only do those combined enemies outnumber Israel in manpower and weaponry by several hundred times but their hatred for Jews is intense. Ezekiel prophesied that Magog (identified by Josephus as the land of what is now Russia), Meshech and Tubal (Asia Minor, or modern Turkey), Persia (modern Iran and Afghanistan), Ethiopia (including modern Sudan), Put (Libya), and other nations will unite against Israel (Ezek. 38:26).

I have heard Israeli soldiers say that if Arabs believe Allah tells them to kill Jews, that is what they will do, and any treaties or peace pacts that forbid such action will mean nothing.

As the modern Satan-inspired alliance of Russia and many Arab nations continues to grow, it becomes evident that the prophetic picture of the end time is unfolding. When that threat to her becomes extreme, Israel will seek security and protection from a powerful ally by making a pact with the European confederacy to the west, which will also be satanically energized.

Halfway through the final week of years, at the end of the first three and a half years, the deceptive leader of the western confederacy (Antichrist) will violently turn against Israel, set himself up as God, and commit the abomination of desolation that activates the Great Tribulation, which brings about intense persecution of Jews.

Interpreters have proposed numerous identities for **the holy place**, some suggesting it is the city of Jerusalem and others that it is the holy of holies, the inner sanctum of the Temple. In the only other passage where the phrase is used in the New Testament, it plainly refers to the Temple itself (Acts 21:28), and that seems to be the only reasonable meaning to take for it in Matthew 24:15. David also referred to the Temple as the Lord’s holy place (see Ps. 24:3).

“And from the time that the regular sacrifice is abolished, and the abomination of desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days” (Dan.

12:11). The desecration of the Temple will not be momentary but continuous, described by Jesus as **standing in the holy place**. From the time the daily sacrifice is canceled and the abomination of desolation begins, 1290 days will pass until the end, 30 more days than three and one half years. Yet according to Revelation 12:6, the Great Tribulation will last 1260 days. It seems that the best explanation for those additional days is that they will cover the time when the Messiah descends to the Mount of Olives, creates the great valley in which the nations of the world will be judged, and executes that judgment (see Zech. 14:4-5; Matt. 25:31-46).

Daniel continues by saying, “How blessed is he who keeps waiting and attains to the 1,335 days!” (12:12), which adds an additional 45 days. That additional time would seem to be a transition period during which the Lord establishes His throne in Jerusalem and sets up places of leadership throughout the earth that will be governed in His behalf by His appointed representatives. So there are the 1260 days of trouble, followed by 30 days to break down man’s kingdom and 45 days to set up the Lord’s.

Further details of **the abomination of desolation** are given in the book of Revelation. Pictured as the beast coming up out of the sea, the Antichrist will be given “a mouth speaking arrogant words and blasphemies; and authority to act for forty-two months was given to him” (Rev. 13:1, 5). Forty-two months translates into three and a half years, or 1,260 days, which will be the Great Tribulation, the second half of the last week of years. As the Antichrist continues his blasphemies against God’s name, tabernacle, and heavenly citizens, “it was given to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them; and authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation was given to him. And all who dwell on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain” (vv. 7-8). His cohort, the false prophet, will then join him and perform great signs and wonders in order to promote the worship of the Antichrist and will even enable an image of the beast to talk and cause the deaths of those who refuse to worship (vv. 11-15).

Antiochus Epiphanes set up an idol in the Temple to be worshiped by the Jews, but the Antichrist will set himself up as God and demand worship from all mankind. He will end all sacrifice in the Temple and commit the abomination that makes **the holy place** desecrated and desolate, a place utterly detestable to Jews.

Then the Antichrist, the man of lawlessness, “the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, . . . takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God” (2 Thess. 2:3-4). He is “the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved” (vv. 9-10). That is the abomination of desolation.

The exhortation **let the reader understand** reinforces the fact that Jesus was not giving the warnings in the Olivet discourse to the disciples themselves or to their generation but to believers in the end time, who will read those truths in Scripture and thereby be enabled to **understand** the trials they are enduring.

The Signs of Christ's
Coming—part 4
Perils to Come
(24:16-28)

Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let him who is on the housetop not go down to get the things out that are in his house; and let him who is in the field not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days! But pray that your flight may not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath; for then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall. And unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days shall be cut short. Then if anyone says to you, “Behold, here is the Christ,” or “There He is,” do not believe him. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. Behold, I have told you in advance. If therefore they say to you, “Behold, He is in the wilderness,” do not go forth, or, “Behold, He is in the inner rooms,” do not believe them. For just as the lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. (24:16-28)

Perhaps no subject in Scripture is more intriguing than the second coming of Jesus Christ, and none should be more motivating to the believer and the unbeliever alike. “Therefore knowing the fear of the Lord,” Paul declared, “we persuade men” (2 Cor. 5:11). Realizing that Christ will one day come in terrible judgment, the sensible unbeliever should be motivated to repent and receive Him as Lord and Savior. The obedient Christian will be motivated to faithfully present the gospel to unbelievers in order that they might have the opportunity to be saved. The

faithful Christian is also motivated by the reward he will receive when His Lord returns, and with Paul he has the “ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him” (v. 9).

In Matthew 24:16-28 Jesus continues to describe some of the perils that will accompany His return to establish His earthly millennial reign. But before giving those additional signs of His coming, He tells all Jews and all believing Gentiles who are living in Judea during the Tribulation what their response to the abomination of desolation should be.

THE RESPONSE

Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let him who is on the housetop not go down to get the things out that are in his house; and let him who is in the field not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days! But pray that your flight may not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath; (24:16-20)

As mentioned previously, the abomination of desolation (see v. 15) will precipitate the first series of dangers and catastrophes that Jesus compared to birth pains (vv. 4-14). When the Antichrist desecrates the restored Jerusalem Temple and demands that all the world worship him as God, the second three and a half years of the Tribulation, called the Great Tribulation (see v. 21), will begin. **Then, Jesus said, let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.** That statement is a warning of the severity of the holocaust to come and an exhortation to **flee** from it.

Because of their proximity to the profaned Temple headquarters of the Antichrist in Jerusalem, **those who are in Judea** will be in the greatest and most immediate danger from that extremely powerful and malevolent agent of Satan. Although everyone on earth will be subject to his tyranny, the Antichrist’s supreme fury will be vented against Jews, regardless of their religious persuasion or lack of it, and also against all Christians. Jewish Christians will be in the greatest jeopardy of all, being doubly despised by Satan’s forces.

Since God first called and made His eternal covenant with Abraham, Satan has sought to destroy God’s chosen people, the Jews, and their God-ordained nation of Israel. To have destroyed the Jews would

have been to destroy God's redemptive plan for mankind, because "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). To have eliminated the Jews before Jesus was born would have broken the line of promise and thwarted the birth and therefore the redemptive ministry of the Messiah, who had to be a descendant of Abraham and of David. Having failed at that, however, Satan still seeks to destroy individual Jews in order to prevent Christ's ultimate redemption of them and to destroy Israel as a nation in order to prevent its restoration under His divine rule. It must be added that God has allowed Satan some success in his attacks on Jews. Because of their covenant violation, unbelief, and apostasy, Satan has sometimes actually acted as God's executioner to punish them.

Because they will refuse to worship him and especially because they belong to God, the Antichrist will also unleash exceptional fury against those who come to believe in Jesus during the last days. As already noted, those nearest Jerusalem will be in the severest and most immediate danger.

Phuegō (flee) is related to the English term *fugitive*, a person who takes flight in order to escape danger. The only hope will be to run for safety, symbolized in the exhortation to flee **Judea** as quickly as possible and take refuge in **the mountains**.

From Zechariah we learn that not every Jew will be successful in the attempt to escape. " 'And it will come about in all the land,' declares the Lord, 'that two parts in it will be cut off and perish; but the third will be left in it. And I will bring the third part through the fire, refine them as silver is refined, and test them as gold is tested'" (Zech. 13:8-9a). When the Antichrist moves against the Jews of **Judea** and other parts of Palestine, he will slaughter millions of them, apparently in a short period of time. That slaughter will also be a divine purging of the rebel Jews and the third that are left are the saved, of whom the Lord says, "They will call on My name, and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are My people,' and they will say, 'The Lord is my God' " (v. 9b). The holocaust of that day will surpass every other catastrophe that has "occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall" (Matt. 24:21). As noted in the previous chapter, the massacres of Jews by the Romans in A.D. 70 and by the Nazis during the World War II will pale by comparison. Two out of every three Jews in the Holy Land will die under the fury of Satan as he enacts the judgment of God on the rebels of the Jewish nation.

Many Christians will also be slaughtered, not as an act of God's judgment but in acts of ungodly persecution. When the fifth seal of judgment was broken, John "saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' " (Rev. 6:9-10). Those martyred saints will wonder when the carnage of their brothers and sisters will stop and God will judge and punish their murderers. In response to their cry, "there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, should be completed also" (v. 11). Through the Antichrist and his other agents, both human and demon, Satan will make all-out war on the saints, butchering all he can find (Rev. 13:7) until his evil hosts are "drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus" (17:6).

For the saved Jews there will be divine help in fleeing and hiding. John saw Israel, the woman who "gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron," flee "into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she might be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days." The apostle then saw the archangel "Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. And the dragon and his angels waged war, and they were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him" (Rev. 12:5-9). The 1,260 days is equivalent to three and a half years, the second half of the seven-year Tribulation. During that Great Tribulation, God will provide a place of refuge for those of His people who escape the Antichrist's onslaught.

They will succeed in their flight to **the mountains**, probably to the east and south of Jerusalem, perhaps to the cliff caves around the Dead Sea and in the hills of Moab and Edom. John reports that "the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman, in order that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she was nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent" (Rev. 12:14). Some modern

commentators have suggested that “the great eagle” represents El Al, the official Israeli airline. But it seems more likely that the eagle represents Michael himself, by whose power God’s people will be transported to safety.

Our Lord continues the call for urgency, stressing the need for immediate flight by insisting that, for example, a person **who is on the housetop** should **not even go down to get the things out that are in his house**. Most Palestinian houses of Jesus’ day had outside stairways leading to **the housetop**, where the family often went in the evening to relax and cool off from the work and heat of the day. The person who happens to be on his roof when he hears of the abomination of desolation should not waste even the few minutes required to go back into the **house** to retrieve a few precious **things** to take with him into the mountains. No material possession will be worth the risk of the slightest delay. Nor should a person **turn back to get his cloak**. If he is working on the far side of a field and has left **his cloak** in the house or on a fence some distance away, he should leave it there and run.

That will not be the time even for taking a stand for Christ but only for fleeing into His arms, as it were. The time for testimony will be past and, by the word of the Lord Himself, believers’ only sensible option will be flight.

It will be an especially tragic and burdensome time for pregnant women, **those who are with child**, and nursing mothers with small **babes**. Women in such conditions will not be able to move fast and will therefore be at greater risk of being captured and killed. An even more horrible prospect, however, will be that of having their unborn **child** slashed in the womb and of their tiny **babes** dashed to pieces before their eyes. Both of those heinous practices were common among the ancient Babylonians and Assyrians and are precisely the judgment that rebellious Israel was promised through Hosea (13:16).

It was by the massacre of hundreds of male Hebrew babies that Satan convinced Pharaoh he could destroy the Israelites in Egypt and by which he convinced Herod he could destroy the Christ child. The Antichrist apparently will employ the same hellish activities during the Great Tribulation. With the Holy Spirit removed and the church raptured, the malevolence of Satan will be unrestrained and untempered.

Although Palestinian winters are mild compared to those in many parts of the world, even slightly inclement weather could be a hindrance when the Antichrist begins his final aggression against God's people. Therefore Jesus said, **Pray that your flight may not be in the winter.**

Those seeking to escape should also pray that they will not have to flee **on the Sabbath**, when legalistic Jews who are not fleeing might try to stone or otherwise impede those whom they believe to be profaning **the Sabbath**—just as their forefathers had sought to stone Jesus for breaking their Sabbath traditions.

Jesus' point was that no possession would be worth the risk of retrieving and no hindrance could be considered small. Because of the imminent unmatched terror, single-minded, undeterred flight will be the only order of the day.

THE PERILS

for then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall. And unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days shall be cut short. Then if anyone says to you, "Behold, here is the Christ," or "There He is," do not believe him. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. Behold, I have told you in advance. If therefore they say to you, "Behold, He is in the wilderness," do not go forth, or, "Behold, He is in the inner rooms," do not believe them. For just as the lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be. Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. (24:21-28)

Jesus here identifies three more signs of His return, signs that will occur immediately after the abomination of desolation and that will warrant fast flight into the mountains. Those signs will be: severe calamity (vv. 16-22), subtle confusion (vv. 23-27), and sinful corruption (v. 28).

SEVERE CALAMITY

for then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall. And unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days shall be cut short. (24:21-22)

The abomination of desolation will mark the beginning of the **great tribulation**, the last three and one half years before Christ appears to rule the world from His throne in Jerusalem. That **great tribulation** will be **such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall**. No time or event in the history of Israel fits the description of the holocaust Jesus is here speaking of. The horrifying time is further described in some detail in Revelation 6-16, where the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments exhibit the escalating intensity of God's wrath upon sinful, rebellious mankind. Both the books of Revelation and of Daniel make clear that the Antichrist will tyrannize the world for "a time, times, and half a time" (Dan. 7:25; 12:7; Rev. 12:14), that is, a year, two years, and a half year, or three and one half years (Rev. 11:2;13:5). Clearly, the events described by our Lord, by Daniel, and by John must refer to the same great holocaust at the end time, just before the millennial kingdom is established on earth.

God's message for Israel is that things are going to get immeasurably worse before they become better. That nation and its people will suffer treachery, desecration of the rebuilt Temple, indescribable persecution, and brutal slaughter that will be totally unparalleled in history.

And unless those days had been cut short, Jesus went on to say, **no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days shall be cut short**. *Koloboō* (**cut short**) can carry the idea of stopping instantly, and that could be the meaning in this context. Since the length of the Great Tribulation is repeatedly stated as being divinely ordained at three and one half years, its length could not be reduced without God's contradicting His own Word. The idea would therefore be that God has predetermined that **those days** of calamity will stop **short** of total destruction.

But since Jesus spoke of **those days** rather than the more general eschatological phrase "that day," it seems that His reference was probably to twenty-four-hour **days**. In that case, God will supernaturally shorten the

daylight hours in order to give His fleeing people the added protection of more darkness.

When the sixth judgment seal is broken, there will be “a great earthquake; and the sun [will become] black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon [will become] like blood; and the stars of the sky [will fall] to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. And the sky [will be] split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up” (Rev. 6:12-14). During the fourth trumpet judgment “a third of the sun and a third of the moon and a third of the stars [will be] smitten, so that a third of them might be darkened and the day might not shine for a third of it, and the night in the same way” (8:12). During the fifth bowl judgment the kingdom of the beast will be darkened by God’s angel (16:10). At least three times during the Great Tribulation the heavenly bodies that give light to the earth will be radically altered in ways that will progressively reduce the daylight until the Antichrist’s forces are compelled to operate in total darkness. God will use that darkness **for the sake of the elect**, using it to hide them from their would-be destroyers.

The elect could represent the nation of Israel, which is often referred to in the Old Testament as God’s elect, or chosen, people (see, e.g., Isa. 45:4). It could also include those who become Christians during the Tribulation (see Rev. 17:14). Both applications seem appropriate, because God will preserve a redeemed remnant of the nation of Israel as well as some redeemed Gentiles. He will shorten the daylight hours so that the Antichrist cannot complete his massacre of Jews and saints.

It should be noted that this is the first use of the term **elect** in the New Testament, and through it Jesus introduced a new concept concerning those who belong to Him. They have been divinely chosen and called out as His own people and indeed His very own children. And when God chooses people for Himself, He will restructure the entire universe if that becomes necessary to protect them and to fulfill His promises concerning them. (For further discussion of election, see the author’s commentary on Ephesians, pp. 10-13.)

Obviously total darkness could not last very long. Not only would nothing grow but little work could be done, and temperatures all across the earth would rapidly drop to unendurable levels. But in that brief time, the anguish from darkness—added to the famine, pestilence, warfare, and

other catastrophes—will become so acute that men will gnaw “their tongues because of pain” (Rev. 16:10).

SUBTLE CONFUSION

Then if anyone says to you, “Behold, here is the Christ,” or “There He is,” do not believe him. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. Behold, I have told you in advance. If therefore they say to you, “Behold, He is in the wilderness,” do not go forth, or, “Behold, He is in the inner rooms,” do not believe them. For just as the lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be. (24:23-27)

Those who heed Jesus’ advice to flee into the mountains and are protected by God from harm will also be especially vulnerable to false teaching and promises. Having left their homes with only the clothes on their backs, they will not have the least security of material possessions. Many of them will have left families and friends behind and will be strangers to each other.

It seems evident from Jesus’ warning here that false teachers will infiltrate the company of those who flee. Those false teachers will be Satan’s emissaries who hope to entice Jews and believers away from their refuge and into the hands of Antichrist. They will share his satanic desire to annihilate all Jews and all Christians.

Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44), and since he first tempted Eve, one of his primary weapons has been deceit. As he has done many times in the past and will have already done many times during the Tribulation (see Matt. 24:5), Satan will inspire the appearance of false Christs. The refugees will hear such claims as, **“Behold, here is the Christ,” or “There He is.”** Some of the false teachers will claim Christ is in their own midst, and others will perhaps claim He is back in Jerusalem or elsewhere in Judea.

Those spurious religious leaders, the **false Christs and false prophets**, will even perform **great signs and wonders**, giving supernatural evidence to support their claims. They will mimic their leader, the Antichrist, who will demonstrate “all power and signs and false

wonders” (2 Thess. 2:9). Those **great signs and wonders** will be so awesome and convincing that they would **mislead, if possible, even the elect.**

It is obvious from Jesus’ saying, **if possible**, that the Antichrist and his false Christs and prophets will not be able to deceive **the elect.** Satan has never been able to deceive Christians about the identity of their Lord. “My sheep hear My voice,” Jesus said, “and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:27-28). Once a person comes to know the true Christ through saving faith in Him, he can never be duped by anyone, including Satan himself, into acknowledging a counterfeit Christ.

The **elect** in that day will not be destroyed because God will sovereignly protect them by reordering the entire universe, and they will not be deceived because they will have the Spirit-inspired knowledge of the true Christ within them.

But those protected ones will nevertheless be under verbal assault. Satan will vigorously try to use the turmoil of the times to undermine the confidence of the refugees and to persuade them to follow a false Messiah, who would immediately betray them to the Antichrist once they were outside God’s sanctuary. With the world falling apart, the stars falling, the sun and moon being radically reduced in light, millions dying from disease and starvation, and thousands of their fellow countrymen having been mercilessly slaughtered, the refugees will be emotionally drained and utterly vulnerable to the subterfuge of the false Christ’s and prophets, were it not for God’s gracious provision.

The fugitives will have access to Jesus’ words recorded here. **Behold, I have told you in advance,** He said, speaking to them prophetically across the intervening centuries. **If therefore they say to you, “Behold, He is in the wilderness,” do not go forth, or, “Behold, He is in the inner rooms,” do not believe them.** “Beware of all claims about My identity or whereabouts,” He was saying. “Pay attention only to what I am teaching you now, not to anything else you will hear or see in that day, no matter how authentic and compelling the message and accompanying signs may seem to be.”

How, then, will those protected ones know when the true Lord really does appear to establish His kingdom? How will they distinguish

His true coming from the many counterfeits? **For just as the lightning comes from the east, and flashes even to the west, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be,** Jesus assures them. His coming will not be stretched over a long period of time but will be quick, sudden, public, visible, universal, and unimaginably glorious. As the astonished disciples stood staring up into the sky after Jesus had ascended into the clouds, the two angels said to them, “This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). An angel said to John in his vision on Patmos, “Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him” (Rev. 1:7). Christ’s appearance not only will be unmistakable to those in hiding on that day but to every human being on earth, including His most implacable enemies.

For those who belong to Him, Christ’s coming will be marvelous deliverance, but for those who have resisted and opposed Him it will be the ultimate day of tragedy. “The kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man, [will hide] themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; and they [will say] to the mountains and to the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb’ ” (Rev. 6:15-16).

Until the Lord appears in that predicted and unquestionable way, those who are hiding should remain where they are. After the true Christ appears, however, His people and His enemies will exchange places, as it were. Those who had been hiding in the mountains and caves will be released to freedom and blessing, and their would-be captors and murderers will themselves seek refuge, as the righteous wrath of God replaces and punishes the evil wrath of man and of Satan.

SINFUL CORRUPTION

Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. (24:28)

That statement was possibly a common proverb in Palestine, as it could be in many parts of the world. Even in highly civilized modern societies, **vultures** circling over the carcass of a dead animal are not an uncommon sight in the countryside, especially in remote areas.

By the end of the Great Tribulation, the world will have filled up its full measure of sin and will have spiritually decayed into a wretched and virtually lifeless carcass. As it lies like a dead animal in the wilderness, Christ will appear to make final disposition of that **corpse** through His righteous and terrible judgment.

The Signs of Christ's
Coming—part 5
The Sign of the
Son of Man
(24:29-31)

But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other. (24:29-31)

In clear, concise, straightforward terms the Lord Himself describes what will be the most momentous event of all time, His return to earth in divine glory. Throughout the history of the church, believers have looked forward with earnest anticipation to the coming again of their Lord Jesus Christ. “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men,” Paul wrote to Titus, “instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus” (Titus 2:11-13). Believers are continually to live righteous lives, motivated in great part by their continual expectation of the Lord’s return.

Much of the world is familiar with the circumstances and features of Christ’s first coming, such as His birth in Bethlehem, the magi guided by the star and bringing Him gifts, and the shepherds in the fields hearing the angel choir. Many people have heard something about His teachings

and miracles and His crucifixion and resurrection. But even many professed Christians are little acquainted with what Scripture teaches about His second coming.

In Matthew 24:29-31, Jesus gives a vivid picture of the moment of His appearing, the sign of all signs of His coming again and of the end of the age, about which the disciples had just inquired (v. 3). Within these three verses Jesus presents five key truths about this supreme sign of His appearance: the sequence of events (v. 29*a*), the scene in the heavens (v. 29*b*), the sign in the sky (v. 30*a*), the strength and glory of the Lord (v. 30*b*), and the selection by the angels (v. 31).

THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

But immediately after the tribulation of those days (24:29*a*)

Jesus states unequivocally that the central sign of His return will occur **immediately after the tribulation of those days**, that is, at the end of the Great Tribulation (v. 21), the second three and a half years of the seven-year Tribulation period.

The context makes clear that **those days** refer to the preceding days of **tribulation** that Jesus has just been describing (vv. 4-28). They are the final days of unsurpassed tragedy (v. 21) that will mark the end of the present world age, days during which sin will be unrestrained on the earth, the church will have been raptured, and Satan will have been allowed almost unrestricted freedom in his final but futile attempt to usurp rule of the earth for himself. With the abomination of desolation (v. 15) Satan will inaugurate the Great Tribulation, desecrating the restored Temple and slaughtering every Jew and Christian he can lay hands on. The Lord's coming to reign will take place at the conclusion of this time of **tribulation**.

As was noted in the last chapter, during **those days**, two out of three Jews in Palestine will be slaughtered, only a third being preserved (Zech. 13:8-9). One hundred forty-four thousand of them will be saved to evangelize the world, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev. 7:4; cf. 14:1-5). Those Jews will be supernaturally sealed and protected by God, and no effort by the Antichrist or his collaborators will be able to destroy them.

THE SCENE IN THE HEAVENS

the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, (24:29b)

Jesus here describes the heavenly setting of His appearance. The whole universe will begin to disintegrate, apparently with great rapidity. The **sun . . . and the moon** will cease to give **light**, and **the stars will even fall from the sky**. From Luke's parallel account we learn that there will be "dismay among nations, in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, men fainting from fear and the expectation of the things which are coming upon the world; for the power of the heavens will be shaken" (Luke 21:25-26).

The events will be so calamitous that men will faint from absolute terror. The Greek term behind "faint" means to expire or stop breathing, indicating that people will literally die of fright. No hurricane, tornado, tidal wave, earthquake, volcanic eruption, or combination of those natural disasters in history will have approached the extreme disruption of those end-time days.

During that time **the powers of the heavens will be shaken** by Jesus Christ, the One who "upholds all things by the word of His power" (Heb. 1:3). Just as He created everything, He also sustains everything, and without His full sustaining power, gravity will weaken and the orbits of the stars and planets will fluctuate. Astronomers can predict coming stellar events centuries in advance only because of the absolute consistency of the divinely ordered and uniform laws that control the operation of the stars and planets. But when the Lord withdraws the least of His power from the universe, nothing in it will function normally, and every aspect of the physical world will be disrupted beyond imagination. All the forces of energy, here called **powers of the heavens**, which hold everything in space constant, will be in dysfunction. The heavenly bodies will careen helter-skelter through space, and all navigation, whether stellar, solar, magnetic, or gyroscopic, will be futile because all stable reference points and uniform natural forces will have ceased to exist or else become unreliable.

The earth is held together by the power of God, and when that power is diminished, the resulting chaos will be inconceivable. Speculations such as the one just cited, no matter how scientifically derived, can only remotely approximate what the actual situation will be like.

But just as the withdrawal of a small part of God's sustaining power will cause such pervasive chaos and destruction, so will His supernatural control of that disintegration prevent the total destruction of the earth. His sovereign power will preserve and restore it and its people for the establishing of His millennial kingdom.

Some seven centuries before Christ, Isaiah had predicted the end-time devastation:

Wail, for the day of the Lord is near! It will come as destruction from the Almighty. Therefore all hands will fall limp, and every man's heart will melt. And they will be terrified, pains and anguish will take hold of them; they will writhe like a woman in labor, they will look at one another in astonishment, their faces aflame. Behold, the day of the Lord is coming, cruel, with fury and burning anger, to make the land a desolation; and He will exterminate its sinners from it. For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not flash forth their light; the sun will be dark when it rises, and the moon will not shed its light. Thus I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will also put an end to the arrogance of the proud, and abase the haughtiness of the ruthless. I will make mortal man scarcer than pure gold, and mankind than the gold of Ophir. (Isa. 13:6-12)

Although that prophecy applied immediately to the destruction of Babylon (v. 1; cf. Dan. 5:30-31), which occurred in 539 B. C., those events described by Isaiah are obviously far too universal and catastrophic to have related entirely to Babylon. The devastation of ancient Babylon was but a microcosm of what will happen to the whole universe in the end time.

Isaiah continues to depict events that could in no way describe the relatively mild and confined judgment on Babylon by the Medo-Persians (v. 17).

Therefore I shall make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken from its place at the fury of the Lord of hosts in the day of His burning anger. And it will be that like a hunted gazelle, or like sheep with none to gather them, they will each turn to his own people, and each one flee to his own land. Anyone who is found will be thrust through, and anyone who is captured will fall by the sword. Their little ones also will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses will be plundered and their wives ravished. (vv. 13-16)

That series of catastrophes is clearly worldwide, affecting all nations and all people.

Isaiah later presents still further details of end-time destruction:

Draw near, O nations, to hear; and listen, O peoples! Let the earth and all it contains hear, and the world and all that springs from it. For the Lord's indignation is against all the nations, and His wrath against all their armies; He has utterly destroyed them, He has given them over to slaughter. So their slain will be thrown out, and their corpses will give off their stench, and the mountains will be drenched with their blood. And all the host of heaven will wear away, and the sky will be rolled up like a scroll; all their hosts will also wither away as a leaf withers from the vine, or as one withers from the fig tree. For My sword is satiated in heaven, behold it shall descend for judgment upon Edom, and upon the people whom I have devoted to destruction. (34:1-5)

It is from those passages in Isaiah that Jesus' teaching and John's vision were drawn. Edom is the southernmost region to which the great battle of Armageddon will extend. The total area involved will be two hundred miles long (Rev. 14:20), stretching from Bozrah, the capital of Edom, in the south (see Isa. 34:6) to the hills of Lebanon, just north of the Valley of Armageddon.

About a hundred years before Isaiah, the prophet Joel wrote of a vast, incredibly devastating locust plague that foreshadowed the disasters of the end time, the coming "day of the Lord" (Joel 2:1). The locusts

marched across the land like a destroying army. “Before them the earthquakes, the heavens tremble, the sun and the moon grow dark, and the stars lose their brightness. And the Lord utters His voice before His army; surely His camp is very great, for strong is He who carries out His word. The day of the Lord is indeed great and very awesome, and who can endure it?” (vv. 10-11; cf. vv. 4-5). The blotting out of natural light by those billions of insects illustrates the vastly greater darkening of the heavens by the direct intervention of God in the end time. “And I will display wonders in the sky and on the earth,” the Lord continued to declare through Joel; “blood, fire, and columns of smoke. The sun will be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes” (vv. 30-31; cf. Rev. 6:12-13).

The prophet Haggai wrote, “For thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘Once more in a little while, I am going to shake the heavens and the earth, the sea also and the dry land. And I will shake all the nations; and they will come with the wealth of all nations; and I will fill this house with glory,’ ” (Hag. 2:6-7). That is the time, Paul says, that the cursed universe is anxiously awaiting. “For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now” (Rom. 8:19-22).

THE SIGN IN THE SKY

and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky (24:30a)

Next Jesus describes the supreme **sign** of His “coming, and of the end of the age,” about which the disciples had asked a few moments earlier (v. 3). He had already mentioned a number of lesser, though astounding, signs that would precede His coming, including the sign of the abomination of desolation that would precipitate them (vv. 4-15). But the sign of signs will be **the Son of Man Himself, who will appear in the sky.**

Many of the early church Fathers, such as Chrysostom, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Origen, imagined that this sign would be an enormous

blazing cross, visible to the entire world, that would pierce the total darkness then shrouding the world. Other interpreters have suggested it will be the Shekinah glory of the Lord's presence returning to earth. It is likely that the Shekinah glory will be involved, as the unveiled Christ Jesus makes His appearance. But the sign is not just His glory; it is Christ Himself, **the Son of Man**, who **will appear in the sky**.

The sign of should be translated as a Greek subjective genitive, indicating that **the sign** will not simply relate to or point to **the Son of Man** (as with an objective genitive) but will indeed *be* **the Son of Man**. In other words, Jesus Himself will be the supreme and final sign of His coming. In the midst of the world's unrelieved blackness—physical, emotional, and spiritual—Jesus Christ will manifest Himself in His infinite and undiminished glory and righteousness. Just as the destructive catastrophes of the Great Tribulation will be utterly unparalleled (v. 21), so will be this manifestation of the glory and power of Christ.

The sight of Him in blazing glory will be so unbearably fearful that rebellious mankind will cry out for the mountains and rocks to fall on them to hide them “from the presence of Him who sits on the throne” (Rev. 6:16). But instead of being driven to the Lord in reverent repentance, they will flee from Him in continued rejection, cursing and blaspheming His name (16:9).

Some people, however, will be brought to their knees in brokenness, acknowledging their need of God's forgiveness and redemption. When they see **the Son of Man** in His glory and righteousness, they will finally confess their own wickedness and unrighteousness. There will be some from **all the tribes of the earth** who **will mourn** over their rebellion against God and their rejection of His Son. Having heard the gospel proclaimed (v. 14; Rev. 14:6), those people will turn from and **mourn** over their sin and receive Christ as Lord and Savior.

Among the repentant will be many Jews. Through Zechariah the Lord promised His people: “And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born. In that day there will be great mourning in Jerusalem” (Zech. 12:10-11). Having realized that they have rejected their Messiah, they will turn to Him in faith, casting

themselves on His mercy. At that time the “fulness of the Gentiles [will have] come in; and thus all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, ‘The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob’ ” (Rom. 11:25-26; cf. Isa. 59:20).

Just as Jesus ascended to heaven in the clouds, He will also return “in just the same way” (Acts 1:11). When He appears at His second coming, **the Son of Man** will come **on the clouds of the sky** (cf. Matt. 26:64; Mark 13:26; Luke 21:27). In his night visions Daniel beheld “with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man . . . coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him” (Dan. 7:13-14). In his vision on Patmos, John also saw Jesus “coming with the clouds.” Then, he said, “every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him” (Rev. 1:7).

The **clouds** into which Jesus ascended and on which He will return seem to be distinctive. The psalmist wrote of God’s using clouds as His chariot (Ps. 104:3), and Isaiah pictures “the Lord . . . riding on a swift cloud” (Isa. 19:1). But whether **the clouds of the sky** on which Jesus appears are natural or supernatural, His use of them at that time will be extraordinary and unique. In the midst of black chaos, He will use those **clouds** to manifest Himself in His complete divine majesty.

Speaking of the end time, Zechariah wrote, “And it will come about in that day that there will be no light; the luminaries will dwindle. For it will be a unique day which is known to the Lord, neither day nor night, but it will come about that at evening time there will be light” (Zech. 14:6-7; cf. Jer. 30:7). At the end of that insufferable period of darkness and anguish, the light will come, not by the reillumination of the sun, moon, and stars but by the brilliance of Christ’s own divine glory, which will later light the eternal new heaven and new earth. In that day there will be “no need of the sun or of the moon to shine upon [the new Jerusalem], for the glory of God [will] illumine it, and its lamp [will be] the Lamb” (Rev. 21:23), “and there shall no longer be any night; and they shall not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God shall illumine them” (22:5).

Although all believers before the Tribulation will have died or been raptured (1 Thess. 1:10; Rev. 3:10), they will witness Christ’s glorious

appearance on earth. They will, in fact, “be revealed with Him in glory” (Col. 3:4), having already been wondrously and appropriately clothed as the bride of Christ for the marriage supper of the Lamb “in fine linen, bright and clean,” which is “the righteous acts of the saints” (Rev. 19:8). When the church is taken into the presence of the Lord just before the Tribulation, she will fellowship with Him at that supper during the seven-year cataclysm on earth. Also present will be the Old Testament saints, “those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (v. 9). As Christ’s bride, the church will not need an invitation to the wedding feast; but everyone who believed in God before Christ’s incarnation will be graciously invited to participate.

It seems that the church, and perhaps the Old Testament believers as well, will probably be included in “the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean,” which follow Christ “on white horses” (Rev. 19:14). Instead of looking up to the sky as Christ appears, as everyone on earth will be doing, the saints of all ages will be looking down from the sky as they return to earth with Him.

While unbelievers on earth are dying from fright, disease, or from the Antichrist’s carnage, those who are coming to salvation and who escape being killed during the Tribulation will have great reason to rejoice at Christ’s appearing. In his account of the Olivet discourse Luke reports that Jesus says to those surviving saints: “When these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:28).

THE STRENGTH AND GLORY OF THE LORD

with power and great glory. (24:30b)

As already seen in the cataclysmic events that will shake the heavens and earth at the end time, Christ’s return will be accompanied by incredible demonstrations of His divine **power** over the universe, including Satan and his demons. He will demonstrate His power to protect His chosen people, His power to redeem the elect, His power to restore the devastated earth, and His power to establish His rule on earth.

In His great **power** the Lord will conquer and destroy all His enemies, including ungodly men who followed and worshiped the beast,

by casting them into the lake of fire (Rev. 19:20). He will also “make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness” (Dan. 9:24). In the restored and purified earth the destructive nature and instincts of wild animals will be radically reversed to make them docile and harmless. No animal will attack or molest another animal or any human being, and the carnivorous will become vegetarian.

The wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little boy will lead them. Also the cow and the bear will graze; their young will lie down together; and the lion will eat straw like the ox. And the nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child will put his hand on the viper’s den. They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Isa. 11:6-9)

By His **power** Christ will eliminate drought, floods, crop failures, and starvation. “And it will come about in that day,” declared Zechariah, “that living waters will flow out of Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern sea and the other half toward the western sea; it will be in summer as well as in winter” (Zech. 14:8).

Along with those overwhelming demonstrations of Christ’s divine power will be equally spectacular manifestations of His **great glory**. “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne” (Matt. 25:31).

Adam and Eve had a glimpse of God’s glory as they walked and talked with Him in the Garden of Eden. The children of Israel had glimpses of it in the pillar of fire that led them through the wilderness, and Isaiah had a glimpse of it in his heavenly vision. Peter, James, and John had a glimpse of Christ’s glory on the mount of transfiguration, when “His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light” (Matt. 17:2). Many years later, Peter was still awed by that experience, declaring, “We were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-

pleased’—and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain” (2 Pet. 1:16-18).

But no human being has yet seen the full unveiled glory of God in Christ, and no one will ever see it until Jesus appears at His second coming and all mankind sees Him at once. At that time no one will have to ask who He is, for He will be perfectly recognized by every human being on earth. There will be no mistaking His identity then as there was when He came in His incarnation. All mankind will see the Son of Man in His full **glory** and immediately recognize Him as God—though all will not honor Him as God.

THE SELECTION BY THE ANGELS

And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other. (24:31)

After the unrepentant ungodly have been judged and destroyed, and the repentant mourners have trusted in Christ and been saved, **He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect.** Among their other responsibilities, **angels** are God’s gatherers. In that day they will be used to gather unbelievers for judgment and punishment (Matt. 13:41, 49) and believers for reward and glory.

In ancient Israel, as in many ancient lands, the trumpet was used to announce important convocations, and the sound of the angel’s **great trumpet** will signal the assembling all of God’s saints on earth, from wherever they might be, **from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.** Many of them will doubtless still be hiding in caves, fearful for their lives. The gathered ones will include the 144,000 Jewish witnesses, their converts, and the converts of the angelic preachers. They will include the Old Testament saints, gathered out of their graves and joined with their redeemed spirits. Those will all be assembled together before Christ and ushered into the glory of His eternal kingdom.

The Signs of Christ's
Coming—part 6
The Final Generation
(24:32-35)

Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; even so you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away. (24:32-35)

The blessed hope of every Christian is the return of his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. “In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness,” Paul wrote, “which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Tim. 4:8). God’s Word instructs believers not only “to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age,” but also to be “looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus” (Titus 2:12-13). Nothing in this world, Paul says, can compare “with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18), “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (v. 21), “the redemption of our body” (v. 23), and “the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:7).

Believers anticipate the day when they will “all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye” and their perishable and mortal bodies put on the imperishable and immortal (1 Cor. 15:51-53), when “death is swallowed up in victory” (v. 54), and when “the saints will judge the world” (6:2). They look forward to the day when they will be “absent from the body and . . . at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8) and when the church will be presented to Christ as His pure virgin bride (11:2). They

look forward to the day when they will see Him just as He is and become like Him (1 John 3:2).

The theme of Christ's second coming permeates the New Testament and is the great anticipatory reality of Christian living. The Lord's return will be as real and as historical an event as His first coming. Believers look *back* to the moment of saving faith in Christ, when their souls were redeemed. They look *forward* to the return of Christ, when their bodies will be redeemed and they will enter into the promised fullness of salvation. In that day Satan will be defeated, the curse lifted, Christ worshiped, the creation liberated and restored, sin and death conquered, and the saints glorified.

Among the many passages in Scripture that describe the Lord's coming again, Matthew 24-25 is unequalled because it is the message from Jesus' own lips about His return. After He told them of the series of signs that will precede His coming, including the supreme sign of His personal appearance, the disciples no doubt were still wondering about the time when those dramatic signs would begin, about what their duration would be, and about how long it would be from the sign in heaven of His appearing to His establishing the kingdom.

In Matthew 24:32-35 Jesus gives another parable about a fig tree. The parable summarizes and illustrates what He had just said and acts as a transition to His answer to the disciples' question about when His coming would be (see v. 3). In this parable and its explanation, four elements can be discerned: an uncomplicated analogy (v. 32), an unmistakable application (vv. 33-34), an unprecedented alteration (v. 35*a*), and an unchanging authority (v. 35*b*).

AN UNCOMPLICATED ANALOGY

Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; (24:32)

Parables had a two-fold purpose in Jesus' ministry. When unexplained, they concealed truth; when explained, they revealed truth. When Jesus gave a parable to the multitudes or to the unbelieving religious leaders without also giving an explanation, it was a riddle to

them. When He gave a parable to His disciples and explained it, it was a vivid illustration that made a truth clear and understandable.

When the disciples asked Jesus, “Why do You speak to them [the multitudes] in parables?” He replied, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. . . . Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (Matt. 13:10-11,13). Then He said to the disciples, “But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear,” and He proceeded to tell them the meaning of the parable of the sower (vv. 16-23).

In light of the fact that Jesus’ parables were given for the sake of helping the disciples understand His teaching, it is evident that He told **the parable from the fig tree** to give them further light about His second coming.

Unfortunately, this parable, like many others, has often been made confusing and misleading by those who view it as a complicated allegory rather than a simple analogy. Some interpreters, for instance, contend that the fig tree represents Israel. A popular version of that view is that the budding of the fig tree refers to Israel’s becoming a political state in 1948. Because Jesus does not identify the fig tree as Israel, that meaning would have been totally obscured to the disciples and to every other believer who lived before the twentieth century. In that view, Jesus would not have been employing the parable to clarify His meaning but to conceal it. Some who hold to that interpretation suggest that the budding of leaves on the fig tree represents a spiritual revival in the new state of Israel. But modern Israel, though very much alive physically, is one of the most secular nations on earth. As a state, it is very resistant, if not hostile, to the gospel.

This parable is simple and uncomplicated, and in the context of what the Lord had just been saying, its meaning should not be hard to discern. Palestine had an abundance of fig trees, which were not only grown commercially but were also found in many family yards, for the sake of the delicious fruit as well as for the shade they provided during the hot summer months.

Jews were used to the fig tree’s functioning as an illustration. Jotham used it in his story shouted to the inhabitants of Shechem from the top of Mount Gerizim (Judg. 9:10-11); Jeremiah saw two baskets of figs in

his vision after Nebuchadnezzar took captives from Judah to Babylon (Jer. 24:1-10); Hosea used it as a figure in his prophecy about Israel (Hos. 9:10); and Joel used a splintered fig tree to illustrate the devastation of Judah by a plague of locusts (Joel 1:4-7).

Few figures would have been better known to the disciples than that of **the fig tree**, which Jesus Himself had used on numerous other occasions as a teaching aid (see Matt. 7:16; 21:19; Luke 13:6-9).

Manthanō (**learn**) means to genuinely understand and accept a teaching, to accept it as true and to apply it in one's life. It was sometimes used of acquiring a life-long habit. Paul declared that he had "learned [*manthanō*] to be content in whatever circumstances" he was in (Phil. 4:11). That sort of learning is much more than mere head knowledge; it involves genuine acceptance of a truth and determination to live a life consistent with it. Jesus wanted the disciples to **learn** in their inmost beings what He was teaching, to understand and receive it with regard to its great importance.

He reminded them of a commonly known fact about a fig tree: **when its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near.** In other words, when the sap begins to flow into the branches, making them **tender**, and new **leaves** appear on the tree, **you know that summer is near.** Even children knew that a budding fig tree meant it was spring and that **summer** would soon follow, when the ripened figs would be harvested.

Throughout the gospel of Matthew, the figure of harvest represents judgment, the time of separating unbelievers from believers and of condemning the unbelievers to judgment. John the Baptist spoke of the Lord's coming with "His winnowing fork . . . in His hand [to] thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matt. 3:12; cf. v 10). As He looked out over the multitudes in Galilee who came out to see Him, Jesus said to the disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest" (Matt. 9:37-38). Without saving faith in Him, those thousands of people, and millions of others like them, were destined to judgment. That field of people was ripening for God's judgment just as a field of wheat or a budding fig tree ripens for the harvesters. In the parable of the wheat and tares Jesus spoke of the farmer's allowing the good wheat

and the bad tares to grow together until harvest time, when the tares could be accurately identified and destroyed (Matt. 13:30).

In all of those instances, the harvest symbolizes a time of rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked. In this present parable of the fig tree Jesus was simply illustrating to the disciples that, when the signs He had just been describing begin to transpire, the time of His return will be very near.

AN UNMISTAKABLE APPLICATION

even so you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. (24:33-34)

When the context is studied carefully, Jesus' application of the parable is as unmistakable as its analogy is uncomplicated. **All these things** can only refer to what He has been talking about—the birth pains (vv. 4-14), the abomination of desolation (v. 15), the need to flee because of the impending perils (vv. 16-28), and the catastrophic upheaval of the universe (v. 29). Those **things** will indicate that **He is near**, just as the budding fig tree indicates that summer, the harvest time, is near.

In the NASB text, **He** translates the Greek verb *estin*, which literally means “it is,” as the term is most commonly rendered. In Luke's account Jesus says, “the kingdom of God is near” (21:31), which is consistent with the reading of “it” (KJV) in Matthew 24:33. The supreme event of the last day, and the event about which the disciples had queried Jesus (v. 3), was the Lord's personal coming to establish His kingdom. The basic idea is therefore the same, whether the pronoun is **He** or “it” or whether the antecedent is the appearance of Christ, Christ Himself, or Christ's kingdom. When Christ's appearing **is near**, He Himself will be near and His kingdom will be **near**. When those signs occur, the divine King will be **right at the door**, knocking and ready to come in.

Giving further application, Jesus said, **Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place**. As explained in chapter 2 of this volume, **this generation** refers to the generation living during the end time. The signs of Matthew 24-25 will be experienced within one **generation**, the generation living when Christ returns.

This generation cannot refer to the disciples' generation, as many interpreters have maintained. Some who hold that view believe Jesus simply made a human guess and was mistaken. "After all," they argue, "didn't Jesus say that 'of that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone'?" (Mark 13:32). But that is a spurious argument. Jesus does not here specify the historical time of His coming but rather the events that will identify it. And it is one thing to recognize that it was in God's sovereign plan for the Son not to have certain knowledge during His incarnation, so that He did not know the exact timetable and knew He did not know it. It is quite another thing to contend that He was capable of bad guesses and liable to propagating an idea He had no idea was wrong or questionable. If Jesus was wrong about the time of His coming, He could have been wrong about any or every other thing He taught. His temporary, divinely-imposed limitations during His time of humiliation in no way imply that what He taught may have been less than perfectly truthful or authoritative.

Some of those who believe Jesus was speaking of the disciples' generation claim the terrible events He mentions here refer to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. But as we have noted before, the events of Matthew 24 are much too universal and cataclysmic to represent the dreadful but geographically limited devastation of Jerusalem. That did not involve "famines and earthquakes" (Matt. 24:7), believers' being "hated by all nations" (v. 9), false Christs and false prophets (vv. 5, 11), the preaching of the gospel to the whole world (v. 14), or the abomination of desolation (v. 15). Nor were the sun darkened, the moon extinguished, or the stars dislodged from their places (v. 29). Most important of all, Jesus certainly did not appear then. It is strange logic to argue that Jesus could accurately foretell the destruction of Jerusalem some forty years hence but be mistaken about His returning at that time. Or if, as some suggest, the teaching here was merely symbolic and allegorical, with the limited destruction of Jerusalem representing the vastly greater destruction of the end time, what event in A.D. 70 could possibly have symbolized Jesus' return, which is the main subject of the discourse?

Those who hold that the fig tree is Israel usually affirm that **this generation** refers to the Jewish people, indicating they would **not pass away** as a race **until these things take place**. That idea is true, and the

perpetuity of the Jews is clearly taught elsewhere in Scripture, but it does not seem to fit this context. All Jews firmly believed in God's promise of an everlasting kingdom of David, and for Jesus to have meant that the Jews would survive until the Messiah ushered in His kingdom would have been superfluous and pointless. And if Jesus had intended that meaning, He could easily have referred to the Jews as "My people," "God's people," or the like. To allude to them as **this generation** would seem obtuse and confusing.

Another interpretation is that **this generation** refers to the Christ-rejecting people of Jesus' day. In that case Jesus would have been saying that ungodly, rebellious mankind would survive until the Messiah's coming. *Genea* (**generation**) was sometimes used to represent a particular kind of people. In the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) the term is used to refer to a righteous people as well as an unrighteous people. But again, although that interpretation is linguistically possible, it does not fit the context and also would have been superfluous and pointless, because no Jew doubted that many unbelieving, ungodly people would be alive to be judged when the Messiah came. In the minds of most Jews, the essential work of the Messiah would be to deliver Israel from its ungodly oppressors. He could hardly judge the nations and put His enemies under His feet if they had already been eradicated.

We are left then with the simple and most reasonable interpretation that the leaves of the fig tree represent the birth pains and the other signs of His coming Jesus has mentioned in this chapter and that **this generation** refers to the people living at the end time who will view those signs. In partial answer to the disciples' question concerning the *when* of His coming, Jesus said that it will occur very soon after those signs are witnessed, before the **generation** who sees them has time to **pass away**. He is speaking to the same prophetically distant "you" He has been addressing throughout the chapter (see vv. 4, 6, 9, 15, 25). As mentioned previously, Jesus was speaking as some of the Old Testament prophets often spoke, as if they were standing directly before future generations (see, e.g., Isa. 33:17-24; 66:10-14; Zech. 9:9).

Matthew 24:34 is an explanation of the parable of the fig tree. The idea is that, just as the budding of fig leaves means it is not long until summer, so the **generation** alive when the signs occur will not have long to wait for Christ's appearance. Those who witness the birth pains will

witness the birth. As the books of Daniel and Revelation make clear, the total time of the Tribulation will be but seven years, and the period of the Great Tribulation, in which the signs will appear, will only be three and a half years (cf. Dan. 12:7; Rev. 11:2-3; 12:6).

Among those who believe that **this generation** refers to those who will be alive during the end time, there are two basic views as to the makeup of that future people. Posttribulationists, who hold that the rapture will take place *after* the Tribulation, believe that **this generation** could include the redeemed presently living if the Tribulation were to occur during their lifetimes. In other words, any believer alive at the beginning of the Tribulation would be subject to its calamities, including possible martyrdom. Only those believers who survive that great holocaust would therefore be raptured, after enduring seven years of hell on earth. Then they would almost immediately come back to earth with the Lord when He appears with His saints to establish the millennial kingdom.

Pretribulationists, on the other hand, maintain that the church, defined as believers of this present age, will be raptured just before the Tribulation. **This generation** could not, in this view, include any of the redeemed alive now. For many reasons, the pretribulation view seems most faithful to New Testament teaching.

First of all, chapters 2-3 of Revelation speak of the church on earth, and chapters 4-5 speak of the church in heaven. But beginning with chapter 6, which introduces the Tribulation, there is no further mention of the church until chapter 18.

Second, there is the total absence of New Testament instruction to the church as to how it should endure and conduct itself during the Tribulation.

Third, if it is to occur at the end of the Tribulation, the rapture would seem to be pointless. The church not only would not be spared the torments of the Tribulation but would almost immediately turn around, as it were, and come back to earth with Christ. Otherwise, who would be left on earth during the Millennium? The unredeemed will have been destroyed, and the returning saints from heaven will have spiritual bodies and will not be married or have families (Matt. 22:30). Yet human life will carry on during the Millennium, with children being born just as before.

Fourth, Jesus' promise to the church at Philadelphia is more than a promise to that local body of believers and more than a promise to keep

them from ordinary testing. That “hour of testing” will “come upon the whole world,” and it will test all those “who dwell upon the earth.” The Lord promises that the whole church, those who “have kept the word of My perseverance,” will be kept from the perils and agonies of the Tribulation (Rev. 3:10).

Fifth, Jesus promised those who believe in Him that He was going to prepare places for all of them in His Father’s house and that He would come again and receive them to Himself. According to the posttribulation view, He would not be taking believers back to heaven to dwell with Him but simply meeting them quickly in the air and returning with them immediately to earth. Yet He said He was preparing a place for His people to dwell, not just to visit briefly.

Sixth, The first 69 weeks of the 70-week period of Daniel’s prophecy lasted from “the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem,” the decree issued by King Artaxerxes in 445 B. C. (see Neh. 2:5-6), “until Messiah the Prince” (Dan. 9:25), that is, the time of Christ. As mentioned in chapter 3 of this volume, it has been calculated that exactly 483 years (69 weeks of years) elapsed from that decree of Artaxerxes until Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, when He was acclaimed Messiah and King by the multitude. That prophecy of Daniel was given to and about Israel, and it seems inappropriate to involve the church in the last week (the seven-year Tribulation) when it clearly was not involved in the first 69.

Finally, if the rapture will not occur until after the Tribulation, Paul’s words of assurance to the Thessalonian church beg for relevance. Some of the Thessalonian Christians thought their believing loved ones who had died would miss the rapture. Paul therefore encouraged them with the words:

We do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and

with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. (1 Thess. 4:13-17)

Had the early church been expecting to endure the Tribulation rather than enjoy the rapture, they would have rejoiced that their loved ones had already died and thereby escaped that horrible trial. But they were obviously looking forward to something joyous, which they thought their departed loved ones and friends would not experience. They were not looking forward to the Antichrist but to Christ. They were not looking for the ordeal of the Tribulation but for the glory of the rapture. They were not looking for the terror of the Antichrist's appearing but for the blessed hope of Christ's appearing.

This generation will therefore be composed of Jews and Gentiles who are alive at the rapture but are not taken up because they do not know the Lord Jesus Christ. Among that **generation**, however, will be many who will later come to salvation during the Tribulation through the witness of the divinely called and protected 144,000 Jewish believers (Rev. 7:38) and the supernatural preaching of the angelic messenger (14:6-7).

AN UNPRECEDENTED ALTERATION

Heaven and earth will pass away, (24:35a)

Jesus says explicitly that both **heaven and earth will pass away**. That expression first appears in 5:18, where it is not primarily used as a prophecy but as an analogy to express the enduring quality of the Word of God. It is used similarly in this text. The universe will fail, but what Jesus has just said will not fail to come to complete fulfillment. That analogical use of this phrase does not, however, preclude a directly prophetic intent. It is clearly predicted in the Old and New Testaments that the universe will be dramatically affected in the divine judgment of God. But that event will occur a thousand years after the return of Christ, when **heaven and earth** as we now know them will cease to exist (cf. 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 21:1).

AN UNCHANGING AUTHORITY

but My words shall not pass away. (24:35b)

Finally, Jesus declared, although the heaven and the earth will pass away, **My words shall never pass away.** On another occasion He said, “It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law,” that is, His Word, “to fail” (Luke 16:17). It is not possible for the Word of God to be broken (John 10:35), including what Jesus says here about the end time. The psalmist established the same great truth when he wrote that Scripture is “clean, enduring forever” (Ps. 19:9). Whatever is touched by sin must pass away. The Word is untouched! It is like silver refined seven times in a furnace of fire—utterly pure (Ps. 12:6).

7

The Signs of Christ's
Coming—part 7
Ready or Not
(24:36-51)

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days which were before the flood they were eating and drinking, they were marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be. Then there shall be two men in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left. Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will.

Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you, that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But if that evil slave says in his heart, “My master is not coming for a long time,” and shall begin to beat his fellow slaves and eat and drink with drunkards; the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, and shall cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; weeping shall be there and the gnashing of teeth. (24:36-51)

The familiar expression “Here I come, ready or not” could well be applied to Jesus’ second coming, because He is coming according to the sovereign plan of God, with no regard for worldwide or individual readiness. Jesus is coming when He is coming, because the when and how of His return have long since been predetermined in the sovereign wisdom of God.

In response to the disciples’ question, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (24:3), Jesus told them of the birth pains that would immediately precede His coming (vv. 4-28), of the abomination of desolation (v. 15), which would precipitate those signs, and of the supreme sign of His own appearing on the clouds of heaven (v. 30). Now He gives them a partial answer to the “when” part of the question.

Although there will be observable, worldwide, and unmistakable indications of His coming just before it occurs, the exact time will not be revealed in advance. **Of that day and hour no one knows**, Jesus declared categorically. The signs He had just been describing will be conclusive proof that His arrival is very near. Once they have begun, the *general* time period of His return will be known, because one of the key purposes of the signs will be to make it known. But even during those sign-days the precise **day and hour** of Jesus’ appearing will not be known, a truth He reiterates several times in this Olivet discourse (see 24:42, 44, 50; 25:13).

As has been noted, the books of Daniel and Revelation both make clear that the full Tribulation will last seven years and that the second part of it, the Great Tribulation, will last three and a half years (Dan. 7:25; 9:27; 12:7; Rev. 11:2-3; 12:14; 13:5). Then, “immediately after the tribulation of those days,” Jesus said, “the Son of Man [will come] on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:29-30). Precisely *how* is not immediately said.

Daniel and Revelation also speak of an expanded period of 1,290 days (Dan. 12:11; Rev. 12:6), 30 days more than the basic 1,260 of the Great Tribulation. Daniel also mentions a 1,335-day period (Dan. 12:12), adding another 45 days to make a total addition of 75. As suggested in [chapter 3](#) of this volume, it seems that the best explanation for those additional days is that they will cover the time when the Messiah descends to the Mount of Olives, creates the great valley in which the nations of the

world will be judged, and executes that judgment (see Zech. 14:45; Matt. 25:31-46).

Nevertheless, even with all those indisputable signs and precisely designated periods, the exact **day and hour** will not be known by any human beings, not even Tribulation believers, in advance. Although the Lord gives no reason for their not knowing, it is not difficult to imagine some of the problems that such knowledge would cause. For one thing, if unbelievers knew the precise time of Christ's arrival, they would be tempted to put off receiving Him as Lord and Savior until the last moment, thinking they could make the decision any time they wanted before He actually is scheduled to appear.

But even if they planned to wait until the precise date and hour of Christ's appearing, they would not know if they would live until that time. Like the rich farmer (Luke 12:16-20), they will have no guarantee of the length of their lives and therefore have no guarantee they will still be alive when Christ appears. Although the *generation* living when the signs begin will not pass away until Christ returns (Matt. 24:34), many individual members of that generation will pass away, some by natural causes and a large percentage at the hand of the Antichrist.

Even if they knew the precise time of Christ's appearing and were certain they would live until then, they would be fooling themselves to think they could simply receive Him before that time. The fact that they will have put off trusting in Christ for as long as they have will be certain evidence they have no sincere desire to follow Him as Lord and Savior. If the indescribable perils of the Tribulation will not persuade them to turn to the Lord, the knowledge of His exact arrival time certainly would not.

As far as believers are concerned, knowledge of that specific time might also make them careless, causing them to withdraw and become spiritually sedentary, thinking it would be pointless to make plans for serving the Lord or to make further effort to win the lost. No one, believer or unbeliever, could think or function normally knowing the exact **day and hour** of Christ's coming.

Neither will the supernatural world know the precise time, not **even the angels of heaven**. Although the righteous angels enjoy intimacy with God, hovering around His throne to do His bidding (Isa. 6:2-7) and continually beholding His face (Matt. 18:10), they are not privy to this secret. The angels will be directly and actively involved in the end time as

God's agents to separate the saved from the unsaved (see Matt. 13:41, 49), but for His own reasons God the Father will not reveal in advance exactly when He will call them into that service.

Still more amazingly, not even **the Son** knew at the time He spoke these words or at any other time during His incarnation. Although He was fully God as well as fully man (John 1:1, 14), Christ voluntarily restricted His use of certain divine attributes when He became flesh. "Although He existed in the form of God, [He] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped," that is, to be held onto during His humanness (Phil. 2:6). It was not that He lost any divine attributes but that He voluntarily laid aside the use of some of them and would not manifest those attributes except as directed by His Father (John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38).

Jesus demonstrated His divine omniscience on many occasions. "He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man" (John 2:25). When, for example, Nicodemus came to Him at night, Jesus already knew what he was thinking and answered his question before it was asked (John 3:13).

But there were certain self-imposed restrictions in His human knowledge. He told the disciples, "All things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). Jesus obediently restricted His knowledge to those things that the Father wanted Him to know during His earthly days of humanity. The Father revealed certain things to the Son as He reveals them to all men—through the Scripture, through the Father's working in and through His life, and through the physical manifestations of God's power and glory (see Rom. 1:19-20). Jesus learned much of His earthly knowledge just as every human being learns, and it is for that reason that He was able to keep "increasing in wisdom" (Luke 2:52). In addition to those ways, some truths were revealed to the Son directly by the Father. But in every case Jesus' human knowledge was limited to what His heavenly Father provided.

Therefore, even on this last day before His arrest, **the Son** did not know the precise day and hour He would return to earth at His second coming. During Christ's incarnation, **the Father alone** exercised unrestricted divine omniscience.

It seems probable that Christ regained full divine knowledge after the resurrection, as implied in His introduction to the Great Commission: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18).

Just prior to His ascension, He told the disciples, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority” (Acts 1:7). He repeats the truth that the disciples would not be told the time of His appearing, but He did not exclude His own knowledge, as He did in the Olivet discourse.

The three attitudes Jesus mentions in Matthew 24:37-51 are specifically addressed to the generation (Matt. 24:34) that will be alive during the Tribulation and that will witness the signs described in verses 4-29. Those attitudes are: alertness (vv. 37-42), readiness (vv. 43-44), and faithfulness (vv. 45-51).

ALERTNESS

For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days which were before the flood they were eating and drinking, they were marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be. Then there shall be two men in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left. Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. (24:37-42)

Jesus used the Flood to illustrate the point He was making about **the coming of the Son of Man**, namely, that the attitude that prevailed during **the days of Noah . . . before the flood** will also characterize most people living during the end time just before Christ returns. They will not be expecting His coming and will not care about it. Despite the perilous signs and wonders, they will simply be unconcerned about the things of the Lord, especially the prospect of His imminent return to judge them.

Many people doubtless will try to explain the extraordinary end-time phenomena on a scientific and rational basis, expecting to discover a natural cause for the cataclysms. Like their counterparts today, they will look everywhere for answers except to the Word of God.

At Jesus’ first coming, most men refused to recognize Him for who He was. He healed every sort of disease, cast out demons, made water into wine, stilled a raging storm, and raised the dead, but even most of His own

people refused to believe in Him. In fact the Jewish religious leaders were so determined to discredit Jesus that they accused Him of casting out demons in the power of Satan (Matt. 12:24).

Sinful, materialistic, hypocritical, godless mankind is willfully blind to God's truth, no matter how compelling that truth may be. And when God's truth exposes their wickedness, they make every effort to oppose and condemn it.

On one occasion "the Pharisees and Sadducees came up" to Jesus, "and testing Him asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. But He answered and said to them, 'When it is evening, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red." And in the morning, "There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening." Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times?' " (Matt. 16:1-3). By that time in His ministry the Lord had performed hundreds, perhaps thousands, of miracles, all of which testified to His divinity and His messiahship, yet those religious leaders refused to acknowledge Him. Because their hearts were determinedly set against Jesus, no sign could have brought them to belief. He therefore said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah" (v. 4). As Jesus explained on an earlier occasion, the sign of Jonah was His resurrection from the dead (12:39-40). That sign did not convince unbelievers, either. Just as most of their forefathers had done, they shut their minds to God's Word and God's messengers, even ignoring the teaching and miracles of the very Son of God. Worse even than ignore Him, they put Him to death.

During the time of the Tribulation, mankind will be hardened to sin and ungodliness as never before in history. As evil men get worse and worse (2 Tim. 3:13), the world then becomes spiritually darker and even physically darker. Unbelieving people will more intensely indulge their sins and more vehemently oppose God's truth and God's people. During the Tribulation the Holy Spirit will be removed from the earth, and evil and Satan will be unrestrained (2 Thess. 2:6-7). During the fifth trumpet judgment, demons bound in the bottomless pit will be unleashed on the earth to wreak unprecedented torment on unbelieving mankind, being forbidden to harm God's people (Rev. 9:1-5).

As people run amok in sin and every form of debauchery and ungodliness, they will become more and more impervious to God's truth

and resentful of His standards of righteousness. They will be so vile, wretched, and preoccupied with sex, drugs, alcohol, materialism, and pleasure seeking that they will believe every explanation for the end-time signs except the one given in Scripture. Rather than turning to God in repentance, they will curse Him (Rev. 9:21).

In the days of Noah before the Flood, **they were eating and drinking, they were marrying and giving in marriage.** While Noah built the ark, he also preached (2 Pet. 2:5), but the people were just as unconcerned about his preaching as about the ark he was building, thinking both were meaningless and absurd. They laughed when he spoke of the coming flood. They had never seen rain, much less a flood, because until that time the earth was apparently covered by a vapor canopy that provided all the moisture necessary for life to flourish. Because they had never seen such a calamity, they discounted the idea that it could happen. They therefore went about their daily routines of **eating and drinking** and of **marrying and giving in marriage.** It was business as usual until the day **Noah entered the ark** and it started to rain.

Even when his prediction began to be fulfilled before their eyes, they did not take his warning to heart. Noah had built and preached for 120 years, yet without having the slightest impact on anyone outside his immediate family. The people were so untouched by God's truth that **they did not understand** their perilous situation **until the flood came and took them all away** into a godless eternity. **Flood** translates *kataklysmos*, which means deluge or washing away, and is the term from which the English *cataclysm* is derived. Only after it was too late did the people of that generation **understand** their tragic destiny.

That is precisely the attitude and response that will prevail before **the coming of the Son of man.** The perilous signs, the abomination of desolation, the disruption of the heavenly bodies, and the preaching of God's witnesses during the Tribulation will have no effect on the majority of men. They will see God's signs but attribute them to natural causes or to supernatural causes apart from God. They will hear His Word, in one instance supernaturally preached worldwide by an angel (Rev. 15:6-7), but they will respond with disdain or indifference. They will heed neither warnings nor appeals from God up until the very moment **the Son of Man** appears to confront them in righteous judgment.

During the Tribulation there will be multitudes won to Christ (Rev. 7:9-14), including the 144,000 Jewish witnesses who will preach His gospel (Rev. 7:1-8), and there will be marvelous revival in the nation of Israel (Rom. 11:26). But that time will be dominated not by belief but by unbelief, not by holiness but by wickedness, not by godliness but by ungodliness. It will be epitomized by secularism and false religion, even as most of the world is today, but to an immeasurably worse degree.

Like the people of Noah's day, the generation of the Tribulation will be warned and warned and warned again. Some of them will have been warned many times before the Tribulation, while the church is still on earth proclaiming the gospel.

When the Son of Man finally appears in His second-coming judgment, **then there shall be two men in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left.** Jesus is giving a figure parallel to the unbelievers of Noah's day being **taken** away by the judgment through the Flood. When He returns, **one will be taken** to judgment and the other **will be left** to enter the kingdom. This is the same separation described in the next chapter by the figures of sheep and goats (25:32-46). The ones **left** will be Christ's sheep, His redeemed people whom He will preserve to reign with Him during the Millennium.

But even until the very end, as Peter declared in his sermon at Pentecost, just "before the great and glorious day of the Lord shall come . . . it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:20-21). In that final moment when the King comes to establish His kingdom, some people will turn to Christ in sincere faith and be redeemed. They will be set apart as the Lord's sheep by the angels and will inherit the kingdom prepared for them.

Therefore be on the alert, Jesus said, **for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.** The phrase **be on the alert** translates a present imperative, indicating a call for continual expectancy.

When the Lord comes, the ungodly will be swept away, having forever lost their opportunity for salvation. Just as believers today do not know at what time the Lord is coming to take them to Himself in the rapture, the generation alive during the Tribulation will not know the exact time of His appearing to judge the ungodly and to establish His kingdom.

Malachi envisioned believers in the last day apparently discussing among themselves the possibility that they would inadvertently and mistakenly be separated out with the wicked and be condemned. But “the Lord gave attention and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who esteem His name. ‘And they will be Mine,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘on the day that I prepare My own possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him.’ So you will again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him” (Mal. 3:16-18).

Peter declared,

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly thereafter; and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day with their lawless deeds), then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation [or trial], and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment. (2 Pet. 2:4-9)

Christians at that time must be alert, even though they will be secure and have no cause for dread.

READINESS

But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will. (24:43-44)

Be sure of this translates what could be either a Greek imperative or an indicative. As an imperative it would be a form of command, but that idea seems inappropriate here, because Jesus was simply stating ‘he obvious, a truism. As an indicative it would be a statement of fact as a reminder. “As everyone knows,” He was saying, **“if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into.”** No sane thief would announce his intention of robbing a house, and no sane **head of the house** who knew in advance **at what time of the night the thief was coming** would fail to be **on the alert** in order to prevent **his house** from being **broken into**.

The generation living during the Tribulation is specifically told they will not know the exact time of Jesus’ appearing, but they are informed in detail as to what the signs immediately preceding it will be. In other words, to carry out the figure Jesus uses here, they will know with absolute certainty that **the thief** will be breaking into **the house** sometime very soon and that they should be prepared accordingly.

It goes without saying that Jesus was not comparing Himself in character to a thief but was comparing His coming to the stealth and unexpectedness of a thief’s coming. The New Testament frequently compares the second coming to a thief’s coming (Luke 12:35-40; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 3:3; 16:15), for the obvious reason that, as Jesus here points out, a thief never tries to rob a place where he knows he is expected, and certainly not at the exact time he is expected.

In one sense, however, Jesus will come in the role as well as with the unexpectedness of a thief. As far as the ungodly are concerned, He will come and take away everything they have, all the things they have cherished and trusted in instead of Him.

As already noted, it seems impossible that most people in that day will not be expecting Jesus’ coming. In light of the absolute destructiveness and horror of the signs of the end time they will witness, how could they not turn to God for help and mercy? How could they possibly attribute those things simply to natural causes? Yet most of them will be so overwhelmingly blinded by sin and self-will that no amount of evidence will cause them to seek God. Instead, hostility toward God will reach a fever pitch never known before on earth, not even during the times

of Noah. **For this reason, you be ready too**, Jesus said, just as Noah and his family were ready.

In this context, being **ready** seems to refer primarily to being saved, of being spiritually prepared to meet Christ as Lord and King rather than as Judge. As Jesus had already warned (Matt. 24:37-42), everyone in the end time should be expectantly alert for His appearing, and as He mentions in verses 45-51, faithfulness to Him by those who are already saved is commanded. But the indispensable preparation for His coming, apart from which expectancy will be pointless and faithfulness will be impossible, is the preparation of salvation, of being redeemed through the blood of Christ. Otherwise a person will be ready only for judgment and damnation.

The Lord reemphasizes the fact that no one on earth will know exactly when He is coming, not even by an accidental right guess. He proclaims categorically: **The Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will**. In divine fury and glory, **the Son of Man** will come in total surprise to every human being. Even believers who are expectantly and faithfully ready for His coming will nevertheless be astonished when He actually arrives. Their readiness will enable them to meet the Lord with gladness and without shame, but it will not provide advance knowledge of His precise arrival time.

Luke reports a similar warning Jesus gave on another occasion. “Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps alight,” He said. “And be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master shall find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them” (Luke 12:35-37). When the Lord returns, those who are ready not only will find themselves in their Lords gracious presence but will be served personally by His own divine hand.

FAITHFULNESS

Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes.

Truly I say to you, that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But if that evil slave says in his heart, “My master is not coming for a long time,” and shall begin to beat his fellow slaves and eat and drink with drunkards; the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, and shall cut him in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites; weeping shall be there and the gnashing of teeth. (24:45-51)

Jesus now presents another analogy to reinforce His point, using the familiar imagery of a trusted **slave whom his master put in charge of** feeding the entire **household**. The particular responsibility of the **slave** is incidental to Jesus’ point, which is that every believer is a **slave** of Jesus Christ and therefore obligated to serve Him in every way. Every believer has been given a divine stewardship and responsibility in the work of Christ on earth, and in that stewardship he is to be **faithful and sensible**. His life, breath, energy, talents, spiritual gifts, and every other good thing he has are trusts from God to be used in His service and to His glory.

Blessed is that slave, Jesus said, whom his master finds so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you, that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. Here Jesus is obviously addressing believers, those who have submitted to Him as Savior and Lord, as divine **master**. The believer who is found faithful to the Lord in what he has been given will be given **charge of all** of the Lord’s **possessions**, having inherited the absolute fullness of the kingdom of God as a fellow heir of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:17). Not only that, but “He who overcomes,” Jesus said, “I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Rev. 3:21).

Unbelievers, represented by the **evil slave**, will also be held responsible for what they do with their stewardship from God. During the end time, some unbelievers will remain openly sinful and rebellious against God, caring nothing for His truth or His mercy. Others will be aware of their lost condition and of their need of a Savior but will put off believing, thinking they will have time after fulfilling their own selfish interests but before He comes in judgment. They will say by their lives if not by their words, **My master is not coming for a long time.**

Jesus is teaching that every person in the world holds his life, possessions, and abilities in trust from God, whether or not he acknowledges that trust or even acknowledges God. He will therefore be held accountable by his Creator for how he uses what he has been given. That truth is seen in the parable of the king recorded in Matthew 18:23-34. Even the prodigal son of Luke 15 demonstrates that an unbeliever is squandering God-given stewardship.

The evil activities Jesus then mentions, the beating of **fellow slaves** and eating and drinking **with drunkards**, are not meant to characterize every unbeliever during the Tribulation. But those activities reflect the attitude many of them will have. Because they think the Lord will not come **for a long time**, they will feel free to indulge themselves in whatever sins and pleasures they desire.

But **the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know**. In this case the **master** will not come as Savior and King to bless and to reward but will come as Judge and Executioner to condemn and to destroy. He will **cut** the unbelieving slave **in pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites** in eternal fire.

The phrase **cut . . . in pieces** is from *dichotomeō* and literally means to cut into two parts. It is used in that strict sense in the Greek translation of the Old Testament in regard to the preparation of an animal sacrifice (Ex. 29:17). To Jews it would therefore carry the unmistakable idea of destruction and death.

The fact that such persons will be assigned along **with the hypocrites** suggests that they were not hypocrites. Just as today, many people in the end time will be open and honest about their unbelief, even wearing such honesty as a badge of intellectual and moral integrity. But honest unbelievers are just as lost as **hypocrites** who pretend to have faith. They will go to the same place as the religious phonies they feel superior to and despise.

When He appears, the same resplendent glory and power (see Matt. 24:30) that will draw His own people to Him in loving gratitude will repel most unbelievers in hateful indignation. For the former it will be the time of final reception and redemption; for the latter it will be the time of final rejection and judgment.

All unbelievers—those who completely reject the Lord and those who think one day they will trust in Him, those who are honest in their unbelief and those who are hypocritical in their faith—will suffer the same destiny of hell. In that place there will be **weeping . . . and the gnashing of teeth**, figures representing inconsolable grief and unremitting torment.

The thrust of Jesus' warning is not simply to inform unbelievers about the horror of facing an eternal hell but to use that dreadful prospect as a motive for believing in Him in order to escape it. His appeal is to believe while there is opportunity, rather than foolishly wait for a supposedly more propitious time that might never come and might not be taken advantage of if it did come.

In his commentary on this passage, William Barclay relates the following story to illustrate the danger of spiritual procrastination:

There is a fable which tells of three apprentice devils who were coming to this earth to finish their apprenticeship. They were talking to Satan, the chief of the devils, about their plans to tempt and to ruin men. The first said, "I will tell them that there is no God." Satan said, "That will not delude many, for they know that there is a God." The second said, "I will tell men that there is no hell." Satan answered, "You will deceive no one that way; men know even now that there is a hell for sin." The third said, "I will tell men that there is no hurry." "Go," said Satan, "and you will ruin men by the thousand." The most dangerous of all delusions is that there is plenty of time. (*The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2 [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], p. 317)

Why, one wonders, is Christ waiting so long to come again? First of all, He is waiting for evil to run its course. In his vision on Patmos, John saw an angel come "out of the temple, crying out with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, 'Put in your sickle and reap, because the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is ripe.' And He who sat on the cloud swung His sickle over the earth; and the earth was reaped" (Rev. 14:15-16). The imagery depicts a field whose crop is completely ready for harvesting, here indicating the harvest of final judgment on unbelieving mankind. Not until the angel notifies Him that the harvest is ripe, will Christ come to earth and execute judgment. God's sovereign purpose is to

allow sin to reach its full evil limits, to run its complete destructive course.

Second, the Lord is waiting for all those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life to be saved. There must be the coming in of "the fulness of the Gentiles" (Rom. 11:25), the gathering in of Gentile saints into the church during the present age. It is also necessary for "all Israel [to] be saved" (v. 26), for all the believing sons of Abraham to be brought into the kingdom by faith in their Messiah and King.

Peter declares, "Do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:8-9). What seems to human beings to be a long period of time is but a moment to God, and they should not rely on their own finite perceptions of time to judge the delay in fulfilling His promises. It is not that God could not act in judgment at any time He chose, but that in His sovereign patience and love He is allowing the fullest time possible for men to repent and come to Him in faith.

But because He has chosen to delay judgment for what has already been thousands of years, some people in the last days will mockingly declare, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation" (2 Pet. 3:3-4). Like scientific uniformitarians, who believe that natural laws have always and will always operate in exactly the same way they operate now, latter-day religious scoffers will assume that because God has not yet judged the world He never will. "It escapes their notice," however, Peter goes on to say, "that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water" (vv. 5-6). The mockers will foolishly ignore the most catastrophic upheaval the world has yet experienced, in which every human being on earth was killed except for Noah and his family.

In Matthew 24-25 Jesus addresses those who will be alive during the generation of the Tribulation (Matthew 24:34). But believers today should be prepared for the Lord's coming in the rapture of the church, in which the Lord takes them to heaven, just as believers in the end time

should be prepared for His appearing in power and glory to establish the millennial kingdom.

To the church at Rome Paul wrote these sobering words:

[You know] the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is at hand. Let us therefore lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts. (Rom. 13:11-14)

Paul commended the first generation church in Corinth for “awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:7), and he reminded the Philippian believers that “our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:20). The writer of Hebrews admonished believers, “Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near” (Heb. 10:24-25).

James’s counsel is, “Be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand” (James 5:8). Peter wrote, “The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer” (1 Pet. 4:7), and John declared, “Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen; from this we know that it is the last hour” (1 John 2:18). And the last words spoken directly by Jesus in Scripture are, “Yes, I am coming quickly” (Rev. 22:20).

The Signs of Christ's
Coming—part 8
The Fate of the
Unprepared
(Waiting for Christ's
Return)
(25:1-13)

Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went out to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps. Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. But at midnight there was a shout, "Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those virgins rose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the prudent, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the prudent answered, saying, "No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut. And later the other virgins also came, saying, "Lord, lord, open up for us." But he answered and said, "Truly I say to you, I do not know you." Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour. (25:1-13)

Here Jesus gives another of the several warning parables in the Olivet discourse (see 24:43, 45-51) that illustrate His repeated and specific declarations that the exact time of His second coming will not be known in advance. It will be at a time when it is least expected (24:36, 42, 44, 50; 25:13). As discussed earlier, the general time will be known by those who

heed the birth pain signs He has given (24:4-29), because that is the purpose of those signs (v. 33). But the precise time of His personal appearing in power and great glory (24:30) will not be known in advance even by the heavenly angels. It was not known by Jesus Himself during His incarnation (v. 36).

The parable of the ten virgins is given to accentuate the incalculable importance of being spiritually prepared to meet Christ when He returns to earth, because after He appears, unbelievers who are then alive will have no further chance for salvation.

The setting for this parable was a typical Jewish wedding ceremony. In Israel, as well as in most other parts of the ancient Near East, a wedding was the most celebrated social event. Virtually everyone in a village or in a neighborhood community of a large city would be involved as a participant or as a guest. It was a time of great happiness and festivity.

A Jewish marriage consisted of three parts, the first of which was the engagement. Most often arranged by the fathers of the bride and groom, the engagement amounted to a contract of marriage in which the couple had little, if any, direct involvement. The second stage was the betrothal, the marriage ceremony at which the bride and groom exchanged vows in the presence of family and friends. At that point the couple was considered married, and their relationship could be broken only by formal divorce, just as if they had been married for many years. If the husband happened to die during the betrothal, the bride was considered a widow, although the marriage had not been physically consummated and the two had never lived together. The betrothal could last for many months, sometimes a year, during which time the groom would establish himself in a business, trade, or farming and would make provision for a place for the couple to live.

At the end of the betrothal period the wedding feast would be held, and it was in the feast and its related celebrations that the entire community became involved. This festivity, which could last a week, began with the groom's coming with his groomsmen to the bride's house, where her bridesmaids were waiting with her. Together the bride and groom and their attendants would then parade through the streets proclaiming that the wedding feast was about to begin. The procession was generally begun at night, and lamps or torches were used by the wedding party to illumine their way and to attract attention.

At the end of the feast period, a close friend of the groom, who acted much like a best man, would take the hand of the bride and place it in the hand of the groom, and the couple would for the first time be left alone together. The marriage would be consummated and the couple would henceforth live together in their new home. It was that third part of the marriage rite that Jesus used as the framework for this parable.

As the parable unfolds, Jesus focuses first on the bridesmaids, then on the bridegroom, and finally on the warning that the parable is given to reinforce.

THE BRIDESMAIDS

Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went out to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps. Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. (25:1-5)

The world was not ready to accept Christ when He came to earth the first time, although His coming had been clearly and repeatedly predicted by the Old Testament prophets. The Messiah was to have a forerunner who would be a voice crying in the wilderness, and John the Baptist was that forerunner. He was to be born in Bethlehem, the son of a virgin, and in the line of David. Jesus uniquely and exclusively met those qualifications. He was to minister in Galilee of the Gentiles and exhibit great miraculous power, and He did those things. Nevertheless, when “He came to His own, . . . those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11).

Preparation for His second coming will be more decisive and consequential than preparation for His first, because those who rejected Him during His incarnation had continued opportunity to be saved as long as they were alive. Doubtlessly many of those who cried out for Jesus’ crucifixion in place of Barabbas or who voted against Him in the Sanhedrin were later convicted to turn to Him as Lord and Savior. But there will be no such continued opportunity when Jesus comes again.

When He appears **then**, the opportunity for salvation and citizenship in **the kingdom of heaven** will be past.

Then refers to the time of Christ's unexpected appearing in power and glory, about which He was speaking. At that time, He said, spiritual preparedness for entrance into **the kingdom of heaven will be comparable** to the preparedness of a certain **ten virgins** who served as bridesmaids at a wedding.

As with all of Jesus' parables, the message of this one is simple. It is meant to illustrate truths He has just been teaching: that He is coming again, that He will then judge sinners and reward the righteous, that people must be ready, and that His coming will be unexpected. The central truth is that once He has arrived, there will be no second chance and the opportunity for salvation will be gone forever.

The parable is not an allegory, as many interpreters have claimed. Every small facet of the story does not carry a mystical meaning that is subject to speculation and imagination. Nor does every part of the parable have application to Christian living, as devotionalists frequently maintain. Still less is the parable a confused and clumsy teaching effort on Jesus' part, as some liberal interpreters suggest. The fact that details such as the bride's identity and the place where the virgins slept are not mentioned has no bearing on the point Jesus was making. For His purpose, the story was clear and complete.

There may be significance in the fact that there were **ten virgins**, because Jews considered **ten** to be a number representing completion. According to Josephus, a minimum of ten men was required to celebrate the Passover. The same number was required to establish a synagogue and to give an official wedding blessing. The attendants were **virgins** because it was the custom of that day that bridesmaids be chaste young women who had never been married.

Although the English **lamps** is derived from *lampas*, in New Testament times that Greek term was used primarily of torches, as it is translated in John 18:3, where it denotes the torches carried by the soldiers who arrested Jesus. Another word, *luchnos*, was generally used for a lamp. The torches used by wedding attendants consisted of tightly wrapped cloths attached to long poles. In addition to lighting the way for the procession, the **lamps**, or torches, served to identify members of the

wedding party, marking them off as special participants. It was therefore important that each of the bridesmaids have a torch.

To meet translates *hupantēsis*, a noun that literally means “a meeting” and was often used of the official welcoming of a dignitary. In the context of Jesus’ teaching about His return and of the parable’s illustrating the coming of His kingdom, **the bridegroom** is obviously Christ Himself. The **ten virgins** are professed believers in Him, and the **lamps**, or torches, symbolize their outward identity with His church. The torches also represent expectation of His imminent return, the preparation and readiness of the bridesmaids **to meet the divine bridegroom** when He comes to gather them for His wedding feast, **the kingdom of heaven**.

The ten bridesmaids represent professed disciples of Christ who claim to love the prospect of His appearing and who demonstrate outward readiness for entrance into His kingdom. In appearance the ten were indistinguishable. They were all dressed appropriately in wedding garments and all had the required torch to carry in the wedding procession. But they were not truly alike, which is the point of the parable, because they were not all prepared—**five of them were foolish, and five were prudent**.

The evidence that some of the bridesmaids were unprepared despite their outward appearance was the fact that **they took no oil with them**. They carried torches that looked exactly like those of the others, but they had nothing to burn in them, nothing that would give light and significance. A torch without fuel is obviously worthless, and a profession of faith in Jesus Christ without a saving relationship to Him is infinitely more worthless, because one is left in spiritual darkness.

The prudent bridesmaids, however, **took oil in flasks along with their lamps**. Their outward profession was substantiated by inward possession. They had the **oil** of preparedness, namely, the reality of the light of the saving grace of God within them. The **oil** is similar to the wedding garments in Jesus’ parable of the wedding feast that a king gave for his son. The man without the proper wedding clothes who attempted to crash the celebration was thrown out into the darkness (Matt. 22:11-13). The king had invited everyone in his realm to the feast, regardless of social standing, wealth, or character. He made every effort to see that no one was excluded, sending his servants into every obscure part of the

country (vv. 9-10). The only condition for attending the feast was the wearing of the wedding clothes provided by the king, symbolizing the divinely bestowed grace apart from which no person can come to God. Because that presumptuous, self-satisfied man would not allow himself to be attired in the king's clothing, he was rejected.

Like that man without proper wedding clothes, five of the bridesmaids were without proper torches. They had a form of godliness but had no spiritual life or power because they did not belong to God (cf. 2 Tim. 3:5). They were committed to Jesus Christ religiously, intellectually, socially, and no doubt emotionally. But they were not committed to Him in their hearts because their hearts had not been regenerated by His saving grace. They had the appearance of faith, but it was dead (cf. James 2:17). They were in darkness, not light.

The warning Jesus gave in this parable is repeated over and over in the gospels, a continually recurring theme of His teaching. He warns that professed believers are like wheat and tares; some are genuine and some are false. They are compared to various kinds of soils, some of which give initial evidence of productivity but only one of which genuinely receives the seed of the gospel and allows it to take root and grow. It was not a popular message in Jesus' day and is not a popular message today, even in many evangelical churches.

No conclusion regarding the number who will be saved can be drawn from the fact that the bridesmaids were divided evenly between the foolish and the prudent. But the proportion suggests, however, that a large part of the professing church does not belong to God. And the situation is obviously pervasive or Jesus would not have spent so much time warning about it. It existed during Jesus' earthly ministry, in apostolic times, and throughout the church until the present. And it is evident from this parable that it will also exist at the end of the Tribulation.

The statement that **the bridegroom was delaying** reinforces Jesus' teaching that His second coming will be unexpected. It will not be delayed from the divine perspective but from the human. Because so much time will have elapsed since His first coming, most people, including many professed Christians, will be carrying on business as usual when He appears (see Matt. 24:38, 43). Jesus may also have been giving the disciples a hint that He would not be returning as soon as they anticipated (see Luke 19:11). But the main thrust of the parable, like the main thrust

of the entire discourse, is directed to the generation who will be living during the latter part of the Great Tribulation (Matt. 24:34). Even the short period of time that will elapse between the signs of His coming and His actual appearance will cause some people to think the Lord is **delaying** His return.

That idea is supported by the bridesmaids' becoming **drowsy** and falling **to sleep**. They were expecting the bridegroom's coming and were gathered together awaiting Him, all in seeming preparedness. There is no indication in this context that **sleep** represents laziness or faithlessness. Even the prudent bridesmaids fell asleep, illustrating still again that no one, not even faithful saints, will know exactly when Christ will appear. The **sleep** of the foolish bridesmaids might suggest their false confidence, whereas the **sleep** of the prudent ones could suggest their genuine security and rest in the Lord.

In one sense, life should go on much as usual for the believer who eagerly anticipates the Lord's return. Readiness for His coming is not evidenced by going apart somewhere to wait idly for Him but by being about His business with enthusiastic dedication. Even the most ardent service of the Lord does not exclude such normal activities as eating, drinking, laboring, and sleeping. Therefore, when Christ comes, "there shall be two men in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left" (Matt. 24:40-41).

It will not be their common participation in the normal activities of human life that will distinguish the prepared from the unprepared when the Lord returns, but the supernatural, internal participation in the life of God that only believers will possess.

The nineteenth-century Bible commentator William Arnot observed: "There is not a more grand or a more beautiful spectacle on earth than a great assembly reverently worshipping God together. No line visible to human eye divides into two parts the goodly company; yet the goodly company is divided into two parts. The Lord reads our character and marks our place. The Lord knows them that are his, and them that are not his, in every assembly of worshippers" (*The Parables of Our Lord* [London: Nelson, 1869], p. 290).

The Lord can look down on every group of bridesmaids, as it were, and accurately judge between those who are unbelieving and deceived

about their readiness, and therefore foolish, and those who genuinely believe and are therefore wise. But when He appears in power and glory at His second coming, the difference will be apparent for all to see. The torches of believers will shine brightly, but those of unbelievers will not even burn.

THE BRIDEGROOM

But at midnight there was a shout, “Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.” Then all those virgins rose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the prudent, “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.” But the prudent answered, saying, “No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.” And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut. And later the other virgins also came, saying, “Lord, lord, open up for us.” But he answered and said, “Truly I say to you, I do not know you.” (25:6-12)

At **midnight** most people are typically deep in sleep, just as the bridesmaids were, and the bridegroom’s arrival at that time underscores still again the unexpectedness of Christ’s return. The children of Israel began their journey out of Egypt at midnight (Ex. 12:29), and rabbinical tradition held that the Messiah would come to earth at that hour.

All of the bridesmaids knew the groom would be coming soon and they were gathered at the bride’s house waiting for Him. They were well aware that the engagement and betrothal periods were over and that the final festivities were about to begin. But they did not know precisely when He would arrive until they were awakened with the **shout, “Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.”**

In the same way, people living during the end of the Tribulation will have seen all the signs of His coming and will know that His appearing is imminent. But they will not know the moment of His arrival until they see Him “coming on the clouds of the sky” (Matt. 24:30).

As soon as the bridegroom’s presence was announced, **all those virgins rose, and trimmed their lamps.** Trimming the **lamps**, or torches, probably amounted to cutting off any ragged edges of the cloth and then

saturating it with oil to make it ready for lighting. At that moment **the foolish** bridesmaids realized their predicament: they had no oil. It was not that they had been unaware of their lack of oil but that they were not concerned enough about it to acquire it before the bridegroom's arrival. Perhaps they thought they could quickly run down to the oil shop anytime they wanted and secure what they needed in plenty of time. Or perhaps they thought they could borrow oil if the shop were closed, the recourse they now tried to take. No reason is given for their negligence, no doubt because the reason is irrelevant. Because they had ample warning that the bridegroom was coming and had ample opportunity to be totally prepared for His arrival, nothing could excuse their failure.

When the Lord appears at the end of the Tribulation, many professed Christians will frantically realize their lack of spiritual life. They will not have heeded Paul's advice to the Corinthian church: "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?" (2 Cor. 13:5). They will be self-deceived, perhaps believing that mere association with the things and the people of Christ has made them a part of Christ's true church. Some may think that being born into a Christian family will make them a member of God's family. We know with certainty that many will be trusting in their good works, saying to Christ, "on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then [He] will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'" (Matt. 7:22-23).

When **the foolish said to the prudent, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out," . . . the prudent answered, saying, "No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves."** When **the foolish** bridesmaids apparently tried to light their dry torches, the cloth would only smolder and keep **going out**. And by then it was too late for help.

The point of the **prudent** bridesmaids' response was not that they were selfish and calloused but that they were helpless to provide oil for their foolish friends. Their own oil was **not . . . enough** to share with anyone else; it was necessary that each **buy** her own.

Just as one person cannot transfer part of his physical life to another person, neither can he share spiritual life, which is indivisible and

unique to each person who has it. Like physical life, spiritual life is a direct, individual gift from God and is nontransferable. The saved cannot themselves become saviors. Those who receive grace cannot impart it. When the call to the judgment seat of God comes to an unbeliever, whether at death or at the Lord's coming, the intercession of all the saints in heaven and on earth could do him absolutely no good. After that time there is no second chance, no purgatory, no hope.

Salvation cannot be bought, and the buying of oil from **the dealers** refers simply to securing salvation from its only source, God. It is bought in the sense that Isaiah used the term when he wrote, "Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost" (Isa. 55:1). The same idea is used by Jesus in His parables of the treasure found in a field and of the pearl of great price (Matt. 13:44-46). In both cases, the discoverer sold everything he possessed in order to obtain that which was valued about all else. In that sense, the price for salvation is the entire relinquishment of one's own merit, which has no value in itself but must be surrendered because it is an absolute barrier to God's grace.

Paul declared with the deepest conviction and sincerity, "I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites" (Rom. 9:3-4). He was willing to give up his own salvation and become forever separated from Christ if that could somehow save his fellow Jews. But he knew such a thing was impossible. They could not come to God apart from their own acceptance of His Son as Lord and Savior. The apostle could proclaim the gospel fully and faithfully, as he always did (see Acts 20:27), but he could not dispense the grace he had received.

Stressing the necessity for individual appropriation of the gospel, Jesus said,

Everyone who comes to Me, and hears My words, and acts upon them, I will show you whom he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation upon the rock; and when a flood rose, the torrent burst against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who has heard, and has not acted accordingly, is like a man who built a house upon the ground without any foundation; and the torrent

burst against it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was great. (Luke 6:47-49)

People who build their lives on any other foundation than Jesus Christ are doomed to destruction. They do not have the necessary grace, imputed righteousness, resident holiness of God, or transformed character to counter the destructiveness of sin, whose ultimate consequence is death. In short, they have no spiritual life and therefore no eternal hope. They may feel happy about Jesus, admire His teachings, and enjoy the fellowship of His people. They may look as prepared for His coming as do true believers, having torches like the rest, but they have no oil with which to light them.

While they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut. The tragedy, of course, was that there was then no more opportunity **to make the purchase**, and the search for the oil merchant was in vain, because all the shops were closed.

In another of His many illustrations about lost opportunity for salvation, Jesus said,

Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, "Lord, open up to us!" then He will answer and say to you, "I do not know where you are from." Then you will begin to say, "We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets"; and He will say, "I tell you, I do not know where you are from; depart from Me, all you evildoers." There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth there when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being cast out. (Luke 13:25-28)

Therefore when the foolish virgins returned from their unsuccessful search for oil and **came saying, "Lord, lord, open up for us,"** the bridegroom **answered** from within the house, **"Truly I say to you, I do not know you."** Those five were sham attendants who had never belonged to the wedding party but had managed to dress and act like true

bridesmaids. Now the pretense was over, and their sinful, foolish character was exposed.

It will be a moment of sheer terror when unbelievers face a holy God and realize with absolute certainty that they are eternally lost. That must have been the feeling of the people of Noah's day when they saw the flood waters rise above their heads and knew the door to the ark was unalterably shut.

Although the parable of the ten virgins illustrates the time of Christ's second coming, its truths apply to an unbeliever's facing God at death in any age. At that moment the opportunity for salvation will be past and all hope gone forever.

THE WARNING

Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour. (25:13)

For the fifth time in the discourse (see 24:36, 42, 44, 50) Jesus called on those who will be alive during the last days of the Tribulation to be **alert**, because they will **not know the day nor the hour** of His appearing. They would know its nearness by the catastrophic signs, but the exact **day** and the exact **hour** they would not know.

"Be on guard," Jesus had said in the Temple on the previous day, "that your hearts may not be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day come on you suddenly like a trap; for it will come upon all those who dwell on the face of all the earth. But keep on the alert at all times, praying in order that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:34-36).

In his epic poem *Idylls of the King*, Alfred Lord Tennyson used figures from the parable of the ten virgins in a song directed to the wicked Queen Guinevere, who learned too late the cost of sin:

Late, late, so late, and dark the night and chill!
Late, late, so late, but we can enter still.
Too late, too late, ye cannot enter now.

No light had we, for that we do repent;

And, learning this, the Bridegroom will relent.
Too late, too late, ye cannot enter now.

No light, so late, and dark and chill the night!
O let us in, that we may find the light.
Too late, too late, ye cannot enter now

Have we not heard the Bridegroom is so sweet?
O let us in, tho' late, to kiss His feet!
No, no, too late! Ye cannot enter now.

The Signs of Christ's
Coming—part 9
The Tragedy of Wasted
Opportunity
(Working Until
Christ's Return)
(25:14-30)

For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves, and entrusted his possessions to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey. Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. But he who received the one talent went away and dug in the ground, and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. And the one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, "Master, you entrusted five talents to me; see, I have gained five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things, enter into the joy of your master." The one also who had received the two talents came up and said, "Master, you entrusted to me two talents; see, I have gained two more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid, and went away and hid your

talent in the ground; see, you have what is yours.” But his master answered and said to him, “You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I scattered no seed. Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.” For to everyone who has shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. And cast out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (25:14-30)

In his poem *Maud Muller*, John Greenleaf Whittier wrote the well-known lines, “For all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: ‘It might have been!’ ”

Scripture is replete with admonitions to take advantage of opportunity while it is available. Solomon wrote, “Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days,” and, “Sow your seed in the morning and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good” (Eccles. 11:1, 6). That same man of wisdom wrote, “He who gathers in summer is a son who acts wisely, but he who sleeps in harvest is a son who acts shamefully” (Prov. 10:5). His father, David, had written, “As for me, my prayer is to Thee, O Lord, at an acceptable time” (Ps. 69:13). Another psalmist wrote, “Come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand. Today, if you would hear His voice, do not harden your hearts” (Ps. 95:6-8).

Isaiah exhorted, “Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near” (Isa. 55:6). Jeremiah reminded his readers that “even the stork in the sky knows her seasons; and the turtledove and the swift and the thrush observe the time of their migration; but My people do not know the ordinance of the Lord” (Jer. 8:7; cf. Heb. 3:7-8). Paraphrasing his preceding quotation from Isaiah, Paul admonished the Corinthian believers, “Behold, now is ‘the acceptable time,’ behold, now is ‘the day of salvation’” (2 Cor. 6:2; cf. Isa. 49:8).

Jesus repeatedly called on men to make the most of spiritual opportunities. “For a little while longer the light is among you. Walk while you have the light, that darkness may not overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. While you have the light, believe in the light, in order that you may become sons of light” (John 12:35-36).

The tragedy of wasted opportunity is the theme of Jesus’ parable of the talents, the second of two parables relating to the kingdom of heaven and, in particular, to men’s readiness for Jesus’ coming to establish the kingdom at His second coming (see Matt. 25:1). The parable of the virgins (vv. 1-13) focuses on readiness manifested in waiting, whereas the parable of the talents focuses on readiness manifested in working. The five virgins who had oil for their lamps represent believers who possess saving grace; the two faithful servants who invested their talents represent believers who exhibit the serving life. Together the two parables depict the balance of believers’ looking forward to His coming with anticipation while living in preparedness for His coming through faithful service.

Frequently, one or the other of those precepts either is lost or overemphasized. Although believers are to rejoice continually in the prospect of their Lord’s coming again, they are not to sit back in idleness and do nothing. Saving faith is serving faith. On the other hand, they are not to become so caught up in serving the Lord that they forget to contemplate and rejoice in His return. It was perhaps because they thought the Lord was coming momentarily that some of the believers at Thessalonica fell into undisciplined, careless living and decided to do no work at all. Consequently they became busybodies who did nothing productive and even disrupted the church. Paul rebuked them severely and commanded them “to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.” He then admonished the whole church not to “grow weary of doing good” (2 Thess. 3:10-13).

Peter challenged mockers who had the opposite problem. They were so convinced that the Lord would *not* come soon that they abandoned all moral restraint and lived in selfish profligacy (2 Pet. 3:3-4). Peter reminded them that the people of Noah’s day responded in the same way to Noah’s prediction of the Flood, which came upon them suddenly and at a time they did not expect. In the same way, the apostle declared, Christ will

appear suddenly in the end time, bringing the “judgment and destruction of ungodly men” (vv. 5-7).

It should be noted that, despite some resemblances, the parable of the talents and the parable of the minas (Luke 19:11-27) are not variations of the same story. The mina parable was given several days earlier, and the two accounts have as many differences as similarities.

Though the parable of the talents has relevance to every generation, the Lord was still speaking directly about the generation that will be living just before His return in glory (24:34), the exact time of which will not be known in advance but the imminence of which will be manifested by spectacular and unmistakable signs (24:3-29).

The parable of the talents illustrates four basic aspects of spiritual opportunity: the responsibility we receive, the reaction we have, the reckoning we face, and the reward we gain.

THE RESPONSIBILITY WE RECEIVE

For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves, and entrusted his possessions to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey. (25:14-15)

The antecedent of **it** is the kingdom of heaven (see v. 1), of which this parable is another illustration. Some translations add “the kingdom of heaven” to verse 14 in italics to make the connection clear. Even the phrase **it is** appears in italics in the NASB, being added because there is no main subject or verb in the Greek text of this verse. Both subject and verb are understood to continue over from verse 1, namely, “the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to,” making it obvious that Jesus is continuing to teach about the kingdom.

As frequently mentioned in this commentary series, it is important to understand that in the New Testament the kingdom of heaven and its synonymous phrase, the kingdom of God, refer to the sphere of God’s dominion in Christ. But while maintaining that basic meaning, the expression is used in two distinct ways. Sometimes it designates the invisible body of all redeemed people. The Lord used it in that sense when He declared, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like

children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3; cf. 25:34). That is the kingdom in its pure, exclusive sense.

But sometimes the kingdom of heaven refers to the visible, outward body of those who profess to know and serve Christ. Jesus made clear that in that outward manifestation of the kingdom both the true and the false will be found, the genuine Christian and the imitation (see section on Matt. 13).

It is in this visible, outward sense that Jesus refers to the kingdom both in the parable of the virgins and in the parable of the talents. The foolish virgins and the faithless slave do not represent professed pagans, atheists, agnostics, or reprobates but those who profess to belong to Christ. In each account, both genuine and counterfeit believers are depicted.

The **man** who was **about to go on a journey** obviously was planning to be gone for a long time, perhaps for many months or even a year or more. In order for his estate to be well managed in his absence, he **called his own slaves, and entrusted his possessions to them.**

The fact that these were **his own slaves** reinforces the idea that Jesus was illustrating the outward, organizational church, composed of those who allege to belong to Him, and not to mankind in general. Many people in the gospels are referred to as Christ’s disciples although some of them proved to be false. Such were the disciples who were offended at His teaching about eating His flesh and drinking His blood (see John 6:52-66). The traitor Judas not only is called a disciple but an apostle (Luke 6:13-16). Even those false followers, by virtue of being attached outwardly to the church, have been entrusted with certain of the Lord’s **possessions.**

Doulos, the singular of **slaves**, was a general term that referred to any kind and level of bondservant. It was used of common laborers and menial household servants as well as of skilled craftsmen and artists and highly-trained professionals. Their commonness was in being the personal property of their owners, who often had the power of life and death over them.

A wealthy person would often have special **slaves** who functioned as overseers of his household and managers of his business. In many cases some of a man’s slaves were much better educated and skilled than he was. Highly trusted slaves sometimes had a virtual free hand within proscribed areas of responsibility even when the owner was at home. When he left town for any length of time, they acted almost in his full authority, having

the equivalent of what we now refer to as power of attorney. They were responsible for handling all the assets and business operations of their owner for his benefit and profit.

The man in Jesus' parable had three such trusted slaves to whom he **entrusted** certain of **his possessions** while he was away. **To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability.** Satisfied that his money was in capable hands, **he then went on his journey.**

The numbers of **talents** given to the slaves have no significance in themselves but simply illustrate a wide range of responsibilities, from the very high and demanding to the relatively low and easy. It *is* significant, however, that the responsibilities were given to **each according to his own ability.** The owner knew his slaves intimately, and he entrusted each one only with the responsibility he reasonably could be expected to handle.

Used in a context such as this, **talents** always referred to money, but the word itself simply represented a measure of weight. The value of a specific coin depended on its weight and its composition. A talent of gold, for example, was extremely valuable, a talent of silver less valuable, and a talent of copper or bronze much less valuable still. But as with the number of talents given to each man, the metal content of the coins, and therefore their actual worth, is irrelevant to Jesus' point. He was emphasizing common accountability for differing levels of responsibility based on individual **ability.**

Because the parable illustrates the kingdom of heaven, the **man** in the story obviously represents Christ Himself, and the going on a **journey** represents the time He is away from earth between His first and His second advents. The **slaves** depict professed believers, members of the Lord's visible church whom He has entrusted with various resources to use in His behalf until He returns.

Jesus mentions only three levels of responsibility, but those are suggestive of the extremely wide range of individual abilities among people, who vary greatly in natural talent, intellect, and other capabilities. They also vary greatly in opportunity and privilege. Some church members have heard the gospel and studied Scripture since early childhood, whereas others know only the rudiments of the faith and have had little opportunity to learn more. Those who are true believers are also

given spiritual gifts that vary widely from person to person (see Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-11). Some Christians are privileged to live and work closely with others of like faith and are continually encouraged and corrected by fellow believers. Other Christians, however, are the only believers in their families or even in their community or town. God knows intimately the abilities, gifts, opportunities, and circumstances of every person, and He graciously assigns responsibilities accordingly.

Even among the Twelve there were different levels of responsibility. Peter, James, and John were clearly the inner circle, and of that group Peter was the most prominent. From among the many devoted believers in the church at Jerusalem, James soon became the acknowledged leader, with commensurate responsibilities and obligations. The implication of the parable of the talents is that, even in the millennial kingdom and throughout eternity, the redeemed will continue to have different levels of responsibility.

The issue of the parable pertains to what each slave does with the fairly assessed responsibility he has been given. The noblest motive in the heart of a faithful servant would be to accomplish as much as possible for the sake of his master during the master's absence. That was also the master's desire: not equal return from each of his slaves but relatively equal effort according to ability.

It is significant that, although the slaves with the five and the two talents did not produce equal profits, they produced equal percentages of profit, doubling what they had been given. In the same way, Christians with different capabilities and opportunities may produce differing results while working with equal faithfulness and devotion. The Lord therefore assures His servants that "each will receive his own reward according to his own labor" (1 Cor. 3:8).

THE REACTION WE HAVE

Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. But he who received the one talent went away and dug in the ground, and hid his master's money. (25:16-18)

The slave **who had received the five talents** was eager to serve his master, and he therefore **immediately . . . went and traded with them, and gained five more talents**. This man represents the genuine believer whose supreme desire is to serve God, fulfilling what Jesus declared to be the first and greatest commandment, to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5; cf. Matt. 22:37).

In this context, **traded** carries the broad connotation of doing business over a period of time. The slave did not simply make one good investment and then sit back, but rather **traded** and retraded as long as his master was away. He may have been involved in a number of commercial ventures, some of them simultaneously. The point, however, is not in the particular type of work he did but in the fact that he used to full advantage all the resources his master had given him. His industry **gained five more talents** for his master, doubling the amount with which he had started.

In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. Although the second slave was given less than half as much to work with, he performed just as faithfully and industriously as the first. Like his fellow slave, he doubled his master’s money. Both men demonstrated supreme commitment to their master by making the most of what they had, by maximizing their opportunities.

The behavior of the third slave, however, was radically different. **He who received the one talent went away and dug in the ground, and hid his master’s money**. Hiding valuables in the ground was a common practice in the ancient world, where there were no bank vaults or safe deposit boxes. It was a simple and sensible way to protect such things as jewels and coins (see Matt. 13:44).

But hiding working resources in the ground was hardly a sensible way to carry on a business and earn a profit. The slave had not **received the one talent** to protect it but to use it wisely for his master’s profit. Although he had been given fewer resources than the other two slaves, he had the same obligation to use what he had to his maximum ability.

THE RECKONING WE FACE

Now after a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. And the one who had received the five talents

came up and brought five more talents, saying, “Master, you entrusted five talents to me; see, I have gained five more talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things, enter into the joy of your master.” The one also who had received the two talents came up and said, “Master, you entrusted to me two talents; see, I have gained two more talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, “Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground; see, you have what is yours.” But his master answered and said to him, “You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I scattered no seed. Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest.(25:19-27)

The exact length of time the owner was gone is not mentioned and is irrelevant, except that it was **a long time**. In the context of the Olivet discourse, in which Jesus repeatedly states that His second coming will be at a time when He is not expected (see 24:36, 42, 44, 50; 25:13), the implication is that **the master of those slaves came** back unexpectedly.

The first order of business upon his return was to determine what the slaves had done with his assets, and he therefore sat down and **settled accounts with them**.

In this discourse Jesus was addressing those who would be alive at the time of His return (24:34), and the statement in the parable that the **master** was gone **a long time** (cf. 25:5) suggests that He was indirectly telling the Twelve that His coming back would not be as soon as they anticipated (see Luke 19:11). He did not tell them that it would not be in their lifetimes, because that would have tended to decrease their motivation for diligence. The idea was that, whether He would be gone for a seemingly long or seemingly short time by their human reckoning, they would have opportunity to serve Him and were obligated to be about His work.

Some years ago, certain segments of evangelicalism became pre-occupied with Christ's return, and some church members quit their jobs or sold their businesses and began watching for His appearance. One man I knew sold everything he had for about half a million dollars, some of which he used to buy thousands of New Testaments and distribute them around the world. He also bought and distributed various religious ornaments and trinkets he thought would arouse people's interest in Christ. But soon he was bankrupt as well as frustrated and disheartened that his confidence in the Lord's immediate return proved unfounded.

When the master called his servants together to settle the accounts, the first one reported, **Master, you entrusted five talents to me; see, I have gained five more talents.** The man was not boasting but simply relating the truth of the matter. There is no hint of pride or self-congratulation. He knew that everything he started with had been **entrusted** to him by his **master**, and that he had only done what he should have done. He exhibited the attitude Jesus said every obedient disciple should have: "When you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done'" (Luke 17:10).

Near the end of his life, Paul wrote Timothy, "I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day" (2 Tim. 4:6-8). He was not boasting but simply expressing a deep sense of fulfillment and rejoicing. He was confident the Lord knew the integrity of his heart and would be faithful to reward Him according to His gracious promises.

When the **master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful slave,"** he was commending the slave's attitude more than just his accomplishment. He first of all commended the man's excellent character, which expressed itself in excellent service.

Because the **master** represents the Lord Himself when He returns in glory and power to establish His kingdom, it is remarkable to contemplate that the holy, just, perfect Lord of the universe will deign to praise His true disciples for their faithfulness, imperfect as it will have

been. Yet that is the glorious prospect of every child of God who, like Paul, loves Christ's appearing (2 Tim. 4:8).

The **master** not only highly praised his servant but highly rewarded him, declaring, **"You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things."**

Not only will the Lord entrust greater earthly tasks to those who prove themselves faithful, but their heavenly reward will be opportunity for greater service to Him throughout eternity. Christ's faithful servants living on earth when He returns will enter into the millennial kingdom in their same earthly bodies and will be given responsibilities commensurate with their previous faithfulness. Believers who have died or been raptured will come to earth with the Lord in their glorified bodies, and they, too, will be given rulership in proportion to their faithfulness to God while they lived on earth. Both in the millennial and the eternal manifestations of the kingdom, those who have been faithful on earth will be **put . . . in charge of many things** much greater in significance than the **few things** over which they previously were faithful stewards.

Of the many things heaven will be, it will not be boring. Our heavenly perfection, for example, will not be a matter simply of never making a mistake. Nor will it be always making a hole in one or a home run, as it were. Rather it will be a time of ever-expanding and increasingly joyous service, and the saints who then will serve the most and rejoice the most will be those who have served the Lord most steadfastly while on earth. Every soul in heaven will equally possess eternal life and will be equally righteous, equally Christlike, and equally glorious. Everyone will be equally perfect, because perfection has no degrees. The difference will be in opportunities and levels of service. Just as the angels serve God in ranks, so will redeemed men and women, and the degree of their heavenly service will have been determined by the devotedness of their earthly service.

Heaven will not involve differing qualities of service, because everything heavenly is perfect. Everything done for the Lord will be perfectly right and perfectly satisfying. There will be no distinctions of superiority or inferiority, and there will be no envy, jealousy, or any other remnant of sinful human nature. Whatever one's rank or responsibility or opportunity, those will be God's perfect will for that individual and therefore will be perfectly enjoyed. In a way that is beyond our present

comprehension, believers will be both equal and unequal in the Millennium and in the eternal state.

In the parable of the pounds, the nobleman who was going into a far country to receive a kingdom gave ten of his servants one mina each to do business with until he returned. When the nobleman came back, the servant who had multiplied his mina tenfold was rewarded with authority over ten cities and the one who had multiplied his mina fivefold was given authority over five cities (Luke 19:12-19). In that parable it is even more explicit that Jesus was speaking of millennial and eternal rewards, because they are specifically bestowed after the nobleman's kingdom was established. And as in the parable of the talents, the kingdom rewards are given in proportion to earthly faithfulness.

Jesus also mentions a second reward the master gives to the faithful slave: **enter into the joy of your master**. Not only will believers be rewarded in heaven with still greater opportunity for service, but they will even share the divine **joy of their master**. In addition to sharing the Lord's divine sinlessness and holiness they will also share His divine **joy**.

Imagine the consummate ecstasy believers will have when they fully comprehend the significance of having their sins forever abolished and their righteousness forever established! It was the joyful prospect of providing that gracious redemption that motivated Christ to endure the cross and despise its shame (Heb. 12:2).

The second slave made the same report as the first, the only difference being that he had doubled **two talents** instead of five, and therefore **gained two talents more**. The master's response to the second slave was also identical: **"Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."**

The third slave, however, did not present the master with earnings but with an accusatory and self-serving excuse. Having done nothing with what he had been given, he said, **"Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground; see, you have what is yours."**

Like the other two, that slave was identified as belonging to the master (see v. 14), representative of his belonging to Christ's church before the second coming. But in two distinct ways he proved that his

identification with Christ was superficial and did not involve genuine faith or regeneration.

First of all, he produced absolutely nothing with the talent he had been given and did not even make an attempt to use it for his master's benefit and profit.

As already mentioned, this slave does not represent an atheist or even an agnostic, because he recognized the master as his legitimate owner and no doubt made a pretense of honoring the master while he was away. He did not misuse his talent on immoral and selfish pursuits like the prodigal son or embezzle it like the unmerciful servant of Matthew 18. He simply disregarded the stewardship he had been given.

In much the same way, unbelieving church members live in the environment of God's redeemed community and enjoy exposure to the teaching of His word and the fellowship of His people. But in spite of their spiritual privilege, they make no positive response to the gospel and therefore can render no fruitful service.

Second, this slave demonstrated his counterfeit allegiance by deprecating his master's character, accusing him of being **a hard man, reaping where he did not sow, and gathering where he had scattered no seed**. He charged his owner with being unmerciful and dishonest.

That slave represents the professing Christian whose limited knowledge of God leads him to conclude that He is distant, uncaring, unjust, and undependable. Instead of judging themselves in light of God's inerrant Word, such people judge God in the light of their own perverted perceptions. They not only justify themselves but do so at God's expense.

His erroneous estimation of his master's character was sufficient proof that this slave had no intimate or reliable knowledge of him. That slave portrays the unregenerate church member who has no spiritual fruit in his life and no spiritual worship in his heart. He is blind to the Lord's kindness, grace, compassion, mercy, honor, majesty, and glory because he has never surrendered himself to the Lord's sovereignty and grace.

Everything about that man contradicted his professed commitment to his master. In a certain way he **was afraid** of his master, but it was not the fear of reverential awe but of irreverent contempt. As his own words testified, he resented and despised the master and had no love or respect for him at all. His relationship to the master was one of enmity rather than peace, of hatred rather than love, of rejection rather than faith.

This slave represents a professed Christian whose view of God is corrupt because his unredeemed heart is still corrupt. He views God through the lens of his own depraved convictions.

In response to the unfaithful slave's rationalization, the master said, **"You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I scattered no seed. Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest."**

The **slave** was **wicked** in that he unjustly besmirched the character of his master, and he was **lazy** in that he did nothing with the talent entrusted to him. By repeating the slave's charge against him, the master did not acknowledge its truthfulness. He rather said, in effect: "You think I am a hard man, do you, harvesting crops that do not belong to me? If you really thought that, why did you not take the talent and put it in the bank, where it could at least draw interest?"

The ancient Roman Empire had a banking system that was in many respects like those of modern times. The maximum loan rate was 12 percent simple interest, and the interest earned on deposits was probably about half that rate. The slave with the one talent therefore could have reaped at least a 6 percent return by making virtually no effort at all. The fact that he did not attempt even to earn simple **interest** on the money confirmed his total irresponsibility and his indifference to the master.

Even if the slave's accusation against his owner had been valid, it would not have excused his indolence. If anything, it would have made it more foolhardy. "If you thought I demand a return even on that which does not belong to me," the master countered, in effect, "did you think I would not require a return on that which *does* belong to me?" The slave was verbally hanged with his own rope.

The truth of the matter was that the slave had no real concern for his master one way or the other, and his excuse seems to have been more spur of the moment than planned. He did not expect the master's return and did not expect to be held accountable, and when he was caught by surprise he simply threw out an outrageous charge that made no sense.

The distinguishing mark of the first two servants was that they used their opportunity to serve the Lord before His return, which they eagerly awaited, and thereby proved the genuineness of their salvation. They were willing to invest everything they had in the service of their

Master. The third servant, on the other hand, put aside what God had given him and went about his own selfish business. He called himself a servant of God but demonstrated conclusively he was not.

The master was angry with the third slave not simply because he lost a profit but because the slave wasted his opportunity. Jesus' point was that having little to work with is no excuse for not using it at all. Even a person with limited exposure to Scripture and who possesses few talents and has few opportunities for service is fully obligated to use those blessings in God's service.

In T. S. Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral*, the chorus chants, "Yet we have gone on living, living and partly living." Those words are reminiscent of the three slaves in this parable. Two of them were truly alive, whereas the other had only the appearance of life. Two of them built their houses on a foundation of rock, the other built his on sand. Two of them were wheat, the other was a tare.

The profit earned by the first two servants represents the accomplishment and satisfaction of a life that belongs to the Lord and is faithfully dedicated to His service. The failure of the third servant to use that with which he had been entrusted by his master represents the emptiness, uselessness, and worthlessness of a life in which profession of faith in Christ is proved false and meaningless by the careless waste of privilege and opportunity.

THE REWARD WE GAIN

Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents. "For to everyone who has shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. And cast out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (25:28-30)

Jesus made clear that the visible church will always include both genuine and spurious Christians. Every church has tares that, except to God, are indistinguishable from the wheat. Their true character cannot be determined by what they do outwardly, because unbelievers can be quite active in the church and seemingly interested in its work. As far as the

Lord is concerned, however, the work they do is not in His service or for the benefit of His kingdom. Whatever such a person may do with the abilities he has from the Lord, they are spiritually unproductive and might as well be hidden away. In the kingdom of God, the realm of His sovereign rule—whether in the visible earthly church or in the millennial kingdom—there will be no acceptable service offered to Him except that offered by true believers.

Therefore when Christ returns, He will figuratively **take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.** As He had declared on at least one previous occasion (see Matt. 13:12), Jesus now said again: **“To everyone who has shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance; but the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away.”**

Those who demonstrate by their spiritual fruitfulness that they belong to God will be given even greater opportunity to bear fruit for Him. But those who demonstrate by their unproductiveness that they do not belong to God will lose even the benefits they once had. Such a person **does not have** any true blessings from God because he has made them worthless through disuse. But the reality of what those blessings could have been will be given to someone who has proved his genuineness. The divine principle is that those who trust in Christ will gain everything, and those who do not trust in Him will lose everything.

The third slave was not simply unfaithful but faithless. A true Christian who wastes his abilities, spiritual gifts, and opportunities will have his work “burned up, [and] he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:15). The person represented by this slave, however, has no faith at all and therefore no saving relationship to God. No matter how much he may appear to have been blessed by God and to have served Him, one day he will hear from the Lord’s own lips the devastating words, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matt. 7:23).

The third slave was utterly **worthless**, and his fate was to be **cast out . . . into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.** Just like the man who tried to crash the king’s wedding feast without the proper garment (Matt. 22:11-13), this unproductive, counterfeit servant was destined for destruction.

Outer darkness is a common New Testament description of hell. “God is light,” John declared, “and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). Light signifies God’s presence, and **darkness** signifies his absence. Hell not only is eternal darkness but eternal torment. **In that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth**, signifying the unrelieved agony of being separated from God’s presence and goodness.

Judgment
of the Nations
(25:31-46)

But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, “Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.” Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” And the King will answer and say to them, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.” Then He will also say to those on His left, “Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.” Then they themselves also will answer, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?” Then He will answer them, saying, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.” And these

will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (25:31-46)

The Bible makes clear that all sin is known to God and that all sin must be punished. Moses declared, “Be sure your sin will find you out” (Num. 32:23), and the writer of Proverbs testified that “adversity pursues sinners” (Prov. 13:21). Moses also wrote, “Thou hast placed our iniquities before Thee, our secret sins in the light of Thy presence” (Ps. 90:8). In other words, what may appear to us to be secret is actually in the full, clear view of God. No sin escapes God’s notice or God’s judgment. The consequence of sin is like a shadow that cannot be shaken, and what the wicked “deserves will be done to him” (Isa. 3:11). Judgment for sin is inevitable.

Paul sums up that basic truth in his letter to the Romans: “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against *all* ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (1:18, emphasis added). Later in that same letter the apostle wrote, “There will be tribulation and distress for *every* soul of man who does evil” (2:9, emphasis added). No sin and no sinner is exempted from God’s judgment and punishment.

Not even the sins of Christians are exempt. The marvelous and gracious privilege granted to Christians, however, is to have had the judgment and punishment for all their sins placed upon the Lord Jesus Christ, who died as the substitute for sinners. By God’s divine grace working through their obedient trust in His Son, believers have the guilt and penalty for their sins nailed to the cross with Christ, who made atonement sufficient even for the sins of the whole world.

But those who do not receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior must bear the penalty for their own sins, which is spiritual death and eternal damnation. The warning to unbelievers is stated over and over again in Scripture by word and demonstrated by direct acts of divine judgment. When Adam committed the first sin, there was judgment of massive proportions, confirming for all time the seriousness with which God views evil. That sin committed by one man not only devastated the human race but the entire created universe with it. During the time of Noah, iniquity had become so widespread and vile that God destroyed all mankind except for the eight righteous souls in Noah’s immediate family. Sodom and Gomorrah became so utterly wicked that God destroyed those cities

simultaneously with fire and brimstone (Gen. 19:24-25). Throughout history God has chosen sovereignly to judge certain nations, cities (see Matt. 11:21-24), and individuals, and those judgments stand as divine signposts to mankind, warning that no person or group of people, no matter how powerful by human standards, can sin with impunity (cf. 1 Cor. 10:6-12).

God's judgment is a repeated theme both in the Old and New Testaments. The judgment emphasized in the Old Testament is primarily temporal, whereas that in the New Testament is primarily eternal. With significant exceptions, the Old focuses on punishment suffered in this world and the New on punishment suffered in the next. The Old more often speaks about God's physically destroying nations, punishing cities, or afflicting individuals because of their wickedness. The New, on the other hand, more often speaks of judgment that lasts through all eternity.

No one in Scripture spoke more of judgment than Jesus. He spoke of sin that could not be forgiven, of the danger of losing one's soul forever, of spending eternity in the torments of hell, of existing forever in outer darkness, where there will be perpetual weeping and gnashing of teeth. No pictures of judgment are more intense and sobering than those Jesus portrayed.

Yet nothing Jesus said or did was inconsistent with His gracious love. He wept at the impending punishment coming on Jerusalem's people (Luke 19:41-44). His warnings of judgment and punishment were acts of love, divine appeals for men to turn from their sin in order to escape the condemnation that would otherwise be inevitable. One of love's supreme desires is to protect those it loves from harm, and Jesus therefore spoke so much of judgment because, in His infinite love and grace, it was not His wish nor the Father's "for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). What more important and loving warning could there be than warning about the eternal damnation every human being faces apart from Jesus Christ? Jesus sought to draw men to Himself not only through the attractiveness of salvation but through the horrors of its only alternative.

Jesus' closing words in the Olivet discourse—a sermon on His second coming given privately to the disciples after His last public teaching in the Temple—were one of the most severe and sobering warnings of judgment in all of Scripture. Pictured as the divine separation of the righteous sheep from the unrighteous goats, that judgment will

occur just before Christ establishes His millennial kingdom on earth. Not only will it determine the ultimate, eternal destinies of everyone living at the end of the Tribulation but will also determine who will and will not enter the kingdom. Only those who belong to the King, believers who have been born into God's spiritual family and been made citizens of His spiritual kingdom, will enter His glorious kingdom.

The judgment of the sheep and goats is not mentioned in any of the other gospels, no doubt because they do not focus on Christ's kingship, as does Matthew. For that same reason Matthew places much greater emphasis on all aspects of the Lord's second coming than do the other gospels, because it is at His return that He will manifest Himself as King of kings and Lord of lords in consummate regal glory and power (Rev. 19:11-16).

THE SETTING OF JUDGMENT

But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him; (25:31-32a)

THE JUDGE

But when the Son of Man (25:31a)

The sovereign Judge over the separation of the sheep and goats will be Christ Himself, **the Son of Man**. Jesus had earlier declared that "not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, in order that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father" (John 5:22). God the Father has delegated all judgment authority to the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The most common title Jesus used of Himself was **the Son of Man**. That title affirmed His incarnation, His identity with mankind, His time of humiliation and sacrifice. It reflected His condescension, His submissiveness, His humility, His meekness, and His gracious love for fallen humanity.

That title also tended to be less offensive than "Son of God." To have referred regularly to Himself as the Son of God would have aroused

additional and needless hostility from the Jewish religious leaders, and they would have given even less heed to His teaching than they did.

In a similar way, to have referred regularly to Himself as King would have aroused the hostility and opposition of the Roman authorities, who were quick to suppress any hint of insurrection.

In addition to those reasons, for Jesus regularly to have used any such exalted title of Himself would have tempted His followers to be presumptuous and arrogant, missing His message of spiritual salvation. It would have greatly increased their already staunch conviction that, as Messiah, He would soon overthrow the Roman yoke and establish His earthly kingdom on the throne of David.

In addition to those reasons, His referring to Himself as **Son of Man** provided a profound contrast with the titles and roles He will have when He comes in glory. It suggested a clear distinction between His two comings.

On the other hand, His referring to Himself both as **Son of Man** and as heavenly King (vv. 34, 40) reinforced the truth that He is indeed both. The condescending, humble, and humiliated **Son of Man** will return one day as the glorious, sovereign, reigning, and judging King of kings and Lord of lords.

Until this point in His ministry Jesus had never directly referred to Himself as King. He had told a parable about a king who represented God the Father (Matt. 22:1-14); but not until now, talking privately to the Twelve (24:3), did He speak of *Himself* as King. Even when Pilate asked, “Are You the King of the Jews?” Jesus replied simply, “It is as you say” (Matt. 27:11). But Pilate did not take that claim seriously, at least not in apolitical sense, as evidenced by the fact that he offered the Jews an opportunity to secure Jesus’ release, knowing “that because of envy they had delivered Him up” (vv. 17-18).

For a long while the Jewish people, and certainly their religious leaders, knew that Jesus claimed to be a kind of king, because He claimed to be Messiah (see Luke 23:2). It was because they hoped that, as Messiah, He would conquer Rome and reign over a delivered Israel that they had acclaimed Him during the triumphal entry. There was no misunderstanding among Jews that Jesus claimed to be Messiah, the coming great King. Nor could there be any misunderstanding that He claimed to be God’s own Son.

But publicly, Jesus nevertheless was always judicious in the way He made such claims. He did not want to needlessly incite the ire of His enemies.

Now, however, in privacy with His disciples on the Mount of Olives, He unambiguously declared that He, **the Son of Man**, would one day take His rightful place as the great King and Judge. The point of this account is that, sitting “on His glorious throne” (v. 31), He will reign over the earth and that His first act as sovereign Lord will be to decide who enters His millennial, earthly kingdom and who does not. And because His kingdom will encompass the entire earth, it is obvious that those who are not allowed to enter will not remain on earth. As Jesus explicitly states, “these will go away into eternal punishment” (v. 46).

The certainty of God’s ultimate judgment of the wicked was prophesied even by “Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam. “Through divine revelation, that ancient man of God declared, “Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones, to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him” (Jude 14-15).

In light of the utter and perfect holiness of the Almighty and the persistent sinfulness and ungodliness of man that Enoch pointed out, it is not the Lord’s coming in wrath to render judgment that is amazing but rather His first coming in grace to offer salvation. The wonder is not that Jesus will some day come in glory to judge the world but that He first came in humility to save sinners. The marvel is not that God promises to condemn sinners for their sin but that He first offers them deliverance from it. In coming to save those who trust in Him, the Lord Jesus Christ demonstrated His great love for the unlovely by bearing the penalty of their sin, dying the death they deserve. What is remarkable is that He came to redeem sinners who are worthy only of His judgment.

THE TIME

comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, (25:31b)

The time of judgment will be Christ’s return, when He **comes in His glory**. Although we do not know at what precise time in history that

event will occur (Matt. 24:36, 42, 44, 50), we know that He will appear “immediately after the tribulation” (24:29).

Apparently His judgment will be instantaneous, at the moment He appears, and when that occurs the opportunity for faith in Him will be past. As pictured in the parable of the virgins, when the Bridegroom comes the door will be shut (Matt. 25:10). When the Lord comes to earth in glory with His angels and saints, there will be no opportunity for unbelievers then living to receive Him as Messiah.

The full Tribulation will last seven years, and the second half of it, the Great Tribulation, will last three and a half years, or 1260 days (Dan. 7:25; 9:27; 12:7; Rev. 11:2-3; 12:14; 13:5). Daniel also spoke of an expanded period of 1290 days (Dan. 12:11), 30 days more than the basic 1260 of the Great Tribulation, and then of a 1335-day period (Dan. 12:12), adding another 45 days to make a total addition of 75. As suggested in [chapter 3](#) of this volume, it seems that the best explanation for those additional days is that they will cover the time when the Messiah descends to the Mount of Olives, creates the great valley in which the nations of the world will be judged, and then executes that judgment (see Zech. 14:4-5). But whatever transpires during those additional days, there will be no further opportunity for people to receive and confess Jesus Christ as their Lord.

Accompanying and assisting the Lord at His appearing in glory and judgment will be the magnificent host of all His heavenly **angels**. At that time, Paul says, “the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess. 1:7-8).

When He appears, “immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels” (Matt. 24:29-31).

The Lord will come not only with His angels but with His saints. “When Christ, who is our life, is revealed,” Paul assured the Colossian believers, “then you also will be revealed with Him in glory” (Col. 3:4).

The Old Testament saints, the saints of the church who will have died, the saints who will have been raptured, and the saints who will have been martyred during the Tribulation will all accompany Christ and join the saints still living on earth when He descends to earth to establish His millennial kingdom.

THE PLACE

then He will sit on His glorious throne. (25:31c)

The place of Christ's judgment will be the earth, where **He will sit on His glorious throne.** Then "there will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore" (Isa. 9:7). Christ will first reign over the stored earth for a thousand years and then over the newly created heavens and earth throughout all eternity.

While Mary was still only betrothed to Joseph, the angel told her, "Behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end" (Luke 1:31-33).

David's throne was in Jerusalem, and that is therefore where Christ's throne will be. When Jesus returns, "His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south" (Zech. 14:4). From that passage it becomes obvious that the Jerusalem then in existence will be cataclysmically transformed to be made suitable as the place of Christ's divine, **glorious throne.**

When the Lord returns, "the nations [will] be aroused and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat," where He will declare, "Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, tread, for the wine press is full; the vats overflow, for their wickedness is great. Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of

decision” (Joel 3:12-14). But the decisions in that day will not be made by men but by God. The time for deciding to receive Christ will be past, and the decisions people already will have made regarding Him will determine His decision regarding them. Those for whom He is Lord and Savior will enter the kingdom, and those who have rejected Him will be forever excluded. At that time the Lord will roar “from Zion and [will utter] His voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth [will] tremble. But the Lord is a refuge for His people and a stronghold to the sons of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, dwelling in Zion My holy mountain. So Jerusalem will be holy, and strangers will pass through it no more” (Joel 3:16-17).

At the ascension, an angel made clear that Jesus’ return would be bodily and historical, not figurative or merely spiritual. He told the astonished disciples, “This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). When He returns to earth He will reign personally on a literal **throne**, in a literal Jerusalem, and over a literal people.

THE SUBJECTS

And all the nations will be gathered before Him; (25:32a)

The subjects of Christ’s judgment will be **all the nations**. *Ethna* (**nations**) has the basic meaning of peoples and here refers to every person alive on earth when the Lord returns. Although He will have taken all believers into heaven at the Rapture, during the following seven years of the Tribulation many other people will come to believe in Him. During that dreadful time, multitudes of Gentiles (see Rev. 7:9, 14), as well as all surviving Jews (Rom. 11:26), will be brought to faith in Christ.

As Jesus makes clear later in this passage, those who are alive on earth when He returns will include both saved and unsaved, represented by the sheep and the goats, respectively. And those two separate peoples will have two separate destinies. The believers will be ushered into the kingdom and the unbelievers into eternal punishment (Matt. 25:46).

Just as death immediately crystallizes eternity for unbelievers when they die, so will the second coming of Christ crystallize eternity for

unbelievers who are then alive. They will be destroyed on the spot and ushered instantaneously into judgment and eternal punishment.

But believers who are alive at the Lord's coming in glory will go directly into the earthly kingdom in their earthly bodies. There is no indication in Scripture that those saints will experience any sort of transformation at that time. But mingling with them and ruling over them will be the glorified saints of all ages who will then be reigning with Christ (Rev. 20:4). Although their bodies will be of vastly different orders, those two groups of saints will be able to communicate and interact with each other just as Jesus communicated and interacted with the disciples in His glorified body after the resurrection.

Amillennialists do not believe Christ will reign in a literal, thousand-year kingdom on earth. They consider the Millennium to be a figurative, spiritualized picture of Christ's reigning on earth through the hearts of His redeemed people. But what would be the purpose of God's giving His saints glorified bodies capable of living on the physical earth if they would never have opportunity to live there? The resurrected Christ was the perfect illustration of millennial kingdom living by glorified saints, because before His ascension He demonstrated His ability to live on this earth in the same glorified body in which He would forever occupy heaven.

There will be reproduction during the kingdom, but apparently all the children born to the redeemed people who enter it will not become redeemed themselves—any more than children born to redeemed parents in any age necessarily become redeemed themselves. At the end of the millennial kingdom there appear to be many unbelievers, who will participate in Satan's final rebellion against God (Rev. 20:7-9). Obviously, those rebels will be descendants of the saints who went directly into the kingdom at Christ's return. We should not be surprised that there are those who will not believe in Christ even though He will be in their presence. Most of His hearers did not believe the first time He came, either.

That final rebellion against the glorified Christ and His kingdom of perfect love, wisdom, justice, and righteousness gives final and irrefutable testimony to man's natural depravity. Although their environment will be perfect in every respect and Satan will be bound and unable to tempt or in any other way influence men, some people will nevertheless reject Christ

even during the Millennium. The only possible source of their sin and rebellion will be their own corrupt hearts (cf. Jer. 17:9).

Contrary to what some Bible teachers and theologians claim, the idea of a literal, physical, earthly Millennium did not originate in modern times. As the astute German theologian Erich Sauer has well documented, belief in such a literal thousand-year, earthly kingdom was the common and orthodox view of the early church, from New Testament times through the middle of the third century (see his *The Triumph of the Crucified* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951]). Early church Fathers such as Papias, Justin, Tertullian, and Hippolytus all affirmed a literal and earthly future kingdom ruled directly by Christ. It was only later, as allegorical hermeneutics became fashionable, that literal millennialism was rejected in favor of a spiritualized interpretation (p. 144).

Those who reject a literal Millennium must do one or more of three things. The first is to confuse Israel and the church, taking the church to be a spiritualized form of the ancient nation of Israel. In that case, the Old Testament curses were for literal Israel, being already fulfilled, and the promises of blessing to Israel would be fulfilled in the church, but in a spiritual, not literal, way. That kind of divided, inconsistent hermeneutics is unacceptable. The second is to make present or past what is clearly future, assuming that all the promises to the literal nation and people of Israel have already been fulfilled, making the earthly kingdom unnecessary. The third is to arbitrarily spiritualize certain Old Testament prophecies, taking predicted places, events, or persons as being merely symbols of spiritual ideas or truths instead of physical and historical realities.

In the book just mentioned above (pp. 144-53), Erich Sauer suggests five compelling arguments for a literal and historical future kingdom. First of all, such a kingdom would be the only adequate confirmation of the truthfulness and reliability of God's promises. Isaiah predicted that the Messiah would establish an everlasting kingdom on the throne of David (Isa. 9:6-7). Paul declared that "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable," referring specifically to His promises to ancient Israel (Rom. 11:29). But if those promises were merely figurative, their fulfillments could never be verified and would be meaningless. In particular, the prophecies about the Messiah would have no clear meaning and could never be verified. But Isaiah himself declared that the Lord's

promises are more unshakable than the mountains (Isa. 54:10) and Israel's endurance as a nation will be as permanent as the new heavens and the new earth that the Lord will one day create (66:22). Jeremiah affirmed that God's covenant promises are more secure than the pattern of night following day (Jer. 33:20) and more stable than the courses of the sun, moon, and stars (31:35-36).

Second, an earthly millennial kingdom is the only explanation of the end times that corresponds to Jesus' teaching in the gospels. For example, His promise to the apostles that one day they would "sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt. 19:28) would be meaningless apart from a literal, historical restoration of Israel.

Third, an earthly millennial kingdom is the only consistent interpretation of Messianic prophecy. It is obvious from the gospel records that a great many of those prophecies were literally fulfilled during Jesus' lifetime. He was born in Bethlehem, just as Micah predicted (5:2). He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, was betrayed for thirty pieces of silver, and was pierced in the side, just as Zechariah predicted (9:9; 11:12; 12:10). His hands and feet were literally pierced, precisely as the psalmist predicted (22:16; cf. 16:10), and He literally died, was buried, and was resurrected, just as Isaiah predicted (53:8-12).

Those fulfillments were so obviously literal that no one suggests the predictions of them were merely symbolic of spiritual truths. Yet many other equally specific and detailed predictions about the Messiah, such as His establishing an eternal throne over the kingdom of David, were just as obviously *not* fulfilled during Jesus' earthly ministry. Therefore, to reject the idea of a literal Millennium is to maintain that some of the Old Testament prophecies were literal and some were not. And to take that position is to assume arbitrarily that all prophecies not literally fulfilled by New Testament times are to be spiritualized.

At the time they were written, *all* Old Testament predictions obviously pertained to the future. By what logic or authority, then, does one take some of their fulfillments to be literal and others to be only figurative?

Fourth, an earthly, visible kingdom is the best possible way for Jesus Christ to demonstrate that He is the supreme ruler over His creation. How else could He prove Himself to be King of kings and Lord of lords? How could He verify that His rulership is superior to that of all other

monarchs if He had no opportunity to rule an earthly kingdom? How better could He prove Himself to be the supremely just King than by personally meting out justice to His subjects? How better could He prove Himself to be the infinitely merciful Lord than by personally showing mercy on His subjects? To do those things He would have to have an earthly kingdom, because in heaven there is no need either for justice or for mercy.

Could it be that, besides the brief time between the creation of Adam and the Fall, the world will know no dominion but Satan's? Could it be that God will literally destroy but not literally restore this vast creation, all of which longs to "be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God" and in that longing "groans and suffers the pains of childbirth" (Rom. 8:21-22)?

The perfect millennial kingdom will testify through all eternity that Jesus Christ is the supreme sovereign, who alone can bring absolute harmony and peace to a world even while it is still infected by sin.

Fifth, an earthly millennial kingdom is the only and necessary bridge from human history to eternal glory. Paul declares that in the end Christ will deliver "up the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power" and that "He *must* reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet" (1 Cor. 15:24-25, emphasis added). What other kingdom could Christ deliver to His Father but an earthly kingdom? The Father already possesses the kingdom of heaven. The Millennium could not refer to the church as a spiritualized form of the kingdom, because the kingdom that Christ will deliver to the Father will include His subjected enemies, of which there are none in there deemed church. And it will be a kingdom over which Christ exercises total authority, which could not apply to any kingdom the world has known thus far, including the ancient theocracy of Israel during its most faithful days.

The thousand-year reign of Christ can only refer to a literal, earthly kingdom that Jesus Christ could present to the Father in the way Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 15. It is the kingdom of a literal earth, which Christ will literally and personally judge, restore, rejuvenate, and rule in righteousness for a literal one thousand years. And at the end of that time, after Satan is released for a brief period and then permanently defeated and cast into the lake of fire, Christ will present that earthly kingdom to His heavenly Father.

THE PROCESS OF JUDGMENT

and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, “Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.” Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” And the King will answer and say to them, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.” Then He will also say to those on His left, “Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.” Then they themselves also will answer, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?” Then He will answer them, saying, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (25:32b-46)

The process of Christ’s judgment will include the absolute and unerring separation of the saved from the unsaved. When all the nations and peoples of the earth will have been gathered before Him at His return, the Lord Jesus Christ **will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.**

In the ancient Near East, as in much of that land still today, **sheep** and **goats** are frequently herded together. But sheep are docile, gentle creatures, whereas goats are unruly and rambunctious and can easily upset

the sheep. Because they do not feed or rest well together, the shepherd often separates them for grazing and for sleeping at night.

In a similar way the Lord Jesus Christ will separate believers from unbelievers when He returns to establish His millennial kingdom. **He will put the believing sheep on His right**, the place of favor and blessing. But the unbelieving goats **He will put on the left**, the place of disfavor and rejection.

In ancient biblical times, a father's blessing was extremely important, because it determined who would receive the major part of the inheritance. When Jacob was about to bless his two grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh, he was careful to place his right hand on the one who would receive the inheritance. Because the major blessing normally went to the eldest son, Manasseh was placed on Jacob's right and Ephraim on his left. But when the time for blessing came, Jacob crossed his hands so that his right hand was on Ephraim's head rather than Manasseh's. Against Joseph's objection, Jacob insisted on giving the major blessing to Ephraim, because God had chosen him over his brother (Gen. 48:8-20).

THE INHERITANCE OF THE SAVED

Then the King will say to those on His right, "Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me." Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?" And the King will answer and say to them, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me." (25:34-40)

Jesus here reveals unequivocally that the Son of Man who sits on the glorious throne (v. 31) is also the Son of God, the divine **King**. After his subjects are separated, **the King will say to those on His right,**

“Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” Those will be the believers who have survived the holocaust of the Tribulation, and they will be ushered alive into the millennial **kingdom**, which has been **prepared for them from the foundation of the world**.

Doubtlessly anticipating the salvation-by-works interpretations that would be made of verses 35-45, the Lord made clear that believers will not **inherit the kingdom** based on good deeds they will have or will not have performed on earth. Their inheritance was determined countless ages ago, even **from the foundation of the world**. Those who enter the kingdom will not do so on the basis of the service they have performed for Christ but on the basis of their being **blessed** by the **Father** because of their trust in His Son. They will in no way earn a place in the kingdom. A child does not earn an inheritance but receives it on the basis of his being in the family. In exactly the same way a believer does not earn his way into the kingdom of God but receives it as his rightful inheritance as a child of God and a fellow heir with Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:16-17).

Prepared for you accentuates the selectivity of salvation. From before the time **the world** was created, God sovereignly chose those who will belong to Him. And “whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29). The source of salvation is the Father’s blessing, the reception of salvation is through faith, and the selectivity of salvation is in the advance preparation of the Father made in ages past. Stressing the same truth, Peter declared, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet. 1:3-5).

The good deeds commended in Matthew 25:35-36 are the fruit, not the root, of salvation. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that they are not the basis of entrance into the kingdom. Christ will judge according to works only insofar as those works are or are not a manifestation of redemption, which the heavenly Father has foreordained. If a person has not trusted in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, no amount of seemingly

good works done in His name will avail to any spiritual benefit. To such people the Lord will say, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matt. 7:23).

Nevertheless, the genuinely righteous deeds Jesus mentions in verses 35-36 are measurable evidence of salvation, and He therefore highly commends those who have performed them. He is saying, in effect, “Come into My kingdom, because you are the chosen children of My Father, and your relationship to Him is made evident by the service you have rendered to Me by ministering to your fellow believers, who, like you, are My brothers” (v. 40).

The Lord then lists six representative areas of need: being **hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and in prison**. The kingdom is for those who have ministered to such needs in the lives of God’s people, because those good deeds evidence true, living faith. They are characteristic of God’s children and kingdom citizens. “If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food,” James warns, “and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,’ and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself” (James 2:15-17). John proclaims the same truth in similar words: “Whoever has the world’s goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in Him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth” (1 John 3:17-18). Scripture is very clear in teaching that the evidence for assurance of true salvation is not found in a past moment of decision but in a continuous pattern of righteous behavior.

The response by those whom the King commends is remarkable and is another proof of their salvation. Because they have ministered in a spirit of humility and selflessness and not to be seen and honored by men (see Matt. 6:2, 5, 16), they have seemingly forgotten about the many things they have done and are surprised that these are worthy of such mention by the Lord.

The King addresses them as **the righteous**, not simply because they have been declared righteous in Christ but because they have been made righteous by Christ. Their works of service to fellow believers give evidence that they are themselves the product of divine “workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

The good deeds mentioned in these verses all deal with common, everyday needs. There is no mention of monumental undertakings or of spectacular accomplishments (cf. Matt. 7:21-23, where the claim to the spectacular is useless) but only of routine, day-to-day kindnesses that help meet the needs of fellow believers. Nothing more evidences conversion than a life marked by the compassion of God and the meekness and love of Christ. When the disciples of John the Baptist wanted evidence that Jesus was the Messiah, He replied by telling them not just about His spectacular healings but also about how He treated those in need (Matt. 11:4-6). When He announced His messianic credentials to the people of Nazareth, He again reflected not on the amazing but on the way He treated the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the downtrodden (Luke 4:18-19). The person who belongs to Christ will demonstrate such compassion and be humble about it.

When the King's self-effacing servants ask, **“Lord, when did we do all those things for You?” the King will answer and say to them, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.”**

The King's addressing these people as **brothers of Mine** gives still further evidence that they are already children of God and do not become so because of their good works. The writer of Hebrews declared, “For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren” (Heb. 2:11). “The one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him,” Paul says (1 Cor. 6:17), and because of that union a believer can say, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me” (Gal. 2:20).

When the disciples were arguing about which one of them was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus set a small child in front of them and said, “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). A person who does not come to Christ in the humble trustfulness that is characteristic of small children will have no part in His kingdom at all, much less be considered great in it. Jesus continued, “Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me” (vv. 4-5).

The physical child standing before them represented the spiritual child of God, the person who is converted (v. 3) by believing in Christ (v. 6). The person who lovingly serves the children of God proves himself to be a child of God.

“He who receives you receives Me,” Jesus told the disciples on another occasion, “and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me” (Matt. 10:40). Whatever believers do for each other they also do for their Lord Jesus Christ, and the person who genuinely receives and serves Christians in Christ’s name proves he himself is a Christian. The self-giving service of Christians to each other in Christ’s name is a key external mark that identifies them as God’s people. Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

It is to the practical manifestations of such love that Christ the King will call attention as he ushers the Tribulation saints into His millennial kingdom. Believers during those seven years, especially during the devastating last three and one-half years, will have great need for the basics Jesus has just mentioned. Because of their identity with Christ, they will often be hungry, thirsty, without decent shelter or clothing, sick, imprisoned, and alienated from the mainstream of society.

Those who will have met the needs of fellow believers will themselves have suffered great need. Few, if any, believers during the frightful days of the Tribulation will be able to give out of abundance. Most of them will have resources hardly sufficient to meet their own needs. Their divinely inspired generosity to each other will have set them apart as the Lords people even before, as returning King, He publicly declares them to be His own.

THE CONDEMNATION OF THE UNSAVED

Then He will also say to those on His left, “Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.” Then they themselves also will answer, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a

stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?” Then He will answer them, saying, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (25:41-46)

To the lost who will be gathered **on His left** the King will say, **“Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.”** Joining the unredeemable **devil and his angels** in the **eternal fire** of hell will be those human beings who refused to believe.

It is just as obvious that Christ does not condemn these people because they failed to serve Him (vv. 42-43) as it is that He does not save the others because they did serve Him (vv. 34-35). These are **accursed** because they rejected Christ, just as those who enter the kingdom are righteous (v. 37) because they accepted Him. Their rejection of Christ left them in a state where they were not able to do righteous deeds.

Jesus is speaking of eternal *separation* from God and from His goodness, righteousness, truth, joy, peace, and every other good thing. He is speaking of eternal *association* with **the devil and his angels** in the place of torment God **prepared** for them. He is speaking of eternal *isolation*, where there will be no fellowship, no consolation, and no encouragement. He is speaking of eternal *duration* and of eternal *affliction*, from which there will be no relief or respite.

The evidence that those rejected people never belonged to Christ will be that they did not love and serve His people. Their response to believers’ needs will have been just the opposite of those who enter the kingdom. When, vicariously through the needs of His people, Christ was **hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison**, those unbelievers refused to minister to Him. And in so doing they proved they did not belong to Him.

Like the righteous who are received into the kingdom, the accursed who are rejected will also be amazed at the Lord’s words to them. But they will ask, **“Lord, when did we *not* minister to you in those ways?”** He will reply, **“Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.”** To fail to serve Christ’s

people is to fail to serve Him, and to fail to serve Him is to prove one does not belong to Him.

It is significant that the marks of lostness Jesus mentions here are not gross sins committed but rather simple acts of kindness *not* committed. The five foolish virgins who had no oil for their lamps were not shut out of the wedding feast because they were morally wicked but because they were unprepared for the bridegroom (see Matt. 25:1-13). In the same way, the slave with one talent was not cast into outer darkness because he embezzled the master's money but because he failed to invest it (vv. 14-30). Also in the same way, a person who is shut out of the kingdom of God is not condemned because of the greatness of his sin but because of the absence of his faith. It is not that those who are damned to hell are equally wretched and vile; their common reason for damnation is lack of faith.

Jesus uses the same word (*aiōnios*, **eternal**) to describe salvation and condemnation. If believers will be in heaven with God forever, the lost will be in hell with the devil forever.

Since the millennial kingdom will be worldwide, there will be no place on earth for the accursed to go. They will be slain on the spot and go immediately into the **eternal punishment** of hell, suffering permanent, everlasting crystallization of their state of spiritual death. At the end of the thousand years their bodies will be raised (cf. John 5:28-29), and they will again stand before God for final sentencing and final condemnation in bodies suited for hell's torments.

But **the righteous** will go away **into eternal life**, to spend all eternity glorified with their Lord and Savior. In marvelous contrast to the prospect of the accursed, at the end of the thousand-year earthly kingdom the righteous will discover that their eternal blessedness will only have begun.

Preparing for Christ's

Death

(26:1-16)

11

And it came about that when Jesus had finished all these words, He said to His disciples, "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man is to be delivered up for crucifixion." Then the chief priests and the elders of the people were gathered together in the court of the high priest, named Caiaphas; and they plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth, and kill Him. But they were saying, "Not during the festival, lest a riot occur among the people."

Now when Jesus was in Bethany, at the home of Simon the leper, a woman came to Him with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume, and she poured it upon His head as He reclined at the table. But the disciples were indignant when they saw this, and said, "Why this waste? For this perfume might have been sold for a high price and the money given to the poor." But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you bother the woman? For she has done a good deed to Me. For the poor you have with you always; but you do not always have Me. For when she poured this perfume upon My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial. Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done shall also be spoken of in memory of her."

Then one of the twelve, named Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests, and said, "What are you willing to give me to deliver Him up to you?" And they weighed out to him thirty pieces of silver. And from then on he began looking for a good opportunity to betray Him. (26:1-16)

Chapter 26 begins the last and most pivotal section of Matthew's presentation of the gospel. Everything else has been a prologue, an

introduction to the great conclusion, which focuses on the cross of Jesus Christ—the culmination of the gospel and the culmination of redemptive history, the only eternal hope of fallen mankind.

The hymn writer John Bowring exulted,

In the cross of Christ I glory,
Tow'ring o'er the wrecks of time.
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.

Everything in the sacred story of God's redemptive plan does indeed center on the cross, apart from which no other revelation or work of God would have any ultimate value for sinful man. It is through the cross of Christ alone that the Lord has provided the way for sinners to be saved and united with Him, the holy God. There is no salvation, no gospel, no biblical Christianity apart from the cross of Christ. It is because he unequivocally believed that central biblical truth Paul could tell the Corinthians, "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2).

The cross is the essence of redemptive truth—foreshadowed in the acceptable sacrifice of Abel, in the ark that saved Noah and his family, in the substitute ram provided to Abraham on Mount Moriah as the substitute for Isaac, in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, in the struck rock that brought forth water in the wilderness, in the Levitical sacrifices, in the serpent lifted up in the wilderness for healing, in Boaz as Ruth's kinsman redeemer, and in countless other Old Testament persons and events. In the deepest sense, all Old Testament truth and history point unerringly to the cross of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist, the last prophet of the Old Covenant, testified of Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Above all else, the Christian gospel is the message of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that is the dominant and supreme focus of both testaments, the Old as well as the New.

Matthew deals with the cross in a concise and straightforward way. His gospel could well be called an expanded narrative of the cross, and in

the last three chapters he focuses on this central theme in several culminating elements. In chapter 26 he details the preparation for the cross and the arrest of Jesus. In chapter 27, he presents Jesus' trials, execution, and burial. And in chapter 28 he narrates the Lord's resurrection victory over death and His final instructions to the disciples.

Chapter 26 picks up the narrative at the end of the Olivet discourse, which **Jesus had just finished**. It was still Wednesday, an unusually eventful day that had included Jesus' teaching the multitudes in the Temple and His excoriating the Jewish religious leaders for their hypocritical ungodliness. Upon leaving the Temple, He went with His disciples to the Mount of Olives, where He privately taught them about His second coming (Matt. 24:3-25:46).

Then the Lord abruptly brought them back to the central reality of His first coming. For the fourth and last time (see Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19) He told them of His inevitable death, which would occur only two days hence (26:2). The crucifixion itself was the next major event in Messiah's mission. Before He should return in glory and power He must die in willing and humble submission to His Father's plan.

In 26:1-16, Matthew presents four incidents that give distinct perspectives on the preparations for Jesus' imminent death: the preparation of sovereign grace (v. 2), the preparation of hateful rejection (vv. 3-5), the preparation of loving worship (vv. 6-13), and the preparation of betraying hypocrisy (vv. 14-16). Each of those events was in the eternal plan of God for the redemption of the world, and each one transpired precisely according to that divine master plan.

THE PREPARATION OF SOVEREIGN GRACE

You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man is to be delivered up for crucifixion. (26:2)

In His incarnation, Jesus voluntarily limited the use of His omniscience, His glory, and certain other attributes of His deity (cf. Phil. 2:7-8). In His humility and self-imposed limitations as a man, Jesus taught only the divine truth that His heavenly Father revealed to Him. "The Father Himself who sent Me," Jesus said, "has given Me commandment, what to say, and what to speak" (John 12:49; cf. Matt. 24:36).

Now Jesus knew it was the Father's time for Him to die, and He not only declared again that He must suffer and be crucified but specified that His death was only **two days** away, at the beginning of **the Passover**. At that divinely appointed time **the Son of Man would be delivered up for crucifixion**.

Unbelieving skeptics have long tried to explain Jesus' death as a quirk of fate, the unintended termination of a well-meaning revolution that was discovered and crushed or the sad end to the delusions of a madman. Others picture Jesus as a visionary whose dreams were ahead of the age in which He lived, or as a prophet who overstated His claims and thereby roused the ire of the religious establishment. But such assertions do not square with the gospel accounts and are blasphemous.

As already noted, Jesus had predicted at least three times previously that He would suffer to the death but would rise again. He had even indicated that His death would be in Jerusalem and that He would rise on the third day. He was on a divine timetable, and no human plans or power could cause that timetable to vary in a single detail. "No one has taken [My life] away from Me," He declared, "but I lay it down on my own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again" (John 10:18). When Pilate said to Jesus, "'Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?'" Jesus answered, 'You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above' " (John 19:10-11).

There were many times when people sought to kill Jesus but were unable to do so. The Jewish religious leaders began plotting His death soon after He began His public ministry (John 5:18), but they were not able to fulfill that intention until it fit into God's timetable.

The first attempt on Jesus' life was made shortly after He was born, when Herod massacred all the male infants in the vicinity of Bethlehem. God sent an angel to warn Joseph to take Jesus and His mother to Egypt until the danger was over. On one occasion when He was ministering in a synagogue in His home town of Nazareth, the people became incensed by His claim to be fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy and by His reminding them of several instances when God chose to bless certain Gentiles rather than Jews. They succeeded in leading Him to the edge of a high cliff on the outskirts of the city, but before they could throw Him to

His death, He miraculously passed through their midst and went His way (Luke 4:16-30).

After Jesus healed the crippled man at the pool of Bethesda, the Jewish leaders began “seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God” (John 5:18). To some people Jesus became known as “the man whom they are seeking to kill” (John 7:25). But when the Temple police were sent to arrest Him for healing a man on the Sabbath, they returned empty-handed. When the chief priests and Pharisees asked the officers why they did not bring Jesus back with them, they replied, “Never did a man speak the way this man speaks” (John 7:44-46).

All of those attempts to kill Jesus, and perhaps others that are not recorded, failed because it was not God’s time or God’s way for the Son to die. Only the sovereign grace of God could have brought Jesus to the cross. No human power could have accomplished it apart from God’s will, and no human power could now prevent it, because it was now God’s plan. As Jesus declared at the Last Supper, “the Son of Man is going as it has been determined” (Luke 22:22). And as Peter declared at Pentecost, Jesus was “delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23).

The appropriate time for Jesus to die was at **Passover**, when the sacrificial lambs were slain, because that celebration pointed to “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). The sacrifices of all the other lambs were but faint symbols of what the true Lamb was soon to accomplish in reality.

As Philip explained to the Ethiopian, Jesus was the Lamb predicted by Isaiah, led to slaughter but not opening His mouth (Acts 8:32-34). As Paul declared to the Corinthian believers, Jesus was “Christ our Passover [who] also has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7). As Peter proclaimed to the scattered and persecuted saints of the first-century church, Jesus was the unblemished Lamb “foreknown before the foundation of the world, but[who] has appeared in these last times for the sake of you” (1 Pet. 1:19-20). As John saw on Patmos, Jesus was “the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing” (Rev. 5:12).

THE PREPARATION OF HATEFUL REJECTION

Then the chief priests and the elders of the people were gathered together in the court of the high priest, named Caiaphas; and they plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth, and kill Him. But they were saying, “Not during the festival, lest a riot occur among the people.” (26:3-5)

As Jesus was speaking to His disciples that Wednesday evening on the Mount of Olives, the Sanhedrin, composed primarily of **the chief priests and the elders of the people**, was **gathered together in the court** of the palace **of the high priest, named Caiaphas**. The **chief priests** represented the wealthy and influential religious nobility and **the elders** represented the wealthy and influential lay nobility. Scribes were present when Jesus was taken to Caiaphas’s house after He was arrested (Matt. 26:57), and it is likely that some of them were also there at this time.

According to the famous Jewish historian Josephus, the full name of the **high priest** was Joseph **Caiaphas**. He was a conniving, treacherous, and deceitful man depicted in Scripture in the one-dimensional role of Jesus’ antagonist. In every passage where he is mentioned, he is seen pursuing the destruction of Jesus. Like Herod, his hatred and fear of Jesus was not theological but political. Caiaphas wanted to destroy Jesus because he feared that He posed a serious threat to his position and power over the Jewish people. Driven purely by greed and selfish, jealous ambition, he had no sense of justice, righteousness, or propriety. He had no regard for his country, his people, or his religion, except as those could be used to personal advantage. His basic operating principle was expediency, epitomized for all time in his infamous declaration: “It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish” (John 11:50).

The high priesthood traditionally was passed on through the Levitical line, but during the Roman occupation the position generally was sold or bestowed as a political favor. Because the Jewish people would not have tolerated a high priest without some Levitical heritage, **Caiaphas** married the daughter of Annas, his predecessor in the high priesthood. The two men even served jointly for a period of time (see Luke 3:2). Caiaphas served as high priest from A.D. 15 to 37, an unparalleled tenure. To hold the

office for that long required a close relationship with Rome, and over the period of some hundred years, 28 different men served as high priest. Caiaphas's successor lasted only 50 days in office.

Caiaphas was the epitome of the decadent religious system that now dominated Israel. Wicked as he was, he alone could enter the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement and offer the sacrifice. He supervised all the priestly functions in the Temple and profited from the merchandising there that had so incensed Jesus that He twice drove out the moneychangers and sellers of sacrificial animals (John 2:14-16; Matt. 21:12-13).

The Sanhedrin had assembled in Caiaphas's house for one purpose: to plot how they could **seize Jesus**. They wanted to do it **by stealth** in order not to antagonize the masses in the city where Jesus was popular; and once they had Him firmly in their grasp they would then **kill Him** when it seemed propitious. They had endured more of Him than they could tolerate and were determined to put an end to His exposure of their hypocrisy and ungodliness and His threat to their power and wealth. Apparently they planned to arrest Him as soon as possible, before He had opportunity to escape or amass further support among the people. He would then be held in custody until the Passover crowds had left Jerusalem, making it safer to put Him to death, perhaps also in secret. Therefore **they were saying, "Not during the festival."**

Jerusalem was swollen to near bursting with pilgrims from all parts of the world who had come to worship at the Passover **festival**. According to Josephus, some 256,500 sacrificial lambs were slain during a typical Passover. And because tradition required that no fewer than ten people were to eat of one lamb, the number of celebrants could have exceeded two million. Many of the worshipers would have been from Galilee and other places where Jesus had ministered and gained great popularity for His powerful preaching and miracle working. And a large number of those admirers doubtlessly were among the multitudes who, only a few days earlier, had strewn garments and palm branches on the road before Jesus and acclaimed Him with shouts of "Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord" (Matt. 21:9).

From the standpoint of the Jewish leaders, therefore, Passover was the worst possible time for them to take direct action against Jesus,

especially to put Him to death. They feared it would surely cause a **riot . . . among the people**. But Passover was the time God had chosen, and those hateful rejecters would crucify Jesus according to God's plan rather than their own. During the many times when they wanted to kill Jesus immediately, they could not. Now, when they wanted to postpone putting Him to death, they could not. God's time was not eight days hence but two, not after the Passover but at its commencement. When, by God's sovereign allowance, Jesus' enemies finally succeeded in putting Him to death, it was at the very time they most wanted to avoid.

THE PREPARATION OF LOVING WORSHIP

Now when Jesus was in Bethany, at the home of Simon the leper, a woman came to Him with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume, and she poured it upon His head as He reclined at the table. But the disciples were indignant when they saw this, and said, "Why this waste? For this perfume might have been sold for a high price and the money given to the poor." But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you bother the woman? For she has done a good deed to Me. For the poor you have with you always; but you do not always have Me. For when she poured this perfume upon My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial. Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done shall also be spoken of in memory of her." (26:6-13)

Matthew here presents a flashback to the previous Saturday, when Jesus came into the area of **Bethany** and Bethphage, just east of Jerusalem near the Mount of Olives (see Matt. 21:1; Mark 11:1). In this touching account, a third preparation for Jesus' crucifixion is portrayed. It is in stark contrast to that of the Sanhedrin, reflecting loving worship rather than hateful rejection.

While in **Bethany** Jesus and the disciples were invited to **the home of Simon the leper** for supper. From John's account we learn that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were also present and that Martha served the meal, probably as a gesture of friendship to **Simon** as well as to the Lord (John 12:1-3).

Since a **leper** was not allowed to live in towns or cities or to associate with nonlepers, it is clear that **Simon** had been cleansed. And because that dread disease was incurable by medical means, he apparently had been healed miraculously by Jesus. In deep gratitude for that deliverance, he had asked Jesus and the others to his house for a meal.

During the supper a **woman**, whom Matthew does not identify but John tells us was Mary (12:3), **came to Him with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume, and she poured it upon His head as He reclined at the table.** From Mark we learn that the **very costly perfume** was worth “over three hundred denarii,” a year’s wages for a common laborer or soldier, and that the expensive **alabaster vial** was broken, making Mary’s act even more costly (Mark 14:3-5).

Mary had always been specially attentive to the Lord’s teaching (see Luke 10:39), and it seems that on this occasion she accepted the reality and understood the significance of Jesus’ impending death better than the Twelve. She may have sensed that in His tragic death somehow lay her redemption. She understood what the disciples did not want to understand, that Jesus had to die in order to be raised again. Unlike them, she was not caught up in the carnal, selfish desire for Christ to establish His earthly kingdom immediately in order to share in the glory and privilege that event would bring.

In an act of unmeasured love, Mary **poured** the perfume **upon His head as He reclined at the table.** The perfume was a pound of pure nard, John tells us, which she also used to anoint Jesus’ feet (John 12:3). In that adoring testimony of love and honor Mary poured out her soul in worship even as she poured out the perfume. Being absolutely controlled by adoration for her Lord, she lost all sense of restraint and economy.

Mary did not offer that valuable possession to support a program or a ministry but offered it to Christ Himself. She did not selfishly seek a visible and tangible result from her generosity but without hesitation offered her most expensive earthly possession to the Lord in an act of effusive, adoring worship.

Having no comprehension of what prompted Mary to do what she was doing, the insensitive **disciples were indignant when they saw this, and** piously asked, “**Why this waste?**” At the instigation of the traitorous Judas (see John 12:4-5) they suggested that the “**perfume might have been sold for a high price and the money given to the poor.**” Even had

that pragmatic and seemingly altruistic notion been pursued, however, it would not likely have benefited many **poor** people. Because Judas was treasurer of the group and also a thief, he no doubt would have embezzled most of the money for himself (see John 12:6). Now that he was totally disillusioned with Jesus, he probably felt even more justified in stealing whatever he could before going his own way.

Although the disciples' indignation was not voiced openly but only among themselves (Mark 14:4) and to Mary, **Jesus was aware of this** and rebuked them for it. **“Why do you bother the woman?”** He asked, **“For she has done a good deed to Me. For the poor you have with you always; but you do not always have Me.”**

In the parable of the sheep and the goats the Lord had just graphically taught that meeting the physical needs of His people is of the utmost importance and is a mark of genuine salvation (Matt. 25:34-36). But He was very soon to end His earthly ministry and return to His Father in heaven. And before He returned He would suffer, die, and be raised up. This was therefore not the time for philanthropy but adoration, not the time for charity but for worship. Just as she had done on an earlier occasion, Mary now had “chosen the good part” (Luke 10:42) and was performing a beautiful **good deed** to her Lord.

Genuine worship is the supreme service a Christian can offer to Christ. There is a time for ministering to the poor, the sick, the naked, and the imprisoned. There is a time for witnessing to the lost and seeking to lead them to the Savior. There is a time for discipling new believers and helping them grow in the faith. There is a time for careful study and teaching of God's Word. But above all else that the Lord requires of His people is their true worship, without which everything else they may do in His name is empty and powerless.

The worshiper emulated by Mary does not ask, “How much is it going to cost?” or, “Do I have the time?” Like her, the true worshiper gives Jesus whatever he has, knowing it is trifling compared to what has been received from Him.

In this particular and unique act of worship, when Mary **poured this perfume upon Jesus' body**, without her even realizing it **she did it to prepare Him for burial**. It became a symbolic deed that anticipated His death and burial.

What Mary did was of such lasting significance that Jesus declared, **“Truly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done shall also be spoken of in memory of her.”** Through the accounts of this story in three of the gospels, the Holy Spirit secured for posterity a memorial to her love and generous worship. In fulfillment of the Lord’s prediction, for nearly two thousand years **what this woman** did has indeed been **spoken of in memory of her**. She is perpetually an example to all Christians of unselfish, sacrificial adoration.

THE PREPARATION OF BETRAYING HYPOCRISY

Then one of the twelve, named Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests, and said, “What are you willing to give me to deliver Him up to you?” And they weighed out to him thirty pieces of silver. And from then on he began looking for a good opportunity to betray Him. (26:14-16)

In contrast to Mary, who gave an open testimony of loving worship, **Judas Iscariot** gave clandestine testimony of betraying hypocrisy.

Going **to the chief priests**, probably while they were still assembled in Caiaphas’s house, Judas asked callously, **“What are you willing to give me to deliver Him up to you?”** No doubt pleasantly amazed that one of Jesus’ own disciples would be the means of their destroying Him, the religious leaders eagerly **weighed out to Judas thirty pieces of silver**. For the price of a slave (see Ex. 21:32), Judas not only sold out his teacher and leader and friend but betrayed the very Son of God, who had come to be his Savior.

Having irrevocably committed himself to the treachery, **from then on**, Judas **began looking for a good opportunity to betray** the Lord. In the eyes of Jesus’ enemies, the **good opportunity** would be when He was “apart from the multitude” (Luke 22:6), as He soon would be in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the greatest example of forsaken opportunity the world has ever known, Judas forever turned his back on the Lord and on his own salvation. And the Lord forever turned His back on Judas.

The Last Passover

(26:17-30)

12

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?” And He said, “Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, “My time is at hand; I am to keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.” ’ ” And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover.

Now when evening had come, He was reclining at the table with the twelve disciples. And as they were eating, He said, “Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me.” And being deeply grieved, they each one began to say to Him, “Surely not I, Lord?” And He answered and said, “He who dipped his hand with Me in the bowl is the one who will betray Me. The Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.” And Judas, who was betraying Him, answered and said, “Surely it is not I, Rabbi?” He said to him, “You have said it yourself.”

And while they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is My body.” And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.”

And after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.
(26:17-30)

As noted throughout these volumes, Matthew presents Jesus as King, the sovereign Lord of the universe come to earth in human flesh.

Even in the midst of Jesus' betrayal, mock trials, and execution, He is revealed in humble but regal dignity. Far from diminishing His majesty and glory, those events portray the powerful and culminating expression of His sovereign grace and power. Through man's ultimate act of sinful depravity, God accomplished His ultimate act of righteous redemption.

In the previous chapter, four initial elements of preparation for Jesus' death were unfolded. Each of those involved the plan and work of others than Christ Himself. Now, on Jesus' last day (Thursday) with the disciples until after His resurrection, Matthew presents four elements of Jesus' own preparation for His sacrificial death: experiencing the final Passover (26:17-25), establishing the Lord's Supper (vv. 26-30), helping the impotent disciples (vv. 31-35), and praying to the Father (36-39). The present chapter will discuss the first two of those elements.

EXPERIENCING THE FINAL PASSOVER

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?" And He said, "Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, "My time is at hand; I am to keep the Passover at your house with My disciples." ' " And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover.

Now when evening had come, He was reclining at the table with the twelve disciples. And as they were eating, He said, "Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me." And being deeply grieved, they each one began to say to Him, "Surely not I, Lord?" And He answered and said, "He who dipped his hand with Me in the bowl is the one who will betray Me. The Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born." And Judas, who was betraying Him, answered and said, "Surely it is not I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said it yourself." (26:17-25)

Leading up to and including the beginning of the final Passover meal are four sub-elements of Jesus' own preparation for His sacrificial death: setting the time (vv. 17-19), sharing the table (v. 20-21a), shocking the Twelve (vv. 21b-24), and signifying the traitor (v. 25).

SETTING THE TIME

Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?” And He said, “Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, “My time is at hand; I am to keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.” ’ ” And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover. (26:17-19)

The Jewish calendar was filled with religious celebrations, many of them involving feasts. The feast of Pentecost, or of Weeks, commemorated God’s provision at harvest time (see Ex. 23:16). It was that feast which the Jews were celebrating in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit came upon believers and Peter delivered his first sermon (Acts 2). The feast of Tabernacles, or Booths, commemorated Israel’s wandering in the wilderness for forty years, when they lived in temporary dwellings and were dependent on God’s direct provision for food and water (see Lev 23:33-43). The Day of Atonement was the highest holy day of the year, culminating in the once-a-year sacrifice offered for sins in the Holy of Holies by the high priest. The blood of the sacrifice was then sprinkle don the altar, symbolizing God’s provision of atonement for the sins of His people (Lev 23:27-32). The feast of Purim celebrated the protection from slaughter of the Jewish exiles in Persia through the intervention of Queen Esther (Esther 9:16-19). The feast of Dedication, or Hanukkah, commemorated the victory of Judas Maccabeus over the Syrian despot Antiochus Epiphanes and the restoration of Temple worship in 164 B.C. (see 1 Macc. 4:36-61).

But in many ways the feast of Passover, closely associated with the feast of Unleavened Bread, was the central feast of the Jewish year. These two feasts combined to make an eight-day celebration that began with the Passover. As reflected in Matthew 26:17, the two were so closely connected in the minds of Jews that the feast of **Unleavened Bread** was used as a comprehensive designation that included **the Passover**. The two names were, in fact, used interchangeably to designate the entire eight day celebration. Technically, however, the **Passover** was celebrated only on **the first day**, the fourteenth of Nisan, and the feast of the **Unleavened Bread** followed from the fifteenth through the twenty-first of Nisan.

Both feasts commemorated the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage. The feast of **Unleavened Bread** was named after the type of bread the Israelites were to take with them as they left Egypt in haste. Ordinary bread of that day, as in our own, used leaven, or yeast, to make it rise and become soft. Before a batch of bread was baked, a piece was pulled off and saved as a starter for the next batch. When it was later placed in fresh dough it would cause it to ferment and rise, and in every household that process was continually repeated.

Throughout Scripture leaven is used to represent influence, usually evil influence. Therefore, as a symbol of leaving behind all evil influence of their cruel and pagan captors, the Israelites were not to take with the many remnants of leavened bread they had prepared in Egypt. As part of the memorial they were henceforth to celebrate each year, they were to remove all leaven from their houses and eat only unleavened bread for seven days (Ex. 12:14-15).

As already noted, the **Passover** celebration began the day before the feast of Unleavened Bread, although traditionally it was considered to be the first day of the combined festival. The Mosaic law required that sacrificial lambs for Passover be selected on the tenth day of the first month (originally called Abib and later Nisan) and that the lamb be kept in the household until it was sacrificed on the fourteenth (Ex. 12:2-6). In the year Jesus was crucified (whether taken as A.D. 30 or 33), the tenth of Nisan was the Monday of Passover week. Therefore, although the incident is not mentioned in the gospels, the disciples would have selected a lamb on the day of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, perhaps keeping it at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany, where they were staying.

As mentioned in the preceding chapter, over 250,000 sacrificial lambs were slain during a typical Passover in Jesus' day. And because tradition required that no fewer than ten people or more than twenty were to eat of one lamb, the number of celebrants easily would have exceeded two million. Because the lambs had to be slaughtered within a two-hour period, an enormous amount of blood poured from the altar site in a very short period of time. Eventually it drained into the Kidron Valley, just east of the Temple, and for several days after Passover made that brook run bright crimson. The Brook Kidron thereby became still another symbol to

Jews, reminding them of the necessity of the sacrificial shedding of blood for the atoning of sin.

Yet the blood of all those lambs together could not cleanse a single sin, just as it was “impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). Those thousands of lambs were but pictures of the one perfect sacrifice that the Son of God Himself was about to make on Calvary, as the sinless, unblemished Lamb of God, offering “one sacrifice for sins for all time” (Heb. 10:12).

It was probably early on that Thursday morning that **the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?”** As mentioned above, they already would have selected a lamb several days earlier, but they had numerous other preparations to make. They would have to have the lamb slaughtered by a priest at the Temple, which, as explained below, could be done only between the hours of three and five in the afternoon. If they had not already done so, they would have to buy unleavened bread, wine, bitter herbs, and the dip for the Passover meal.

Each part of the meal was symbolic of some aspect of the deliverance from Egypt. Just as lambs had been slaughtered that long-ago night in Egypt and their blood sprinkled on the door posts to protect the firstborn from the death angel, so lambs were now slaughtered and their blood sprinkled on the altar. Likewise, the lamb was cooked and fully eaten the same evening, just as in Egypt. The four cups of wine served during the meal symbolized God’s four promises to His ancient people just before their deliverance from Egypt: “I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God” (Ex. 6:6-7).

The bowl into which the unleavened bread, the bitter herbs, and sometimes the bare hands were dipped (see Matt. 26:23) contained a paste called *charoseth*, composed of finely ground apples, dates, pomegranates, and nuts. That thick, brownish mixture was perhaps symbolic of the mud and clay used in the making of bricks for the Egyptians. Sticks of cinnamon, representing the straw used for the brick making, were also sometimes added to the *charoseth*. Into this mixture the bitter herbs would be dipped and eaten, as reminiscent of the bitterness of bondage coupled with the sweetness of deliverance.

The Passover lamb was to be slain at “twilight” (Ex. 12:6), which translates a Hebrew term literally meaning “between the two evenings.” Josephus explains that time as being between the ninth and eleventh hours of the Jewish day, which would be between three and five o’clock in the afternoon. After being slaughtered by the priest in the Temple court and having had some of its blood sprinkled on the altar, the lamb would then be taken home, roasted whole, and eaten in the special evening meal with the unleavened bread, bitter herbs, *charoseth*, and wine. Any of it that was not eaten before morning was to be burned (Ex. 12:8-10).

It is likely that by this time, that is, Thursday morning, the disciples would have bought the herbs, fruit, nuts, unleavened bread, and wine. But they did not as yet have a place to eat the meal, which had to be done within the city limits of Jerusalem. For obvious reasons, rooms suitable for eating a Passover meal were at a premium. Perhaps thinking that Jesus already had arranged for a room, the disciples asked Him, **“Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?”**

Jesus’ answer no doubt was more than a little perplexing to the two disciples, identified by Luke as Peter and John (Luke 22:8; cf. Mark 14:13), who were sent to take care of the matter.

First of all they were to **go into the city** and find **a certain man**, obviously someone they did not know. From the other two synoptic gospels we learn that the man would be carrying a pitcher of water (Mark 14:13; Luke 22:10). That would have set him apart noticeably for identification, because it was highly unusual for a man to carry such a domestic article.

When the man was found, the disciples were to **say to him, “The Teacher says, ‘My time is at hand; I am to keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.’ ”** The man carrying the water pitcher was probably a servant in the **house** where the meal was to be eaten. Therefore when Peter and John followed the servant home, they repeated Jesus’ words to the owner, who then showed them “a large upper room furnished and ready” (Mark 14:14-15).

That clandestine approach to securing a meeting place was necessary to prevent Jesus’ premature betrayal. Had the Lord announced the place earlier, Judas would surely have told the chief priests and elders (see Matt. 26:14-16), who would have arrested Jesus secretly there after dark and before the meal and the vital instruction He planned as part of it.

Even when the instructions were given to Peter and John, Judas had no way of knowing the location. He and the other nine would not find out until they arrived that evening.

In God's redemptive plan it was necessary for Jesus **to keep the Passover . . . with His disciples**. It would be His last opportunity to teach them (see John 13-17) and to have intimate fellowship with them. But more importantly even than that, it would be the time of His transforming the Passover supper of the Old Covenant, marked by the shedding of lambs' blood, into the Lord's Supper of the New Covenant, which would be marked by the shedding of His own blood (Luke 22:20). He therefore eliminated any possibility of His arrest before that crucial task could be accomplished.

Because Jesus told Peter and John to identify Him as **the Teacher**, it seems probable that the servant carrying the water pitcher, and certainly the owner of the house, were believers in the Lord. Likely Jesus secretly had prearranged for the room with the owner, who is nowhere identified by name. In any case, the Lord knew in advance that the accommodations would be large, located on an upper level, and be fully furnished for the meal (Mark 14:15).

Jesus' statement, "**My time is at hand**," was perhaps more for the sake of the disciples than the two men whom Peter and John would encounter. **Time** does not translate *chronos*, which refers to a general space or succession of time, but rather to *kairos*, a specific and often predetermined period or moment of time. Jesus' **time** was also, of course, the Father's time, the divinely appointed time when the Son would offer Himself as the sacrifice for the sins of the world (cf. 1 John 2:2). Until now, that monumental time had not come and could not have come (see John 7:6), but at this particular Passover it could not fail to come, because it was divinely ordained and fixed. That last Passover supper would set in motion the final, irreversible countdown, as it were, for the crucifixion.

I am to keep the Passover translates what is sometimes called a prophetic present tense, because it uses the normal form of the Greek present tense to state the future as if it had already arrived. Understanding the statement in that way is fitting, because our Lord was on a divine mission set in a divine timetable, both of which were unalterable. He not only was ordained to celebrate that last **Passover** Himself but to celebrate it **with His disciples**.

The profundity of Jesus' declaration is not apparent on the surface. As the events surrounding this occasion are carefully studied, however, it becomes clear that this seemingly rather ordinary statement was of momentous significance.

First of all, our Lord declared His commitment to keeping the Passover. He observed the Passover for the same reason He had been baptized, "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). Not only as a Jew but also as God's own Son it was incumbent upon Him to obey every divine commandment of the Old Testament law. "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets," He declared at the beginning of His ministry; "I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17).

Observing this particular feast was especially important to Jesus. As recorded in Luke's account, He told the disciples, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15). It was by divine imperative that Jesus not only observe this last Passover of His earthly ministry but that He observe it with the Twelve.

It was without hesitation that **the disciples, Peter and John, did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover.** Peter and John would then have had to get the lamb, probably at Bethany, and take it to the Temple for sacrifice. They were doubtlessly charged with this important task because they were the most intimate with Jesus of the Twelve. In any case, the tradition required that only two men could carry a given lamb into the Temple. Otherwise the court of sacrifice would have been hopelessly crowded, with thousands of animals to be slain and only two hours in which to do it.

It is clear from this passage in Matthew, as well from many other in all four gospel records, that Jesus and the disciples ate the Passover meal on Thursday evening. Certain other passages, however, such as the one cited below from John's gospel, indicate that some Jews celebrated the Passover on Friday, which seems to create a contradiction and has given some scholars what they think is proof of scriptural error.

The apostle John notes that after the Passover meal Jesus took His disciples out of the city to the Garden of Gethsemane, which was on the western slope of the Mount of Olives. He was arrested there and taken first to the high priest Annas (John 18:13) and then to the house of his father-in-law, Caiaphas, who also still held the title of high priest (v. 24). A few hours later, while it was still early on Friday morning, Jesus was taken to

Pilate. But the Jewish leaders would “not enter into the Praetorium in order that they might not be defiled, but might eat the Passover” (v. 28). Unlike Jesus and the disciples, those Jews obviously had not yet eaten the Passover.

Some interpreters suggest that because those religious leaders would surely have celebrated the Passover at the proper time, Jesus must have moved His observance up a day. But Jesus was meticulous in His observance of the Mosaic law and would not have desecrated such an important feast by observing it at the wrong time. Even had He wanted to do such a thing, however, He could not have, because the lamb eaten at the Passover meal first had to be slaughtered by a priest in the Temple and have its blood sprinkled on the altar. No priest would have performed that ritual a day earlier, or even an hour earlier, than the law prescribed.

Other scholars suggest that the chief priests and elders involved in Jesus’ arrest were a day late in their observance. But in spite of their control of the Temple, even those ungodly men would not have dared make an exception for themselves for this most celebrated of all feasts. Not only that, but John recognized Friday as the legitimate Passover day, reporting that when Pilate finally agreed to Jesus’ crucifixion “it was the day of preparation for the Passover” (John 19:14). In the same verse he states that “it was about the sixth hour,” that is, noon on Friday.

Some three hours later, “about the ninth hour,” Jesus cried out from the cross, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” (Matt. 27:46). Shortly after that, “Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit” (v. 50). John therefore specifically recounts that our Lord died within the prescribed time of sacrifice for the Passover lambs, from three to five o’clock in the afternoon of Passover day. At the very time those lambs were being sacrificed in the Temple, “Christ our Passover also [was] sacrificed” on Calvary (1 Cor. 5:7).

In addition to that evidence for a Friday Passover and crucifixion is the fact that, just as the tenth of Nisan was on a Monday the year Jesus was crucified, the fourteenth (the day of Passover, Ex. 12:6) was on the following Friday. Still further evidence is Joseph of Arimathea’s taking Jesus’ body down from the cross on “the preparation day, that is, the day before the Sabbath” (Mark 15:42; cf. John 19:42). That day of preparation referred to the weekly preparation for the Sabbath, not preparation for the Passover, as in John 19:14. Unless it was qualified (such as being for the

Passover), the day of preparation always referred to preparation for the Sabbath and was commonly used to designate Friday, the day before the Sabbath (Saturday).

Why, then, did Jesus observe the Passover on the previous evening?

The answer lies in a difference among the Jews in the way they reckoned the beginning and ending of days. From Josephus, the Mishna, and other ancient Jewish sources we learn that the Jews in northern Palestine calculated days from sunrise to sunrise. That area included the region of Galilee, where Jesus and all the disciples except Judas had grown up. Apparently most, if not all, of the Pharisees used that system of reckoning. But Jews in the southern part, which centered in Jerusalem, calculated days from sunset to sunset. Because all the priests necessarily lived in or near Jerusalem, as did most of the Sadducees, those groups followed the southern scheme.

That variation doubtlessly caused confusion at times, but it also had some practical benefits. During Passover time, for instance, it allowed for the feast to be celebrated legitimately on two adjoining days, thereby permitting the Temple sacrifices to be made over a total period of four hours rather than two. That separation of days may also have had the effect of reducing both regional and religious clashes between the two groups.

On that basis the seeming contradictions in the gospel accounts are easily explained. Being Galileans, Jesus and the disciples considered Passover day to have started at sunrise on Thursday and to end at sunrise on Friday. The Jewish leaders who arrested and tried Jesus, being mostly priests and Sadducees, considered Passover day to begin at sunset on Thursday and end at sunset on Friday. By that variation, predetermined by God's sovereign provision, Jesus could thereby legitimately celebrate the last Passover meal with His disciples and yet still be sacrificed on Passover day.

Once again we see how God sovereignly and marvelously provides for the precise fulfillment of His redemptive plan. Jesus was anything but a victim of men's wicked schemes, much less of blind circumstance. Every word He spoke and every action He took were divinely directed and secured. Even the words and actions by others against Him were divinely controlled (see, e.g., John 11:49-52; 19:11).

Now when evening had come, He was reclining at the table with the twelve disciples. And as they were eating, (26:20-21a)

It was now sometime after six o'clock on Thursday **evening**. Although the original Passover meal in Egypt was eaten in haste while standing, with loins girded, sandals on the feet, and staff in hand (Ex. 12:11), the ceremony had changed through the years and had become more leisurely. Therefore, rather than standing, Jesus was **reclining at the table with the twelve disciples . . . as they were eating**.

The **eating** of the Passover meal involved a strictly defined sequence. First, the initial cup of red wine mixed with water was served. Wine was always mixed with water before drinking, but during Passover it was diluted with a double amount of water, lest anyone should desecrate the most sacred occasion by becoming drunk. Partaking of the first cup was preceded by the giving of thanks to God (see Luke 22:17).

Second, the ceremonial washing of hands preceded the main part of the meal, signifying the need for moral and spiritual cleansing and holiness of heart. Because they were celebrating God's deliverance from spiritual bondage to sin as they remembered His deliverance from physical bondage to Egypt, it was important that celebrants come to the table cleansed.

It is significant that shortly after that the disciples started another "dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest" (Luke 22:24). After having cleansed their hands, it was obvious that their hearts were still as proud, self-serving, and ambitious as ever (cf. Mark 9:34). It may have been at this time that Jesus "rose from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, . . . began to wash the disciples' feet" (John 13:4-5). The Lord specifically explained to the disciples that He had washed their feet "as an example that you also should do as I did to you" (v. 15). Washing another person's feet was normally done by a servant and was considered by most Jews to be the most demeaning of tasks. Jesus' example of humble, selfless service was a stinging rebuke of the disciples' pride and a profound lesson in condescending love.

To that visualized rebuke the Lord added a verbal one, saying, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.' But not so with you, but let him who is the

greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as the servant” (Luke 22:25-26).

The third part of the Passover meal was the eating of bitter herbs, symbolic of the bitter bondage their forefathers had endured in Egypt. As mentioned above, these herbs and pieces of unleavened bread were dipped in the *charoseth*, the thick mixture of ground fruit and nuts.

The fourth part was the taking of the second cup of wine. When the head of the household, the Lord in the present case, took that second cup, he would explain the meaning of the Passover.

Following that would be singing from the Hallel, which means “praise” and is the term from which *hallelujah* is derived. The Hallel consisted of Psalms 113-18, and at this point the first two were normally sung.

After the singing, the roasted lamb would be brought out. The head of the household would again wash his hands and then break pieces of the unleavened bread and hand them out to be eaten with the lamb.

SHOCKING THE TWELVE

He said, “Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me.” And being deeply grieved, they each one began to say to Him, “Surely not I, Lord?” And He answered and said, “He who dipped his hand with Me in the bowl is the one who will betray Me. The Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.” (26:21b-24)

Paradidōmi (**betray**) literally means to give over and was often used of delivering a prisoner over to prison or punishment. Jesus had mentioned His impending death to the disciples several times, but this was the first time He mentioned His betrayal. And it was especially painful for the disciples to hear Jesus say that the betrayer would be “**one of you.**”

In the ancient Near East, the eating of a meal with someone was considered a mark of friendship, and therefore to eat with a person just before betraying him would be to compound the treachery. When David experienced the betrayal of a trusted friend, he lamented: “For it is not an enemy who reproaches me, then I could bear it; nor is it one who hates me

who has exalted himself against me, then I could hide myself from him. But it is you, a man my equal, my companion and my familiar friend. We who had sweet fellowship together, walked in the house of God in the throng” (Ps. 55:12-14).

Being well aware of Jesus’ many enemies, the disciples were hardly surprised that He would be betrayed. But it was unbelievable that the betrayer would be one of their own group. Understandably, they were **deeply grieved**. John reports that they were “at a loss to know of which one He was speaking” (John 13:22). Judas was perhaps among the least suspected, because his being the group’s treasurer indicates his integrity was thought to be beyond reproach. In the midst of their agonizing and probable tears, the disciples “began to discuss among themselves which one of them it might be who was going to do this thing” (Luke 22:23). While discussing the matter among themselves, they may have pointed accusing fingers at one another, as Luke’s account might suggest (cf. v. 24). But to their credit, the primary concern of each man was the possibility of his own culpability, and **they each one began to say to Jesus, “Surely not I, Lord?”**

It was doubtlessly because Jesus had just rebuked them for their self-serving egotism and fleshly ambition that they now showed signs of genuine humility and self-distrust. They were brought face to face with the sinfulness of their own hearts. Because their sins of pride had been so clearly exposed, they were open even to the possibility that somehow they had unwittingly said or done something that endangered their Lord.

Jesus’ response did nothing to alleviate their anxiety. In fact, it emphasized again that the betrayer was one of them. He said cryptically, **“He who dipped his hand with Me in the bowl is the one who will betray Me.”** Because each one of them had **dipped his hand . . . in the bowl**, the disciples had no better idea of the betrayer’s identity than before. Jesus did, however, assure them that only one of them was guilty and that the others genuinely belonged to Him. “I do not speak of all of you,” He said. “I know the ones I have chosen; but it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me’” (John 13:18). Jesus’ quotation from Psalm 41:9 referred to Ahithophel’s betrayal of David by helping Absalom plot against his father (see 2 Sam. 16:15-17:3). Ahithophel was an Old Testament parallel to Judas, the ultimate betrayer.

But Jesus then put the betrayal in its divine perspective by assuring the disciples that the heinous act would work to the fulfillment of God's sovereign plan. **The Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him.** Jesus did not fall into Judas's trap but rather Judas, by his wicked rejection of Christ, became an instrument of God's plan. God would use even that vile scheme to work the righteousness of **the Son of Man.** The betrayal had been **written** ages beforehand in the pages of divine prophecy. Jesus Christ was "delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). Judas's malicious decision to reject and betray Christ was used by God in fulfilling Christ's gracious mission of redemption. An unholy man in the hands of a holy God was used to accomplish a holy purpose.

Contrary to the perverted reasoning of some interpreters, the fact that this sinful act was used by God to provide salvation from sin did not justify Judas by making evil good. God's sovereignly turning evil to His own righteous purposes does not make a sin any less sinful or the sinner any less guilty. God turned Judas's betrayal to His own divine purposes, but He did not thereby transform the son of perdition (John 17:12) into a son of righteousness. Judas was not an unwitting saint but a willing devil (John 6:70). The suggestion that he intentionally betrayed Jesus in order that the world might be redeemed through the crucifixion is as unscriptural as it is ludicrous. He had no interest in the salvation of the world or the coming of the kingdom. He was a consummate thief, a disillusioned, selfish mercenary who soon would sell out his teacher and friend for a mere thirty pieces of silver.

The Lord made clear that Judas's destiny was damnation. Despite the fact that God used the betrayal to fulfill prophecy, Jesus said, **"Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born."** Judas's future in hell was so terrifying that he would have been infinitely better off **if he had not been born.** He is the most graphic and tragic example of the people about whom the writer of Hebrews says that, because they "go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. . . . How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by

which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?" (Heb. 10:26-27, 29).

Yet Jesus' fearsome warning of judgment seems also to have been a final gracious appeal for Judas to turn to Him for salvation before it would forever be too late. He refused.

SIGNIFYING THE TRAITOR

And Judas, who was betraying Him, answered and said, "Surely it is not I, Rabbi?" He said to him, "You have said it yourself." (26:25)

Had Judas not said to Jesus the same thing as the others, he would have become suspect. He therefore imitated their astonished disbelief and parroted their anxious queries to the Lord. He even called Jesus **Rabbi**, as if to reinforce his feigned loyalty.

Jesus did not respond with a direct accusation but said simply, **"You have said it yourself,"** affirming that Judas had condemned himself out of his own mouth.

It is obvious the other disciples did not overhear that brief exchange, because Peter privately asked John to question Jesus about the betrayer's identity, which he did. "Jesus therefore answered, 'That is the one for whom I shall dip the morsel and give it to him.' So when He had dipped the morsel, He took and gave it to Judas, the son of Simon s Iscariot" (John 13:24-26). John thereby learned the appalling truth about Judas, but he apparently did not tell Peter at that time.

As soon as Judas took the morsel he sealed his destiny for all eternity, because "Satan then entered into him" (John 13:27). The supreme adversary of God and the ruler of darkness came himself to reside in Judas, and he became hellish to the core of his being in a way that perhaps no other human being has exceeded. In betraying the Son of God, Judas became the arch sinner of all human history.

Lest that devil incarnate participate further in the Passover meal with them or in any way interfere with Jesus' last precious moments with the true disciples, and to set him loose for the final scenes of his treachery, the Lord said to the betrayer, "What you do, do quickly" (v. 27b). Except for John, the others did not know why Jesus gave that instruction to Judas but supposed "because Judas had the money box, that Jesus was saying to

him, 'Buy things we have need of for the feast'; or else, that he should give something to the poor" (vv. 28-29). Jesus knew who the betrayer was; John knew; and Judas himself knew. But the rest did not know.

ESTABLISHING THE FUTURE PROVISION

And while they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom." (26:26-29)

After Judas left and Jesus was alone with the eleven faithful disciples, He transformed the Passover of the Old Covenant into the Lord's Supper of the New Covenant.

Passover was the oldest of Jewish festivals, older even than the covenant with Moses at Sinai. It was established before the priesthood, the Tabernacle, or the law. It was ordained by God while Israel was still enslaved in Egypt, and it had been celebrated by His people for some 1,500 years.

But the Passover Jesus was now concluding with the disciples was the last divinely sanctioned Passover ever to be observed. No Passover celebrated after that has been authorized or recognized by God. Significant as it was under the Old Covenant, it became a remnant of a bygone economy, an extinct dispensation, an expired covenant. Its observance since that time has been no more than a religious relic that serves no divinely acknowledged purpose and has no divinely blessed significance. To celebrate the Passover is to celebrate the shadow, after the reality has already come. Celebrating deliverance from Egypt is a weak substitute for celebrating deliverance from sin.

In fact, Christ ended the Passover and instituted a new memorial to Himself. It would not look back to a lamb in Egypt as the symbol of God's redeeming love and power, but to the very Lamb of God, who, by the sacrificial shedding of His own blood, took away the sins of the whole

world. In that one meal Jesus both terminated the old and inaugurated the new.

Jesus' institution of the new memorial consisted of three primary elements: the directive (vv. 26a, 27), the doctrine (vv. 26b, 28), and the duration (v. 29).

THE DIRECTIVE

And while they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; . . ." And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; (26:26a, 27)

It is not certain as to what part of the meal **they were eating** at this time, but the supper was still in progress, and our Lord instituted the new memorial in the midst of the old.

First, **Jesus took some bread** and offered a **blessing** of thanks to His heavenly Father, as He always did before eating (see, e.g., Matt. 14:19; 15:36). The unleavened bread was baked in large, flat, crisp loaves, which Jesus **broke** into pieces before He **gave it to the disciples** with the instruction, **"Take, eat."** The fact that He **broke** the bread does not symbolize a broken body, because John makes clear that, in fulfillment of prophecy, "Not a bone of Him shall be broken" (John 19:36; cf. Ps. 34:20), just as no bones of the original Passover lambs in Egypt were broken (Ex. 12:46).

Shortly after that, **when He had taken a cup and given thanks** again, **He gave it to them saying, "Drink from it, all of you."** The verb behind **given thanks** is *eucharisteō*, and it is from that term that we get Eucharist, as the Lord's Supper is sometimes called.

As would be expected, all eleven disciples drank of it (Mark 14:23). It should be noted that the Roman Catholic practice of not allowing the entire congregation to partake of the cup is in direct contradiction of Jesus' explicit directive, of the disciples' obedient example, and of Paul's later teaching (see 1 Cor. 10:16, 21; 11:28).

Those two acts of Jesus were normal features of the Passover, in which unleavened bread was eaten and diluted wine was drunk at several points during the meal. This was probably the third **cup**, called the cup of

blessing. Paul refers to it by that name in his first letter to the Corinthians: “Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ?” (10:16). It is from the King James translation of that verse (“. . . is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?”) that Communion, another name for the Lord’s Supper, is derived. A few verses later Paul refers to this cup as “the cup of the Lord” (v. 21).

THE DOCTRINE

“this is My body. . . . for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins” (26:26b, 28)

Breaking the unleavened bread was a normal part of the traditional Passover ceremony. But Jesus now gave it an entirely new meaning, saying, **“This is My body.”** The original unleavened bread symbolized severance from the old life in Egypt, carrying nothing of its pagan and oppressive “leaven” into the Promised Land. It represented a separation from worldliness and sin and the beginning of a new life of holiness and godliness.

By His divine authority, Jesus transformed that symbolism into another. From henceforth the bread would represent Christ’s own **body**, sacrificed for the salvation of men. Luke reports that Jesus added, “given for you; do this in remembrance of Me” (22:19), indicating He was instituting a memorial of His sacrificial death for His followers to observe.

In saying the bread **is** His **body**, Jesus obviously was not speaking literally. A similarly foolish misunderstanding already had caused the Pharisees to ridicule Him and many superficial disciples to desert Him (see John 6:48-66). It is the same misunderstanding reflected in the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. That literalistic notion is an absurd misinterpretation of Scripture.

Jesus’ statement about eating His body was no more literal than His saying He is the Vine and His followers are the branches (John 15:5) or than John the Baptist’s calling Him the Lamb of God (John 1:29).

As the disciples drank of the cup Jesus said, **“This is My blood of the covenant.”** From Luke we learn that the Lord specified “new

covenant” (22:20), clearly distinguishing it from all previous covenants, including the Mosaic.

When God made covenants with Noah and Abraham, those covenants were ratified with blood (Gen. 8:20; 15:9-10). When the covenant at Sinai was ratified, “Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words’ ” (Ex. 24:8). When God brought reconciliation with Himself, the price was always blood, because “without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22; cf. 1 Pet. 1:2). A sacrificial animal not only had to be killed but its blood had to be shed. “The life of all flesh is its blood” (Lev. 17:14), and therefore for a life truly to be sacrificed, its blood had to be shed.

Jesus therefore did not simply have to die but had to shed His own precious blood (1 Pet. 1:19). Although He did not bleed to death, Jesus bled both before He died and as He died—from the wounds of the crown of thorns, from the lacerations of the scourging, and from the nail holes in His hands and feet. After He was dead, a great volume of His blood poured out from the spear thrust in His side.

Obviously there was nothing in the chemistry of Christ’s blood that saves. And although the shedding of His blood was required, it symbolized His atoning death, the giving of His unblemished, pure, and wholly righteous life for the corrupt, depraved, and wholly sinful lives of unregenerate men. Representative of the giving of that sinless life was the pouring out of that precious blood **for many for forgiveness of sins**. That blood made atonement for the sins of all mankind, Gentile as well as Jew, who place their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. The **many** includes those who trusted in God before Christ died as well as those who have and will trust in Him after His death. Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and every other true believer who lived before Christ, was saved by Christ’s atoning death, as are believers of the New Covenant age. It was because of that truth that Jesus declared to the unbelieving Jewish leaders, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56).

THE DURATION

But I say to you, “I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.”
(26:29)

As noted above, the divinely-ordained Passover remembrance ended when Jesus celebrated it that night with His disciples. Any observance of it since that time has been based solely on human tradition, the perpetuation of an outward form that has long since lost its spiritual significance. But for those who belong to Jesus Christ, that event in the upper room began a new remembrance of redemption that the Lord will honor until He returns in glory.

Fruit of the vine was a common Jewish colloquialism for wine, which Jesus told the disciples He would not **drink** with them again **until that day when** He would **drink it new with** them in His **Father’s kingdom**. He had instructed them to remember Him in the eating of the unleavened bread, which represents His sacrificed body, and in the drinking of the cup, which represents His shed blood as a sacrifice for sin. “Do this,” He said, “as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me” (1 Cor. 11:25). That memorial was to continue **until that day** in His **Father’s kingdom**.

The Lord’s promise to drink with the disciples in that future kingdom was another assurance to them of His return, an assurance that would take on intensified meaning after His death, resurrection, and ascension. “When I return to establish My **kingdom**,” He promised them, “you will all be there and you will all **drink** the cup **new with** Me.” In other words, the Lord’s Supper not only is a reminder of our Lord’s sacrifice for our sins but also a reminder of His promise to return and share His kingdom blessings with us. From those words we learn that the end of this present age does not signal the end of this observance.

The supper concluded with the **singing of a hymn**, probably Psalm 118, the last psalm of the Hallel. Then **they went out to the Mount of Olives**, where Jesus would pray fervently to His Father, be betrayed by Judas, and be arrested by the officers of the chief priests and elders.

Helping the
Impotent Disciples 13
(26:31-35)

Then Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, ‘I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered.’ But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee.” But Peter answered and said to Him, “Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.” Jesus said to him, “Truly I say to you that this very night, before the cock crows, you shall deny Me three times.” Peter said to Him, “Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You.” All the disciples said the same thing too. (26:31-35)

As much as Christians might like to think of themselves as being spiritually strong, those who are mature know from experience as well as from Scripture that in themselves they are weak. They would like to think they could never deny the Lord, contradict His Word, or be ashamed to be called by His name. But they know that every believer succumbs to those things from time to time. They find themselves in an environment of unrighteousness but do nothing to correct it. They have an opportunity to speak for Christ but say nothing. They need to be bold for the cause of Christ but instead are timid.

When I was young I often thought of what I might do if the Lord sent me to a place of difficult service where I faced the choice of being obedient to Him or risking death. I had read many stories of Christians who were martyred rather than renounce their Lord and I wanted to believe I would have such devotion. But I always had doubts, because I knew that in situations far less threatening than martyrdom I had failed to be as faithful as I should have been.

We look back to the apostles as model believers, as men of supreme faith who unflinchingly endured every hardship and persecution

for their Lord. But it was not until after Pentecost that they did indeed become such men. On the last night of Jesus' earthly life, contrary to their self-confident assertions of loyalty and bravery, they demonstrated anything but faith and heroism. They discovered, along with everyone who reads the record of Scripture, that, in themselves, they were fearful, cowardly, and impotent.

As Jesus came to the Mount of Olives with the eleven remaining disciples after the Last Supper, He knew He soon would be betrayed and arrested, as He had told the disciples at least three times. He also knew that His disciples would desert Him and flee for their lives, which fact He now revealed to them for the first time; and they had as much difficulty believing the second prediction as the first. They still could hardly comprehend that it was possible for the Messiah to be put to death, much less that such a dreadful event would be the supreme act of God's redemptive plan. Nor could they believe that, regardless of what might happen to Jesus, they themselves could be anything less than steadfastly loyal.

The self-affirmations they expressed on this occasion were based on false feelings of personal strength and commitment. They thought their love and devotion to Christ were greater than they were and that their ability to handle temptation and intimidation was greater than it was.

Of all the things Jesus could have said to them, of all the things about which He could have warned them, He chose to tell them on this occasion of their imminent and certain desertion of their Master. Their failure to live up to their high estimation of themselves would prove to be a profound and unforgettable lesson, a lesson that, along with the reality of the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit to indwell them, would change the course of their lives.

The incident recorded in 26:31-35 is integral to Matthew's presentation of Jesus' preparation for the cross. As He prepared to die for the sins of the world, Jesus needed to teach the disciples the need of continually dying to themselves (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3, 31; 2 Cor. 5:15) and of never trusting in themselves (cf. 2 Cor. 1:9).

Besides the certainty of Jesus' resurrection and the empowering of the Holy Spirit within them, perhaps the most important thing the disciples needed was an honest awareness of their own weakness. They desperately needed the poverty of spirit (see Matt. 5:3) without which no

person can come to Christ and without which no believer can be effectively used by Christ. The first step to spiritual strength is the sincere, humble acknowledgment of one's own spiritual weakness (cf. 2 Cor. 12:9-10).

That is a lesson every child of God needs to learn and relearn. Because it is not difficult to stand firm in doctrine and moral standards when we are among fellow Christians, we are tempted to think we would never desert our Lord by compromising those truths and standards. But when we are out in the unbelieving world and are separated from the strength of Christian fellowship, we discover how unfounded such self-confidence is. Paul even had to remind the faithful Timothy that "God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7), because Timothy had evidenced some proneness to be ashamed of his Lord (v. 8).

There is no place in the life of a believer for shame of Christ or for defection and desertion. Shame of Christ is characteristic of unbelievers (see Mark 8:38) and should never be found in Christians. Because of his continual reliance on the Lord, Paul could truthfully affirm to Timothy, "I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day" (2 Tim. 1:12). To the Roman church he declared with equal confidence, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16).

As the disciples soon learned that last night with their Lord, without His help faithfulness to Him is impossible. No believer is equipped in his own understanding or power to engage in spiritual warfare with the flesh, the world, and Satan. That important truth is beautifully expressed by nineteenth-century hymn writer John E. Bode in the hymn, "O Jesus, I Have Promised." In one stanza the affirmation "I shall not fear the battle" is qualified by "if Thou art by my side," and the affirmation "Nor wander from the pathway" is qualified by "if Thou wilt be my guide."

In predicting their desertion the Lord also taught the disciples another lesson about His divine omniscience. Precisely as He declared, all of them fled in fear when He was arrested a short while later that same evening (Matt. 26:56).

Although the disciples are essential participants in this account and are instructive examples for us, Matthew's central focus, as always, is on Christ as King. It seems the gospel writer's intent is to preserve the dignity and glory of the King of kings even in the midst of defection, betrayal, and supreme malevolence.

Skeptics are inclined to ask such questions as: "What kind of leader is this whose followers all leave Him in the time of His greatest need? What kind of leader is it who has so little control over those under Him that He cannot keep them from running away when the battle gets shot? Have not many men heroically stood their ground for lesser causes and in face of greater danger? How could one who made such great claims as Jesus have been such a poor judge and builder of men?"

But Matthew reveals how, in the purpose of God, the disciples' failure actually enhances and intensifies the grandeur of the Lord's achievement. By way of contrast, their impotence served to magnify His power, their unfaithfulness served to magnify His faithfulness, and their dishonor served to magnify His majesty.

In the Upper Room Jesus had given the first two elements of His own preparation for His sacrificial death: experiencing the final Passover (vv. 17-25) and establishing the Lord's Supper (vv. 26-30). After his account of Jesus' leaving Jerusalem and going to the Mount of Olives (v. 30) with the eleven disciples who remained (see John 13:26-30), Matthew presents this third element: helping the impotent disciples (vv. 31-35).

Christ shut down the Old Covenant of the Jewish economy with His celebration of the last Passover meal and ushered in the New Covenant in His own blood with the institution of the Lord's Supper. Then He taught this profound lesson to the men who, despite their imminent display of frailty, would become the principal human instruments in establishing His church.

From John's gospel we learn that after the Lord's Supper Jesus gave the eleven an extensive message that traditionally has been called the Upper Room discourse. In chapters 14-17 John records Jesus' teaching about believers' being with Him in heaven and serving Him on earth; the coming of the Holy Spirit; the meaning of true peace, faithfulness, joy, love, and fruitfulness; the opposition believers can expect in the world; and His second coming. He concluded by offering a beautiful and profound intercessory prayer on their behalf and in their presence.

But the synoptic writers (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) do not include that teaching. Instead they each move directly from the end of the Lord's Supper to the scene on the Mount of Olives (see Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26; Luke 22:39).

As Jesus and the disciples left the upper room and proceeded to the eastern gate, they doubtlessly had to negotiate their way through teeming crowds of pilgrims who were preparing to celebrate Passover on the following day, according to the prevailing custom in Judah. For reasons explained in the previous chapter, the Judeans and Sadducees observed Passover a day later than the Galileans and Pharisees. Many of those preparing to celebrate on Friday probably had not yet secured rooms in which to eat the Passover meal and were making other last-minute preparations.

As Jesus and the disciples descended into the valley east of the city and crossed the brook Kidron, it was still flowing full from the late winter rains and was running bright red from the blood of the thousands of lambs slain that afternoon. The group headed up the western slope of the Mount of Olives toward the Garden of Gethsemane, a familiar place they had visited many times before. Gethsemane means "olive press," and that garden was one among numerous others on the Mount of Olives. Because there was little room for garden plots inside Jerusalem, many of its inhabitants cultivated small gardens just outside the city. It may have been that the Garden of Gethsemane belonged to one of Jesus' friends, who made it available to Him as a place of meditation and retreat. There would have been little hope for that in the crowded, noisy city.

Before they reached the garden, Jesus stopped and warned the disciples of their forthcoming desertion. The teaching of the Upper Room discourse had consisted largely of positive promises, but now it was time for a negative message, a warning that the self-assured disciples could not bring themselves to believe. We witness a vivid demonstration both of Jesus' omniscience and of the disciples' ignorance.

JESUS' OMNISCIENCE

Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, 'I will strike down the shepherd, and the

sheep of the flock shall be scattered.’ But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee.” (26:31-32)

As they were nearing the Garden of Gethsemane, **Jesus said to the disciples, “You will all fall away because of Me this night.”** *Skandalizō (fall away)* is the term from which *scandal* is derived and has the literal meaning of setting a trap, snare, or stumbling block. In Jesus’ day the word most often was used metaphorically, as it always is in the New Testament. Jesus predicted that the disciples would soon confront an obstacle that would make them stumble and **fall away** from their loyalty to Him.

He knew that **all** the disciples would desert Him and that they would be shocked and offended at His prediction of their abandonment. He knew they would fall away **because of** their fear of being associated with Him (**Me**) and that they would flee that very **night**, just as they did (v. 56).

While Jesus faced the cross with courage and valor that were distinctly divine, the disciples would be fleeing with typically human fear and cowardice. Even as He faced sin, death, and Satan for them, they would risk nothing for Him.

It was as if Jesus were seated at the control booth of a television studio monitoring prerecorded events on a large bank of screens before Him and determining which would be aired at a given time. Every event of that night, just as every event of His entire life, was under God’s direct divine authority. No act was accidental and no word was incidental. He not only knew exactly what He Himself would do but what the disciples, the religious and political leaders, the soldiers, and the multitudes would do. He could see every movement as if it had already transpired and hear every word as if it had already been spoken.

In Matthew’s portrayal Jesus loses nothing of His majesty and dignity even as, in the eyes of the world, He faced imminent defeat and ignominy. His own sovereign plan was unfolding, and the supposed victim was in reality the foreordained Victor.

Jesus’ comment **for it is written** referred to Zechariah 13:7, which predicted the desertion He had just mentioned. He then quoted part of that verse: **“I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered.”** In quoting the Old Testament prophecy Jesus assured the

disciples that their abandonment of Him, just as Judas's betrayal, was part of the eternal plan of God.

Without Jesus' explanation, the Zechariah passage would have been impossible for the disciples to have understood correctly. Zechariah's prediction was veiled, and its meaning could not have been discerned apart from the Lord's own interpretation. Zechariah was speaking about idolatrous false prophets whom the Lord would remove from among His people, but some of whom would renounce their deceitful practices (13:2-6). But in verse 7 the attention turns abruptly to a man the Lord calls "My Shepherd, . . . the man, My Associate." "The man, My Associate" could be rendered "the mighty man of My union" or "the mighty man equal to Me," clearly indicating that this person also was deity. It is against this divine Shepherd-Associate that God commanded the sword to be struck: "Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered."

In the broadest sense, the sheep that would be scattered represented Israel. Because Israel as a nation rejected and crucified her Messiah, Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed. From that time (A.D. 70) the people of Israel were scattered throughout the world—where they have largely remained scattered for nearly 2,000 years. Even today, only a minority of them live in the state of Israel.

But **the sheep** of whom Jesus spoke that night on the Mount of Olives were the disciples, the first group, as it were, representative of and picturing all those who would **be scattered** when He, **the shepherd**, was struck.

But Jesus immediately encouraged the disciples with the assuring words "**But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee.**" Jesus faced death with supreme courage because He knew He had supreme power over death. But the disciples were still afraid of death, and even of imprisonment or humiliation. Jesus knew He would be raised from the dead by the power of His Father, just as He had predicted to the Twelve many times before (see Matt. 16:21; 17:9, 23; 20:18-19; cf. Rom. 6:4). Even more certain than the faith by which Abraham believed God could raise Isaac from the dead (Heb. 11:17-19) was the divine omniscience of Jesus. By that knowledge our Lord knew His heavenly Father would raise His only begotten Son from the dead on the third day.

The hard-headed and weak in faith disciples should have remembered and believed those predictions of their Lord. They should

have remembered those whom Jesus Himself raised from the dead, especially Lazarus, at whose raising He declared, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies” (John 11:25). But fear had eclipsed their memory and subdued their belief.

In His infinite patience Jesus told them again that He would be **raised** and that He would then **go before** them **to Galilee** and meet them there. That, of course, is exactly what He did. Outside the garden tomb, the angel told the two Marys, “Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going before you into Galilee, there you will see Him” (Matt. 28:7). When the resurrected Lord appeared to the two women a few moments later, He repeated the promise and the instruction (v. 10). Sometime later “the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. And when they saw Him, they worshiped Him” (vv. 16-17). Matthew’s inspired record of the disciples’ tragic weakness clearly affirms the omniscience of the Lord Jesus.

THE DISCIPLES’ IGNORANCE

But Peter answered and said to Him, “Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.” Jesus said to him, “Truly I say to you that this very night, before the cock crows, you shall deny Me three times.” Peter said to Him, “Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You.” All the disciples said the same thing too. (26:33-35)

Peter either missed or disregarded what Jesus had just said about His being raised and appearing to them. He was so concerned about defending his loyal character that, in typical boldness, he blurted out, **“Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.”** Proud, self-confident Peter, convinced of the strength of his love for Jesus, presumptuously proclaimed himself to be the truest of the true.

Like a self-willed child, Peter seemed to hear only what he wanted to hear and believe only what he wanted to believe. During the Last Supper, only an hour or so earlier, Jesus had given the disciples a similar warning. Speaking specifically to Peter, He said, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat” (Luke 22:31). Though directed right at Peter, the “you” in this verse is plural (*humas*),

indicating that the warning extended to the other disciples as well. They would all be so severely tested by Satan that it would seem as if they were being shaken violently like a tray of wheat in the harvester's hand. "But I have prayed for you [singular]," Jesus went on to say, "that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers" (v. 32).

But Peter was oblivious to the Lord's words. Instead of acknowledging his need and expressing gratitude for the Lord's protection, Peter boasted, "Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death!" (v. 33). Unimpressed with that claim, Jesus responded, "I say to you, Peter, the cock will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me" (v. 34). With those compassionate but stinging words, Jesus singled out Peter as one who not only would desert Him but would even deny Him.

The Lord now repeated the prediction: "**Truly I say to you that this very night, before a cock crows, you shall deny Me three times.**" Peter did not believe his Master this time any more than he had a few hours earlier. With amazing brashness and pride, he obviously thought that, wise as Jesus was, He was mistaken about the dependability and courage of his foremost disciple.

The Jews divided the night into four parts: evening, from six to nine; midnight, nine to twelve; cock crow, twelve to three; and morning, three to six. The third period gained its name from the fact that roosters began to crow about the end of that period and continued to crow periodically until after daybreak.

By the time Jesus and the disciples reached the Mount of Olives it was probably near midnight. Jesus was therefore predicting that, within a very few hours, Peter would deny the Lord **three times**—before three in the morning, when **a cock** would normally begin to crow. As Peter should have known, that is precisely what happened. No sooner had his third denial, augmented with a curse, come out of his mouth than "immediately a cock crowed" (v. 74).

But Peter's pride did not allow him to think such a thing was conceivable. His pride on this occasion was manifested in at least three ways. In the first place He contradicted the Lord, as he had done at other times. Shortly after Peter confessed that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of the living God," he "took Him aside and began to rebuke Him" for

predicting His suffering and death, “saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to you’” (Matt. 16:16, 22).

Second, Peter’s pride was manifested in his considering himself better than all the other disciples, claiming that, although they might desert Jesus, he would never do so. Third, he trusted in his own strength, foolishly declaring, **“I will never fall away”** and a few moments later adding, **“Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You.”** Sharing Peter’s misguided self-confidence, though perhaps to less extreme degrees, **“All the disciples said the same thing too.”**

The disciples were still ignorant about many things. They were ignorant of their own weakness and of Satan’s strength. They were ignorant of the great power that fear would soon have over them. And they would not accept Jesus’ interpretation of the Old Testament prophecy He had just quoted regarding the shepherd’s being struck and the sheep being scattered. In other words they were wilfully ignorant, because they persisted in trusting their own understanding above the Lord’s.

Like the disciples, believers only parade their ignorance when they claim to be wise, courageous, and self-sufficient. And often, as with the disciples, the Lord allows them to learn the hard way that they are really foolish, cowardly, and weak.

In humble, sinless grace Jesus was willing to go to the cross and shed His blood for the proud, foolish, and sinful disciples. Although He knew they soon would be ashamed of Him and even desert and deny Him, He was not ashamed of them. In spite of their pride, weakness, desertion, and denials, He would draw them again to Himself in perfect love. In a gracious act of divine mercy He would forgive and restore them.

Thankfully, our Lord is devoted to restoring disciples who have fallen and been unfaithful. In his first epistle John reminds his readers of that comforting truth. “If we confess our sins,” he wrote, “He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Paul echoes that wonderful grace of recovery when he instructs spiritual believers to act as Christ’s agents to restore in love fellow believers who have fallen into sin (see Gal. 6:1).

After Pentecost the eleven men who had deserted their Lord in fear and shame were hardly recognizable. When they were imprisoned by the high priest for preaching and healing and then were miraculously released by an angel, “they entered into the temple about daybreak, and began to

teach” again. And when they were rearrested, flogged, and ordered by the entire Sanhedrin “to speak no more in the name of Jesus,” they were “rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (see Acts 5:12-42).

The presence of the now-indwelling Holy Spirit within them doubtless was the source of power in the apostles’ new-found courage and dedication. But even the power of the indwelling Spirit of Christ is no guarantee of faithfulness. Long after he had been indwelt by the Spirit, Peter discovered again how spiritually unreliable and impotent he was when he acted in the flesh rather than in the Spirit. Having been intimidated by the Judaizers, he refused for a while to have fellowship with Gentile believers and was severely rebuked face to face and publicly by Paul for his hypocrisy (Gal. 2:11-14).

It therefore seems certain that another factor besides the indwelling Spirit contributed to the apostles’ later faithfulness—namely, the lesson they learned so bitterly at the end of the Lord’s ministry about their own ignorance and foolish self-sufficiency and about Christ’s divine omniscience and gracious sufficiency. They remembered His patient love and mercy in pulling them back to Himself, despite their cowardly and despicable defection. They had experienced His mercy so intimately and so profoundly that they were determined never to forsake Him again. But they knew that, in themselves, they were as weak as ever and that their only prospect for faithfulness was total obedience to and dependence on Him.

Could they have known it, the restored disciples would joyously have sung the beloved hymn “How Firm a Foundation,” two of the stanzas of which are:

Fear not, I am with thee; O be not dismayed,
For I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;
I’ll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand.

The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to its foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,

I'll never, no, never, no, never forsake!

The Son in Sorrow

(26:36-46)

14

Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. Then He said to them, “My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me.” And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt.” And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, “So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? Keep watching and praying, that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, “My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Thy will be done.” And again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. And He left them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more. Then He came to the disciples, and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Arise, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!”
(26:36-46)

In a sermon entitled “The Man Christ Jesus” preached on April 12, 1885, Charles Haddon Spurgeon commented, “It will not be enough for you to hear, or read [about Christ]; you must do your own thinking, and consider your Lord for yourselves. . . . The wine is not made by gathering the clusters, but by treading the grapes in the wine-vat: under pressure the red juice leaps forth. Not the truth as you read it, but the truth as you meditate upon it, will be a blessing to you. . . . Shut yourself up with Jesus, if you would know him.” Just before that he had said, “[Yet] I am never

more vexed with myself than when I have done my very best to extol his dear name. What is it but holding a candle to the sun?" Spurgeon concludes, "I cannot speak as I would of Him. The blaze of this Sun blinds me!" (*The Metropolitan Tabernacle*, vol. 31 [London: Passmore & Alabaster, n.d.], pp. 209, 213).

Even when one's best is done to study about and meditate on the Lord Jesus Christ, it becomes clear that the mystery is far too deep for human comprehension. We know and believe that He is fully God and also fully man, but to state and even sincerely believe such a paradox is not to understand it. It is far too profound even for Christian minds enlightened by the Holy Spirit to fathom. With humility, awe, and reverence we follow the Lord on His circuitous route to the cross.

By now it was probably near midnight on the Thursday of Passover week in A.D. 33 (or perhaps 30). Jesus' three years of ministry were completed. He had preached His last public sermon and performed His last miracle. He also had celebrated the last Passover with His disciples. But infinitely more important than that, He had come to *be* the last and ultimate Passover Lamb, the perfect and only sacrifice for the sins of the world.

As we look further into our Lord's last night before death, we grasp what we can of the sacredness of this powerful moment in His life and ministry. But we realize that no amount of study or insight can give more than a glimpse of the divine-human agony He experienced there.

One of Philip Bliss's beautiful hymns contains the words,

Man of sorrows, what a name,
For the Son of God who came,
Ruined sinners to reclaim!
Hallelujah, what a Savior!

The hymn writer borrowed his description of Christ from Isaiah, who predicted that the Messiah would be "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3).

There is no record in Scripture of Jesus' laughing, but there are numerous accounts of His grieving, His sadness, and even His weeping. He wept at the grave of Lazarus (John 11:35) and wept over Jerusalem at the

time of His triumphal entry (Luke 19:41). Jesus knew sorrow upon sorrow and grief upon grief as no other man who has ever lived. But the sorrow He experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane on the last night before His crucifixion seemed to be the accumulation of all the sorrow He had ever known, which would accelerate to a climax the following day.

We cannot comprehend the depth of Jesus' agony, because, as sinless and holy God incarnate, He was able to perceive the horror of sin in a way we cannot. Therefore even to attempt to understand the suffering of Jesus that night on the Mount of Olives is to tread on holy ground. The mystery is too profound for human beings to comprehend and even for angels. We can only stand in awe of the God-Man.

Like every other aspect and detail of Jesus' life and ministry, His agony in the garden was integral to the foreordained, divine plan of redemption. It was part of Jesus' preparation for the cross, where the climactic event in the work of that redemption would transpire.

Ever and always the teacher, Jesus used even this struggle with the enemy in the garden the night before the cross to teach the disciples and every future believer another lesson in godliness, a lesson about facing temptation and severe trial. The Lord not only was preparing Himself for the cross but also, by His example, preparing His followers for the crosses He calls them to bear in His name (see Matt. 16:24).

Matthew 26:36-46 reveals three aspects of Jesus' striving in the garden: His sorrow, His supplication, and His strength. And in clear contrast to their Lord's unremitting struggle we see also the disciples' indifferent lethargy.

SORROW

Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. Then He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me." (26:36-38)

After the eleven disciples echoed Peter's boast and insisted on their loyalty to Jesus even to the point of dying with Him if necessary (v. 35),

they **then** moved with Him **to a place** on the Mount of Olives **called Gethsemane**. Although He had not announced in advance where He was going, “Jesus had often met there with His disciples,” and it was that fact that enabled Judas to find Him so easily later that night (John 18:2).

The name **Gethsemane** means “olive press,” and the garden probably belonged to a believer who allowed Jesus to use it as a place of retreat and prayer. As William Barclay points out, the owner of **Gethsemane**, like the owner of the donkey on which Jesus rode into Jerusalem and the owner of the upper room, was a nameless friend who ministered to the Lord during His final hours. “In a desert of hatred,” Barclay observes, “there were still oases of love” (*The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2 [Westminster, 1958], p. 384).

It is likely that the garden was fenced or walled and had an entrance, perhaps even a gate. Jesus asked **His disciples** to **sit** at the entrance and keep Him from being disturbed while He went into the garden to **pray**. He did not use the normal word for praying (*euchomai*), which was often used of asking or petitioning other people, but the intensified *proseuchomai*, which was used only of praying to God.

Jesus had told the disciples two days earlier that “after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man is to be delivered up for crucifixion” (26:2). And just a few moments earlier He had told them, “You will all fall away because of Me this night” (v. 31). They knew they were at a crisis point, and, like their Lord, they should have seen it as a time for deep concern and fervent prayer. Luke reports that Jesus told the disciples now that they should “pray that [they might] not enter into temptation” (Luke 22:40; cf. Matt. 6:13), a warning He later repeated (Matt. 26:41). But there is no indication that they uttered a single breath of prayer, no hint that they called on the Father to strengthen them. In smug self-confidence, they still thought of themselves as loyal, dependable, and invincible. Like many believers throughout the history of the church, they foolishly mistook their good intentions for strength. The sinless Son of God felt a desperate need for communion with His heavenly Father, but His sinful, weak disciples, as so often they do today, felt no desperation about their weakness and vulnerability.

Leaving the other eight disciples at the entrance, Jesus **took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee**, James and John. Through the years commentators have speculated as to why Jesus took only three

disciples with Him and why He chose those particular men. As already mentioned, He probably left most of the disciples at the entrance to stand guard, lest He be interrupted before He finished praying. Some interpreters suggest that He chose Peter, James, and John because they were the weakest and needed most to be with Him. But the fact that they made more noticeable blunders than the others does not indicate they were the weakest but rather the most forward and presumptuous. They were, in fact, the obvious leaders among the Twelve and were the inner circle to whom Jesus gave special attention throughout His ministry.

It was surely for that reason that the Lord took those three with Him to pray. He wanted to teach them further about facing strong temptation with confidence in God rather than in themselves. In light of their self-declared dependability (v. 35), the disciples needed to learn the humility and poverty of spirit that is necessary before God can effectively use His people (see Matt. 5:3). He wanted Peter, James, and John to be convinced and convicted of their foolish smugness and feelings of invincibility. And He wanted them, in turn, to teach their fellow disciples that lesson.

Jesus did not take them along in order to have their companionship, sympathy, or help. He loved them deeply and doubtlessly enjoyed their company, but He knew them far too well to expect them to be of any assistance to Him in this crucial hour. He took them along for their benefit, not His.

His purpose also was to teach that, as important and helpful as the fellowship and support of other believers can be, there are times when one's only help is direct communion with God in prayer. He wanted to show them vividly that, in His humanness, even the divine Son of God needed the sustenance of His heavenly Father.

Fallen, sinful humanity refuses to acknowledge its weakness, but the Unfallen, sinless Son of Man well knew His human weakness. When He became flesh and dwelt among men as a man, He accepted the weaknesses that are common to all humanity. He experienced the weaknesses of hunger, thirst, pain, and temptation. Now He was about to experience the supreme human weakness: death.

In acknowledging His human weakness and His consequent need for His heavenly Father's presence and strength, Jesus did what the disciples saw no need for doing. It was because He looked to His Father

that He endured and passed every temptation, including sin-bearing and death—the severest test of all. Every moment of Jesus’ life, from His first cry as an infant to His last cry from the cross, was lived in total submission to His heavenly Father. And through that sinless submission during His humanity He became a high priest who can fully “sympathize with our weaknesses, . . . one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15).

Every Christian at times faces temptations, trials, and heartaches that threaten to overwhelm him. In the depths of such testings, even our dearest and most spiritual friends are unable to provide the needed solace and strength. God expects believers to encourage and strengthen one another, and that is an essential means through which He builds up His children (see Luke 22:32; Acts 18:23; Heb. 10:25). But there are times when only direct, intimate communion with the Lord in intense prayer can provide the strength to meet their desperate need.

Jesus’ ministry began and ended with relentless temptation directly by Satan. After He was baptized by John the Baptist, Jesus went into the wilderness of Judea and fasted for forty days and nights. At the end of that period the devil tempted Him three times, and each time Jesus responded with Scripture (Matt. 4:3-10). While Jesus agonized in the garden on the last night of His earthly life, the devil tempted Him again three times, and each time He responded by praying earnestly to His Father.

On both occasions, the temptations were private, personal solicitations directly by Satan to Jesus, and apart from His own revelation we would know nothing of them. The two weapons He used were Scripture and prayer, weapons the Lord provides each of His children (see Eph.6:17-18).

As He went into the garden with the three disciples, Jesus **began to be grieved and distressed**. It was not that He had never experienced grief or distress over sin and death and over the isolation from His heavenly Father they would bring. He had always known that He had come to earth to suffer and die for the sins of the world. But the climax of His anguish now **began** to intensify as never before, as His becoming sin in our place and His consequent estrangement from God drew near. His very soul was repulsed by the encroachment of His sinbearing, not because of the physical pain He would endure but because of His taking upon Himself

there the full magnitude and defilement of all man's iniquity. His agony over that prospect was beyond description or understanding.

When Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus (John 11:35), it was not for Lazarus or for the grieving sisters, because He was about to restore His dear friend and their brother to life. He rather wept because of the power of sin and death over mankind, and possibly, even then, over the imminent prospect of His becoming sin.

But now a very deep and desolate kind of loneliness began to sweep over Him that caused Him to be severely **distressed**. In addition to the cross were personal disappointments that perhaps pressed Jesus into deeper depression. First was the treachery of Judas, an earthly lucifer who betrayed the loving and selfless Son of God, who graciously had taught and ministered to Judas for three years. Then there was the desertion of the eleven other disciples, made more tragic by the fact that, for them, He was Savior and Lord. He had been their teacher, healer, encourager, forgiver, supporter, and friend. Yet He would soon be forsaken by those He would never forsake. There would be outright denial by Peter, the one in whom Jesus had invested the most. In return, He would be the object of Peter's shame and the cause for Peter's cursing. Jesus would also be rejected by Israel, God's chosen and covenant people, through whom He came in the flesh and to whom He came as Messiah, Redeemer, and King.

In addition to the rejections were the blatant injustices He would face. The very Creator of justice would Himself be subjected to the ultimate injustice of mankind. He would be vilified and defrauded in the petty courts of sinful, spiteful, lying men—and that in the name of God. The One whom angels praise and with whom God the Father is well pleased would be cursed and mocked by the vile and wicked multitudes, many of whom had a few days earlier sung His praises and attempted to make Him their king.

Jesus confronted a loneliness that no other man could experience. The Son of God, who communed with the Father and the Holy Spirit and with all the holy angels of heaven, would find Himself forsaken by His Father as He became sin. He would be so identified with iniquity that the hosts of heaven would have to turn their backs on Him. And the same sin that repulsed them repulsed Him, the sinless, holy, pure, and undefiled Son of righteousness.

As the mortal Son of man, the undying Son of God had to take death upon Himself, and that, too, was grievous and depressing. As part of His divine mission of redemption, Christ came to earth to “taste death for everyone” (Heb. 2:9). As Alfred Edersheim wrote, “He disarmed Death by burying its shaft in His own heart,” and death thereby had no more arrows (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971], 2:539). But that last arrow of death caused the Lord inexpressible torment.

Although Satan’s activity is not mentioned in this event by the gospel writers, his evil presence is fully evidenced by the fact that he entered Judas (John 13:27), who went out from the upper room to carry out the betrayal. His words and activity are not recorded, but we can be certain of his participation and of his intent. At the first great episode of temptations in the wilderness, Satan tempted Jesus to demand His rights, first for food, then for protection, and finally for sovereignty over the world. Now he tempted the Son of God again to demand His rights. Jesus did not deserve to suffer, much less to die. He deserved honor, glory, and reverence, not the cross. Why, the devil perhaps whispered in Jesus’ ear, should the Author of justice be submitted to such gross injustice? Why should the Creator of life be submitted to the ignominy of death? He called Jesus to revolt against God and thus disqualify Himself from being the sacrifice for sin and the destroyer of Satan, death, and hell.

In all of those temptations—in the wilderness, in the garden, and throughout Jesus’ earthly life—Satan sought to make Him disobey God and to rebel as he had done. He knew that in Christ’s obedience to the Father was his (Satan’s) own destruction. Therefore the intent of every temptation of Jesus was to lead Him away from the cross God had planned. It was when Peter brazenly declared that Jesus would never be crucified that the Lord said to him, “Get behind Me, Satan!” (Matt. 16:23). Although Peter’s desire was to protect His Master, nothing he said could have been more contrary to His Master’s will and work, or more supportive of Satan’s effort.

After dismissing Satan-filled Judas from the upper room, Jesus said, “I will not speak much more with you, for the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me” (John 14:30). Jesus was speaking about the intense conflict with Satan He would soon experience in the garden, where the ruler of the world would make his final onslaught. Just as in the wilderness, he would engulf Jesus in three great waves of temptation, each

designed for the single purpose of causing Him to avoid the cross, in open revolt against God, thus preventing the work of salvation and leaving all men under the damnation of hell.

From the time of Jesus' arrest until His death, Satan seemed to have the upper hand in the events, but that was both temporary and by divine allowance. Jesus told the chief priests and the officers of the Temple when they came to arrest Him, "This hour and the power of darkness are yours" (Luke 22:53). That was Satan's hour, and by the Father's permission he attacked the Son with the full power of his malevolence. Satan's purpose was to induce Jesus to compromise His holiness and to relinquish submission to the Father and thereby deflect Him from the cross. God's purpose, on the other hand, was to prove the Son's righteousness and to demonstrate the Son's power over the severest temptations Satan could devise. Scripture nowhere teaches that Satan plotted to kill Jesus; rather, His death was by God's foreordained plan (cf. Acts 2:22-23), which Satan wanted to thwart. Once it became apparent that he could not prevent the Lord's death, Satan did all he could to make that death permanent. And when he failed at that, and Jesus arose, he inspired a conspiracy to deny His resurrection (see Matt. 28:11-15).

It is therefore hardly surprising that Jesus told Peter, James, and John, "**My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death.**" *Perilupos* (**deeply grieved**) is related to the term from which we get *periphery* and carries the idea of being surrounded by sorrow. It is possible to die from sorrow just as from other strong emotions, such as fright and anger. Jesus' anguish was enough to kill Him and doubtlessly would have done so had He not been divinely preserved for another kind of death.

The agony of this temptation was unequalled. It was Jesus' most intense struggle with Satan, more agonizing even than the encounter in the wilderness. The magnitude of His grief apparently caused Jesus' subcutaneous capillaries to dilate and burst. As the capillaries burst under the pressure of deep distress and blood escaped through the pores of His skin, it mingled with His sweat, "falling down upon the ground" (Luke 22:44). It was to this experience, no doubt, that the writer of Hebrews referred in saying that Jesus "offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death" (Heb. 5:7).

Jesus was not grieved because of fear He would succumb to Satan's temptations. As mentioned above, He had already declared that Satan "has nothing in Me," meaning that there was no sin or evil in Him in which temptation could take root. Nor was He grieved over a possibility of not conquering sin or surviving death. He had repeatedly spoken of His coming resurrection and even of His ascension. There was no doubt in our Lord's mind about the outcome of the cross, by which He would become victor over sin, death, and the devil. Jesus was **deeply grieved, to the point of death** because of His having to *become* sin. That was the unbearably excruciating prospect that made Him sweat great drops of blood. Holiness is totally repulsed by sin. The prophet Habakkuk revealed this when he wrote, "Thine eyes are too pure to approve evil, and Thou canst not look on wickedness with favor" (Hab. 1:13).

In that deep sorrow Jesus knew His only solace was with His heavenly Father, and with each wave of temptation and anguish He retreated to a place of seclusion some distance away (see vv. 36, 39, 42). Luke reports that "He withdrew from them about a stone's throw" (Luke 22:41), which amounted to thirty to fifty yards. The intensity of temptation and of Jesus' prayer response increased with each of the three sessions and is reflected in the positions the Lord took. At first He knelt (Luke 22:41), but as the intensity escalated He fell prostrate on His face (Matt. 26:39).

While He went to be alone with His Father, Jesus asked His three dear friends to **keep watch with** Him, leaving them not only to **watch** but also to pray in view of temptation (see v. 41), just as He would be doing.

SUPPLICATION

And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt." And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? Keep watching and praying, that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Thy will be done." And again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. And He left

them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more. Then He came to the disciples, and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest?” (26:39-45a)

These verses focus alternately on Jesus’ supplication to His heavenly Father and on the three disciples’ falling asleep. On the one hand is Jesus’ intense, self-giving desire to do His Father’s will, even to the point of becoming sin to save sinners and by prayer to deal with temptation cast at Him. On the other hand is the disciples’ indifferent, self-centered inability to watch and to confront the conflict and danger with intercession on their Lord’s behalf. While Jesus, understanding the power of the enemy, retreated to prayer, they retreated into sleep.

Again going **a little beyond** the three disciples, Jesus **fell on His face and prayed** to His **Father**. Except at the time when He quoted Psalm 22:1 as He cried out from the cross, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” (Matt. 27:46), Jesus always addressed God as **Father**. In so doing He expressed an intimacy with God that was foreign to the Judaism of His day and that was anathema to the religious leaders. They thought of God as Father in the sense of His being the progenitor of Israel, but not in the sense of His being a personal Father to any individual. For Jesus to address God as His Father was blasphemy to them, and “for this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God” (John 5:18).

Although Jesus consistently called God His Father, only on this occasion did He call Him **My Father** (cf. v. 42), intensifying the intimacy. The more Satan tried to divert Jesus from His Father’s will and purpose, the more closely Jesus drew into His Father’s presence. Mark adds that Jesus also addressed Him as “Abba! Father!” (Mark 14:36), Abba being an Aramaic word of endearment roughly equivalent to “Daddy.” Such an address would have been unthinkably presumptuous and blasphemous to Jews.

Jesus implored the Father, “**If it is possible, let this cup pass from Me.**” By asking, “**If it is possible,**” Jesus did not wonder if escaping the cross was within the realm of possibility. He knew He could have walked away from death at any time He chose. “I lay down My life that I may take it again,” He explained to the unbelieving Pharisees. “No one has taken it

away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again” (John 10:17-18). The Father *sent* the Son to the cross, but He did not *force* Him to go. Jesus was here asking if avoiding the cross were **possible** within the Father’s redemptive plan and purpose. The agony of becoming sin was becoming unendurable for the sinless Son of God, and He wondered aloud before His Father if there could be another way to deliver men from sin.

God’s wrath and judgment are often pictured in the Old Testament as a cup to be drunk (see, e.g., Ps. 75:8; Isa. 51:17; Jer. 49:12). **This cup** symbolized the suffering Jesus would endure on the cross, the **cup** of God’s fury vented against all the sins of mankind, which the Son would take upon Himself as the sacrificial Lamb of God.

As always with Jesus, the determining consideration was God’s will. “I did not speak on My own initiative,” He declared, “but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me commandment, what to say, and what to speak” (John 12:49; cf. 14:31; 17:8). He therefore said submissively, **“Yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt.”** This conflict between what **I will** and what **Thou wilt** reveals the reality of the amazing fact that Jesus was truly being tempted. Though sinless and unable to sin, He clearly could be brought into the real conflict of temptation (see Heb. 4:15).

But when the Lord returned to the three disciples, He **found them sleeping**. That discovery, though not unexpected, must have added greatly to His grief and distress. No one can disappoint and hurt us so deeply as those we love. Jesus was not surprised, because in His omniscience He was perfectly aware of their weakness and had predicted that it would, that very night, be manifested even in desertion (see v 31). But that knowledge did not alleviate the pain caused by their not being sensitive enough or caring enough to watch and pray with Him in the last hours of His life.

Just as these same three disciples had slept when Jesus was transfigured (Luke 9:28, 32), they were sleeping at the moment of the greatest spiritual conflict in the history of the world. They were oblivious to the agony and need of their Lord. Despite His warnings of their abandonment and of Peter’s denial, they felt no need to be alert, much less to seek God’s strength and protection. (How we can thank the Lord for the gift of the Holy Spirit, who continually prays for us! See Rom.8:26-27.)

It was probably after midnight, and the need for sleep at that hour was natural. Jesus and the disciples had had a long and eventful day, and

they had just finished a large meal and walked perhaps a mile or so from the upper room to the Mount of Olives. But even the disciples' limited and confused perception of His imminent ordeal and of their desertion of Him that He had predicted should have motivated and energized them enough to stay awake with Him at this obviously grave time.

In fairness, it should be noted that sleep is often a means of escape, and the disciples may have slept more out of frustration, confusion, and depression than apathy. They could not bring themselves to face the truth that their dear friend and Lord, the promised Messiah of Israel, not only would suffer mockery and pain at the hands of wicked men but would even be put to death by them. As a physician, Luke perhaps was especially diagnostic in viewing their emotional state, and he reports that, as we might expect, they were "sleeping from sorrow" (22:45).

But even that reason did not excuse their lack of vigilance. They did not fully believe Jesus' predictions of His death and of their desertion primarily because they did not want to believe them. Had they accepted Jesus' word at face value, their minds and emotions would have been far too exercised to allow sleep.

The startling events and controversies of the last few days—the institution of the Lord's Supper, Jesus' repeated predictions of His suffering and death, the prediction of their fleeing in the time of trial, and the obvious anguish He now experienced—should have provided more than sufficient motivation and energy to keep them awake. But it did not. Had they sought the Father's help in prayer as Jesus did and as He exhorted them to do, they not only would have stayed awake but would have been given the spiritual strength and courage they so desperately needed.

The disciples' predicted desertion of Jesus began here, as they left Him alone in His great time of need. His heart must have broken when He **said to Peter**, but also for the benefit of James and John, "**So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour?**"

Considering the circumstances, the rebuke was especially mild. It was not Jesus' purpose to shame the disciples but to strengthen them and teach them their need for divine help. "**Keep watching and praying,**" He implored, **that you may not enter into temptation.**"

The Greek verbs behind **keep watching and praying** are present imperatives and carry the idea of continuous action, indicated in the NASB by **keep**. The need for spiritual vigilance is not occasional but constant.

Jesus was warning His disciples to be discerning enough to know they were in spiritual warfare and to be prepared by God to resist the adversary. He was warning them of the danger of self-confidence, which produces spiritual drowsiness.

The only way to keep from being engulfed in temptation is to be aware of Satan's craftiness and not only to go immediately to our heavenly Father in prayer when we are already under attack but to pray even in anticipation of coming temptation. Peter perhaps first began to learn that lesson on this night in the garden. And after serving faithfully as an apostle for many years, he admonished Christians: "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). He also gave the assurance, however, that "the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation" (2 Pet. 2:9).

We cannot overcome Satan or the flesh by our own power, and we risk serious spiritual tragedy when we think we can. When a military observer spots the enemy, he does not single-handedly engage him in battle. He simply reports what he saw and leaves the matter in the commanding officer's hands. In the same way, believers dare not attempt to fight the devil but should immediately flee from him into the presence of their heavenly Father. As our Lord taught, we are to pray for God not to "lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (Matt. 6:13).

As Jesus here acknowledges, doing what is right is often difficult, because although **the spirit is willing, . . . the flesh is still weak**. Regenerated people who truly love God have a desire for righteousness, and they can claim with Paul that they genuinely want to do good. But they also confess with Paul that they often do not practice in the unredeemed flesh what their regenerated spirits want them to do. And, on the other hand, they sometimes find themselves *doing* things that, in the inner redeemed person, they do *not* want to do (Rom 7:15-20). Like Paul, they discover that "the principle of evil is present in [them]," that there is a law of sin within their fleshly humanness that wages war against the law of righteousness in their redeemed minds (vv. 21-23).

In light of that troublesome and continuing conflict, Paul then lamented, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" Answering his own question, he exulted, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my

mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin” (vv. 24-25). The only source of victory is the power of Jesus Christ.

The fact that Jesus **again. . . came and found them sleeping** indicates that the disciples fell asleep even after He had awakened and admonished them. **Their eyes were heavy**, and because they would not seek the Father’s help they found themselves powerless even to stay awake, much less to offer intercession for or consolation to their Master.

After He found the disciples sleeping the second time, Jesus **left them again, and went away and prayed a third time**. Although the gospels do not indicate it specifically, it would seem possible that, as already mentioned, Jesus had three sessions of prayer in response to three specific waves of Satanic attack, just as in the wilderness. It took three attempts for Satan to exhaust his malevolent strategy against the Son of God. Each time Jesus suffered more extreme torment of soul, but each time He responded with absolute resolution to do the Father’s will. After the third siege, our Lord said **the same thing once more** to His heavenly Father, that is, “Thy will be done” (see v. 42).

In these prayers, as in all His others, Jesus gives His followers a perfect example. Not only do we learn to confront temptation with prayer but we learn that prayer is not a means of bending God’s will to our own but of submitting our wills to His. If Jesus submitted His perfect will to the Father’s, how much more should we submit our imperfect wills to His? True prayer is yielding to what God wants for and of us, regardless of the cost — even if the cost is death. The nature or character of our praying in the face of temptation should be to cry out to the Lord for His strength to resist the impulse to rebel against God’s will, which is what all sin is.

We can be sure that the more sincerely we seek to do God’s will, the more severely Satan will attempt to lure us from it, just as he did with Christ. And like our Lord, our response should be prayerful, single-minded determination to draw near to God.

After the third time of supplication Jesus was the victor and Satan was the vanquished. The enemy of His soul was defeated, and Christ remained unscathed in perfect harmony with the will of His Father, calmly and submissively ready to suffer and to die. And in that death He was prepared to take upon Himself the sins of the world. If the very Son of God needed to cry out to His heavenly Father in time of temptation and grief,

how much more do we? That was the lesson He wanted the eleven, and all His other disciples after them, to learn.

After the third session of prayer, Jesus **came to the disciples, and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest?”** Even after the two rebukes and heartfelt admonitions from the Lord, the three men were **still sleeping**. Their eyes were still heavy (cf. v. 43) because they were controlled by the natural rather than by the spiritual. They were so totally subject to the flesh and its needs that they were indifferent to the needs of Christ. They were even indifferent to their own deepest needs, because, just as Jesus had warned a short while before, they were about to be overwhelmed by fear for their own lives and by shame of Christ. Yet instead of following their Master’s example through agonizing in prayer, they blissfully rested in sleep.

Jesus was teaching the disciples that spiritual victory goes to those who are alert in prayer and who depend on their heavenly Father. The other side of that lesson, and the one the disciples would learn first, was that self-confidence and unpreparedness are the way to certain spiritual defeat.

STRENGTH

“Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Arise, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!” (26:45b-46)

The word **behold** is used to call attention to something. As Jesus walked back to the three disciples, the men coming to arrest Him were already within sight. In fact, they arrived “while He was still speaking” (v. 47). As they approached, Jesus could make out the Roman soldiers from Fort Antonia and the chief priests and elders. Most clearly of all, He could see Judas, who led the motley contingent.

With great sadness, Jesus said, **“The hour is at hand.”** He was not sad because He was unwilling to face the cross but because He was about to become sin. And His sadness was made the more bitter because His beloved disciples would not stand with Him as He gave His all for them. With a strength made even more magnificent by its contrast with their weakness, **the Son of Man** graciously submitted to **being betrayed into the hands of sinners**.

There was nothing more that Jesus needed to do and nothing more the disciples were willing to do. **“Arise,”** Jesus therefore said, **“let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!”** Rather than being weakened and deterred by the temptations, Jesus became stronger and more resolved; and instead of waiting for His enemies to come to Him, He went out to meet them.

With the courage of invincibility, Jesus had made the ultimate and final act of commitment to His heavenly Father, who He knew would raise Him from the dead on the third day. As He moved toward the crowd who came to arrest Him, He also resolutely moved toward the cross. “For the joy set before Him [He] endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb. 12:2).

Because Jesus resisted every ploy and temptation of Satan, the adversary fled from Him that night, and he will likewise flee from every believer who resists him in God’s power (James 4:7). “Walk by the Spirit,” Paul declared, “and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16).

Matthew 26:36-46 gives the pattern and sequence of spiritual tragedy, which may be summarized in the words: confidence, sleep, temptation, sin, and disaster.

Self-confidence always opens the door to temptation. The first step of a believer’s falling into sin is false confidence that he is able to be faithful to the Lord in his own power. Like the disciples on the Mount of Olives, he is certain he would never forsake Christ or compromise His Word.

Following self-confidence comes sleep, representing indifference to evil and lack of moral and spiritual vigilance. The sleeping believer has little concern for what he reads or listens to, even when it is clearly unchristian and debasing.

The third step is temptation, which Satan’s system is constantly ready to place in the way of God’s people. As with Jesus, the temptation appeals to one’s personal rights and calls for rebellion against God.

The fourth step is sin, because a believer who is spiritually self-confident, who is indifferent to sin, and who does not turn to the Lord for help will inevitably fall into sin. No person, not even a Christian, has the capacity within himself to withstand Satan and avoid sin.

The fifth and final stage in the sequence is disaster. Just as temptation that is not resisted in God's power always leads to sin, sin that is not confessed and cleansed leads to spiritual tragedy.

That is the pattern the disciples followed that last night of Jesus' earthly life and that every believer follows when he does not depend wholly on the Lord.

But this passage also contains the pattern for spiritual victory, manifested and exemplified by Jesus. The way of victory rather than tragic defeat is confidence in God rather than self, moral and spiritual vigilance rather than indifference, resisting temptation in God's power rather than in our own, and holding to obedience rather than to the rebellion of sin.

The Traitor's Kiss

(26:47-56)

15

And while He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, came up, accompanied by a great multitude with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and elders of the people. Now he who was betraying Him gave them a sign, saying, “Whomever He shall kiss, He is the one; seize Him.” And immediately he went to Jesus and said, “Hail, Rabbi!” and kissed Him. And Jesus said to him, “Friend, do what you have come for.” Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and seized Him. And behold, one of those who were with Jesus reached and drew out his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? How then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen this way?” At that time Jesus said to the multitudes, “Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest Me as against a robber? Every day I used to sit in the temple teaching and you did not seize Me. But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples left Him and fled. (26:47-56)

Besides Jesus, the participants in this narrative are the mixed crowd that came to arrest Him, the traitor Judas, and the eleven disciples. The crowd attacked Jesus, Judas betrayed Him with a kiss, Peter presumptuously tried to defend Him with a sword, and the disciples defected from Him in terror. But amidst those tragic activities, all of which appeared to work toward Jesus' disgrace and defeat, the undaunted majesty and triumph of the Savior continued to manifest themselves as God's prophetic Word was unerringly fulfilled.

THE ATTACK OF THE CROWD

And while He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, came up, accompanied by a great multitude with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and elders of the people. (26:47)

While Jesus was still speaking to the eleven disciples in the garden, admonishing them to be spiritually vigilant and announcing to them His imminent betrayal (vv. 45-46), **behold, Judas, one of the twelve, came up.**

It seems strange and inappropriate that **Judas** would still be called **one of the twelve** while he was in the very act of betrayal. One would think Matthew would have been loath to refer to him in such a way. By the time the gospels were written, Judas's name had long been a byword among Christians, a synonym for treachery and infamy. Why, we might wonder, was he not referred to as the false disciple or the one who counted himself among the twelve?

But, in fact, all four gospel writers specifically speak of Judas as “one of the twelve” (Matt. 26:14, 47; Mark 14:10, 20, 43; Luke 22:47; John 6:71), whereas no other disciple is individually designated in that way. The writers clearly identify Judas as the betrayer of Jesus, but they do not speak of him with overt disdain or hatred. They are remarkably restrained in their descriptions and assessments of him, never using derogatory epithets or fanciful episodes, as did many extra biblical writers.

The apocryphal writing *The Story of Joseph of Arimathea* taught that Judas was the son of the brother of the high priest Caiaphas and that he was sent by Caiaphas to infiltrate the disciples and discover a way to destroy Jesus.

According to another apocryphal writing, *The Acts of Pilate*, Judas went home after the betrayal and found his wife roasting a chicken. When he told her he was planning to kill himself because he was afraid Jesus would rise from the dead and take vengeance on him, she replied that Jesus would no more rise from the dead than the chicken she was cooking would jump out of the fire and crow—at which instant the chicken was said to have done just that.

An ancient manuscript called *Coptic Narratives of the Ministry and Passion* maintained that Judas's wife was exceedingly greedy and that he was nothing more than the pawn of a manipulative wife. In the ancient Near East, to accuse a man of being subjugated to a dominating wife was considered highly slanderous.

A twelfth-century writing called *The Legendary Aura* claimed that Judas's parents threw him into the sea when he was an infant, because even at that early age they supposedly sensed he was diabolical and deserved to be destroyed. Somehow he managed to survive and grow to adulthood, and, according to the legend, soon after marrying a beautiful older woman, he discovered she was his mother.

Such bizarre accounts are common in extra biblical literature. They are concocted to demonstrate the vileness of Judas and to reveal the contempt with which he was viewed. The gospel writers, by contrast, simply call him **one of the twelve**. Rather than minimizing the heinousness of Judas' treachery, this heightens the insidiousness of his crime more than any list of epithets could do.

When the traitor came to the garden, he was **accompanied by a great multitude with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and elders of the people**. This **great multitude** was not the typical spontaneous crowd of admirers that often sought Him out. It was rather a carefully-selected group brought together for the sole purpose of arresting Him and putting Him to death.

The **multitude** included officers of the Temple (Luke 22:52), who were granted limited police powers by the Romans in matters concerning Jewish religion and society. This group was probably armed with **clubs**. The multitude also included a cohort of Roman soldiers (John 18:3), which, at full strength, comprised 600 men. Because they had to have Roman permission to exercise the death penalty, the Jewish leaders had requested Roman soldiers to join in the arrest. These soldiers from Fort Antonia in Jerusalem, and perhaps some of the Temple police as well, were armed with **swords**. The soldiers probably were also included because on a previous occasion when the Temple police were sent to arrest Jesus, they came back empty handed (John 7:32, 44-46).

Apparently the Jewish leaders had intended for some time to accuse Jesus of rebellion against Rome. In that way His death could be blamed on the Roman government, and they themselves would be safe

from reprisal by the many Jews who as yet still admired Him. In order to take advantage of the opportunity, **the chief priests and elders** must have hurried to Pilate to request the immediate use of his troops. Or perhaps they previously had arranged with the governor to have the soldiers available on short notice. Under intimidation because he did not want to risk another insurrection, especially in the midst of an important Jewish feast (see Mark 15:6-7), the Roman governor granted the request.

When he left the upper room, Judas must have rushed to meet with the Jewish leaders and inform them that the propitious time they had been waiting for was at hand. Although Judas's original arrangement had been only with the chief priests and other Temple officials (Luke 22:4), the Pharisees also became involved in the plot (John 18:3), as did the Sadducees and the entire Sanhedrin (Mark 15:1; Acts 23:6). And because the multitude not only included representatives **from the chief priests and elders** but the chief priests and elders themselves (Luke 22:52), those leaders obviously wanted to make sure Jesus did not overpower them or slip through their fingers again. When all four gospel accounts are compared, it becomes evident that the total number of men who came with Judas to the garden may have been as high as a thousand.

That mixed multitude was a prophetic portrait of the world's treatment of Christ, a vivid illustration of its wickedness, mindlessness, and cowardice. Instead of humbly welcoming the Son of God, embracing their long-awaited Messiah, and falling at His feet in adoration and worship, they arrogantly came to put Him to death.

Their wicked intent was manifest first of all in the gross injustice of their accusations and actions, which had no relation to truth or justice. Jesus had broken neither Mosaic nor Roman law. He had committed no immoral or illegal act. His only offense was in not recognizing or obeying the man-made, legalistic rabbinical traditions. Pilate had no love or respect for Jesus, but he acknowledged He was not guilty of breaking any Roman law, much less of inciting a rebellion (John 19:4). Yet to protect his own position with Rome and to keep from arousing the discontent of the Jewish leaders, he was perfectly willing to allow an innocent man to be executed.

Second, the multitude not only was unjust but mindless. The majority of them probably had little idea of what they were doing or of the reasons for it. The Roman soldiers, of course, were simply obeying orders

as they were trained to do, without questioning the purpose or propriety. Most of those in the multitude had no personal grudge against Jesus, and some of them probably had never heard of Him before. Yet they had no compunction about participating in His arrest. In their spiritual darkness they had no ability to recognize Jesus as the very source and incarnation of truth and righteousness. In any case, they cared little for truth, righteousness, or anything else of spiritual value, but only for their personal welfare. Most of them were hirelings who were indifferent to the justice of what they did as long as they were paid and did not get into trouble with their superiors.

That multitude has had counterparts in every age of church history. Countless millions have been incited against the cause of Christ without having the least notion of who He is or of what He taught. They become willing victims of someone else's ungodly prejudice and join in causes that are patently unjust.

A third characteristic of the multitude in the garden was cowardice. Not only the leaders, but probably the soldiers and Temple police as well, preferred to arrest Jesus in this dark, isolated place rather than in the streets of Jerusalem in broad daylight. A riotous mob can be intimidating even to armed men. And despite the advantages of darkness and isolation, the cowardly, apprehensive leaders felt it necessary to bring a thousand men, including several hundred armed soldiers, to arrest a dozen men who were known to be peaceful.

A guilty conscience always produces cowardice. The wicked fear they may receive justice for their injustice and therefore seek protection in numbers and in darkness. They are afraid of exposure and opposition, and they take no public stand or action unless the odds are overwhelmingly in their favor.

The multitude was also profane. What an unbelievable sacrilege was committed that night by the murderous, sinful men who dared to lay hands on the sinless Son of God!

The unbelieving world has always disdained the name of God, the Word of God, and the things of God. No pagan deity is so openly blasphemed by mankind as is the Lord Jesus Christ. Few evidences testify more boldly that the world is now in the hands of Satan than the fact that it is the true God who is most often blasphemed and mocked.

THE KISS OF THE TRAITOR

Now he who was betraying Him gave them a sign, saying, “Whomever I shall kiss, He is the one; seize Him.” And immediately he went to Jesus and said, “Hail, Rabbi!” and kissed Him. And Jesus said to him, “Friend, do what you have come for.” (26:48-50a)

Judas had left the upper room after dark (John 13:30) and gone directly to the chief priests, with whom he had already consummated the agreement to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver (Matt. 26:14-16). He had been looking for “a good opportunity to betray Him to them apart from the multitude” (Luke 22:6), and now was the ideal time. Judas rightly surmised that Jesus would later go to the Garden of Gethsemane (see John 18:2), which was well away from the crowds of Jerusalem. Pilgrims thronged the streets throughout most of the night during this high time of Passover week, when the two days of sacrifice overlapped (see chap. 12 of this volume). Only in darkness and in such a remote place as this could they take Jesus captive without arousing attention.

Judas was severely disappointed that Jesus did not turn out to be the kind of Messiah he expected. Jesus did not overthrow Rome or even the powerful Jewish religious leaders, and consequently He had acquired no positions of prestige and power with which to reward His disciples. Instead of teaching them how to conquer and control, Jesus taught them how to submit and serve. Instead of Judas’s being richer than when he began to follow Jesus, it is quite likely he was poorer—except for the money he stole from the group’s treasury (John 12:6).

Judas was already possessed by Satan (Luke 22:3), and therefore what he did was no longer under his control. Yet it was under the compulsion of his own unbelief, greed, and ambition that he had opened himself to Satan’s presence.

Delivering up Jesus was in the mind of Satan, the mind of Judas, the minds of the Jewish religious leaders, and in the mind of Rome. But it was in the “predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God” ages before it entered the mind of Satan or the minds of those godless men (Acts 2:23). Even while doing Satan’s business, Judas and his co-conspirators were being used to fulfill a divinely ordained plan that would result in the salvation of sinners like the very ones set on killing Him.

Because it was dark and because many in the multitude probably did not know Jesus by sight, Judas, **the one who was betraying Him**, had prearranged a sign, saying, **“Whomever I shall kiss, He is the one; seize Him.”**

Kiss is from *phileō*, a verb referring to an act of special respect and affection, much as is still displayed today in many Arab cultures and even among some Europeans. In the ancient Near East such a **kiss** was a sign of homage.

Because of his lowly status, a slave would kiss the feet of his master or other not able person, as would an enemy seeking mercy from a monarch. Ordinary servants would perhaps kiss the back of the hand of the one they greeted, and those above the level of servant would sometimes kiss the palm of the hand. To kiss the hem of a persons garment was a sign of reverence and devotion. But an embrace and a kiss on the cheek was the sign of close affection and love, reserved only for those with whom one had a close, intimate relationship. A kiss and embrace were an accepted mark of affection of a pupil for his teacher, for example, but only if the teacher offered them first.

Therefore, of all the signs Judas could have selected, he chose the one that would turn out to be the most despicable, not because of the act itself but because he perverted it so hypocritically and treacherously. He could have pointed out Jesus in countless other ways that would have been just as effective. For whatever debauched reason he may have had, Judas chose to feign his innocence and affection before Jesus and the disciples to the very end. It is hard to imagine that even so wicked a person as Judas could have flagrantly displayed his treachery in the very face of the one who had graciously taught and befriended him for three years. But Satan, who filled him, knows no embarrassment and has no restraint on his wretchedness.

The raucous cries of the crowd to crucify Him must have been painful to Jesus’ ears. He had taught them, healed them, and offered them the very bread of life, and yet they had turned against Him in contempt and derision. Even the hatred of the chief priests, elders, Pharisees, and Sadducees was painful to Him, because He loved and would have redeemed even those wicked men. The brutality of the soldiers who would beat Him, spit on Him, and place a crown of thorns on His head was painful to Jesus’ spirit as well as His body. Even the cowardly indifference

of Pilate would wound Jesus' heart, because He came to forgive and to save even that pagan Gentile.

But Judas must have wounded Jesus more grievously than all the others together, because he had been a disciple and friend, an intimate with whom Jesus unreservedly had shared His love, His companionship, and His truth. It is impossible to imagine what our Lord must have felt when Judas brashly approached Him **and said, "Hail, Rabbi!" and kissed Him.** Yet His grief was not for Himself but for this man who was so engulfed by greed and self-will that he would stoop to betray the dearest Friend he ever had or could have.

Kissed translates an intensified form of the verb used in verse 48 and carries the idea of fervent, continuous expression of affection. It was the word used by Luke of the woman who came into the Pharisee's house and kissed Jesus' feet, wiping them with her hair and anointing them with perfume (Luke 7:38, 45). It was also used by Luke to describe the father's reception of the repentant son in the parable of the prodigal (15:20) and of the grieving Ephesian elders on the beach near Miletus as they bade farewell to their beloved Paul (Acts 20:37). It was just such intense affection that Judas feigned for Christ.

Judas was so caught up in his deceitful display that even Jesus' sobering words, "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" (Luke 22:48) did not deter him. It is probable that Judas was now so much under Satan's domination that his actions were no longer voluntary.

In deep sadness, but with perfect composure in the face of Judas's perfidy, Jesus said simply, **"Friend, do what you have come for."** The Lord did not use the usual word (*philos*) for **friend**, which He used of the Twelve in John 15:14. Instead He addressed Judas merely as *hetairos*, which is better translated "fellow," "comrade," or "companion." Jesus had offered Himself to be Judas's friend, and more than that, to be his Savior. But the opportunity for salvation had passed, and in light of Judas's unspeakable treachery, even *fellow* was a gracious form of address.

Do what you have come for was Jesus' farewell statement to the son of perdition. For Judas those were the last words of Christ, and one can imagine that the words will ring as a torment in his ears through out all eternity in hell. Judas exposed himself outwardly as the enemy of Christ he had always been inwardly, and until the end of history his name will be synonymous with treachery.

Judas's betrayal not only reflected the wickedness of the sinful world but the wretchedness of the false disciple. He is the epitome of a sham believer, the quintessence of a spurious Christian.

A false Christian is first of all motivated by self-interest, which for Judas was exhibited most obviously in his greed, because he was a thief (John 12:6). But it is likely that he also craved prestige, glory, and power, which he expected to share with Jesus when He overthrew Rome and established His earthly kingdom. He sought to use Jesus for his own sinful ends, and when he discovered that the Lord would not be so used, he turned on Him in open rejection and betrayal. He was like the seeds planted in rocky soil that spring up for a little while but wither when exposed to the heat of the sun (Matt. 13:5-6). When disappointment and testing came, he fell away (see vv 20-21). He is the fruitless branch that is cut off and burned (John 15:6).

Second, a false disciple is also marked by deceit and hypocrisy. He masquerades in the guise of devotion to Christ, His Word, and His church. He is like a tare planted among wheat; only God can with certainty distinguish him from the real thing. He pays homage to Christ on the outside but hates Him on the inside. Like Judas, his outward signs of affection for the Lord cover a heart that despises Him.

But when a false believer is confronted with a price to pay for his association with Christ, his superficial interest in the church and the things of God invariably withers, and he is exposed as the impostor he has always been.

Judas's particular act of betrayal and its direct consequences were unique, but his basic attitude toward Jesus is characteristic of every false believer. Every age has found Judases in the church, those who outwardly feign allegiance to Christ but who at heart are His enemies. They identify themselves with the church for many different reasons, but all of the reasons are self-serving. Whether it is to get ahead in business by appearing respectable, to gain social acceptance by being religious, to salve a guilty conscience by means of pretended righteousness, or to accomplish any other purpose, the underlying motive always is to serve and please self, not God.

Judas is the archetype of Christ rejecters and the supreme example of wasted privilege and opportunity. He is the picture of those who love money, having forsaken the priceless Son of God for thirty pieces of silver

(cf. Matt 13:22). He is the classic hypocrite, who feigned love and loyalty for Christ even as he delivered Him up for execution. He is the supreme false disciple, the son of Satan who masquerades as a son of God.

THE PRESUMPTION OF PETER

Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and seized Him. And behold, one of those who were with Jesus reached and drew out his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” (26:50b-53)

As soon as He was identified by Judas, the soldiers **came and laid hands on Jesus and seized Him**. When they saw their Master being arrested, the disciples asked, “Lord, shall we strike with the sword?” (Luke 22:49). But **one of those who were with Jesus** did not wait for a reply but **reached and drew out his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear**.

As we might guess, this act was performed by the impulsive and volatile Peter (John 18:10), who obviously was one of the two disciples who had armed themselves (Luke 22:38). It may have been that the synoptic writers did not identify Peter because their gospels were written earlier than John’s, when Peter could have been in danger of reprisal from the Jewish authorities.

John also informs us that the man Peter struck was named Malchus (John 18:10), who, because he was in the forefront of the multitude, was probably a high-ranking **slave of the high priest**. Peter doubtlessly had aimed for Malchus’s head but **cut off** only **his ear** when the man ducked. Peter probably was emboldened by the fact that a few moments earlier when Jesus told the multitude who He was, “they drew back, and fell to the ground” (John 18:6). Seizing that time of vulnerability, Peter perhaps thought he would kill as many as he could before he himself was slain. Or perhaps he assumed he was invincible, thinking that Jesus would not allow Himself or His disciples to be harmed.

As was often the case, however, Peter reacted in the wrong way. When the Lord had told the disciples, “Let him who has no sword sell his robe and buy one” (Luke 22:36), He was speaking of spiritual, not physical, preparedness. As Jesus had made clear many times, and as Paul later declared to the Corinthian church, “The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses” (2 Cor. 10:4).

The church has never made advances by physical warfare, and every time it has tried, the cause of Christ has been severely harmed. There are no holy wars. Every war fought in the name of Christ has been utterly unholy, contradicting and undermining everything His Word teaches. The kingdom of God does not advance with fleshly weapons or by fleshly strategy. The battleground is spiritual, and it makes no sense to fight with physical weapons.

Jesus told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered up to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm” (John 18:36). Wars such as the Crusades that are fought in the name of Christ are an affront to Christ. In reality, they are crusades against the very One who is claimed to be served.

Jesus gave Peter two important reasons that explain why the use of physical weapons cannot be used to defend, much less extend, His kingdom. First of all, to do so is fatal. **“Put your sword back into its place,”** Jesus told Peter; **“for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword.”** Jesus was not philosophizing by declaring that everyone who takes up arms will himself be killed by arms or that a person who uses violence will be killed violently. His point was that those who commit acts of violence to achieve personal ends will face punishment by civil authorities, **the sword** representing a common means of execution in the ancient world. He was simply reiterating the divine standard set forth in Genesis: “Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man” (9:6). To protect the sanctity of human life, God declares that the one who wantonly takes the life of another person is subject to capital punishment.

God has given human government the right to execute murderers. “It does not bear the sword for nothing,” Paul said; “for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil” (Rom.

13:4). The apostle willingly applied that law to himself. In his defense before Festus he said, “If then I am a wrongdoer, and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die” (Acts 25:11).

In telling Peter to put his **sword back into its place** Jesus was saying, in effect, “No matter how wicked and unjust my arrest is, you have no right to take vigilante action. If you take a life while doing that, your own life will justly be forfeited as punishment.”

Jesus’ arrest and subsequent trials were clearly unjust, but they were nevertheless carried out within the framework of the legal systems of that day. Although it exercised its power only by the permission of Rome, the Sanhedrin was a civil as well as religious governing body in Israel. Pilate was the duly appointed Roman governor. Jesus’ point was that personal violent action against even an unjust governing body is wrong. God has the sovereign right to overrule human governments, as He has done frequently throughout history, but no individual has such a right.

Jesus was not speaking about self-defense or the defense of loved ones or friends from an attacker. Nor was he talking about fighting in the armed forces of one’s country. He was referring to violently taking justice into one’s own hands. Under no circumstances does a Christian or anyone else have the right to dispense personal justice, even to defend Christ’s name or Word.

Second, trying to defend Christ and His kingdom by physical force is foolish. “**Do you not think that I cannot appeal to My Father,**” Jesus said, “**and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?**” Trying to defend Christ with a sword not only is morally wrong according to God’s law but is also pointless. After having seen Jesus’ divine power demonstrated hundreds of times, why did Peter think his Lord needed the puny help of one sword, or even a thousand swords?

A full Roman legion was composed of 6,000 soldiers. **More than twelve legions of angels** therefore would be in excess of 72,000. If a single angel of God could slay 185,000 men in one night, as with the Assyrian troops of Sennacherib (2 Kings 19:35), the power of 72,000 angels is unimaginable. Jesus explained to his impetuous disciple that He had immediate access to supernatural forces that easily could destroy the entire Roman army, not to mention the mere cohort of 600 soldiers (John 18:3) they now faced. Peter’s demonstration of self-willed bravery was therefore unnecessary and absurd. The Lord’s battles are won

in His power alone, and any human efforts on His behalf that are not made in submission to His divine will and strength are presumptuous and futile.

THE FULFILLMENT OF PROPHECY

“How then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen this way?” (26:54)

For Peter to violently oppose Jesus’ arrest was also to oppose the fulfillment of God’s prophesied plan of redemption. According to God’s own **Scriptures**, He reminded Peter again that **“it must happen this way.”** On at least three other occasions (see Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19; cf. 12:40; 17:9, 12) He had told the disciples that it was necessary that He suffer, die, and be raised from the dead.

As David predicted, a close and trusted friend would betray the Messiah (Pss. 41:9; 55:12-14). Isaiah foretold that He would be “despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; . . . smitten of God, and afflicted. . . . pierced through for our transgressions, . . . crushed for our iniquities; . . . [chastened] for our well-being . . . [that] by His scourging we are healed.” He would be oppressed, afflicted, and slaughtered like a lamb that does not cry out. “The Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering.” He “will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities” (Isa.53:3-5, 7, 10-11).

Because Peter boasted too loudly, prayed too little, slept too much, and acted too fast, he seemed invariably to miss the point of what Jesus was saying and doing. The Lord therefore had to explain to him again that what was happening was in God’s perfect plan. “Put the sword into the sheath,” He said; “the cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?” (John 18:11). Then, in the only instance recorded in Scripture of Jesus’ healing a fresh wound, “He touched [Malchus’s] ear and healed him” (Luke 22:51). In a sovereign act of miraculous grace, Jesus undid Peter’s damage.

THE DEFECTION OF THE DISCIPLES

At that time Jesus said to the multitudes, “Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest Me as against a robber? Every day I used to

sit in the temple teaching and you did not seize Me. But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples left Him and fled. (26:55-56)

With an overtone of sarcasm **Jesus** pointed up the subterfuge and cowardice of **the multitudes** who now confronted Him in the garden. “Am I so dangerous,” He said to them, “that you had to come out in such great numbers and **with swords and clubs to arrest Me as against a robber?** Am I so elusive that you had to capture me by stealth in the dead of night? You know very well that **every day I used to sit in the temple teaching.** Why did you **not seize Me** then?”

Jesus knew that no amount of truth or logic would dissuade His enemies from executing their plot against Him. They knew their charges were spurious and unjust and that they had had countless opportunities to arrest Him publicly. But when evil men are determined to have their way, they will not be deterred by such considerations as truth, justice, legality, or righteousness.

Jesus then told the crowd what He had just reminded Peter of: **All this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets maybe fulfilled.** “Whatever your personal reasons and motivations may be,” He was saying, “you are unwittingly accomplishing what your own **Scriptures** have said through **the prophets** that you would do to your Messiah. Completely apart from your own evil intentions, God is sovereignly using you to accomplish His righteous and gracious purposes. And in doing so, He will demonstrate that His infallible Word through **the prophets will be fulfilled.**”

Those words obviously gave little comfort or courage to the disciples. At last it dawned on them that their Lord was finally a captive of His enemies and that He would neither do anything Himself nor allow them to do anything to interfere. Although the leaders of the multitude had said they sought only Jesus (John 18:5), the disciples were fearful they would be arrested as accomplices, and therefore **all the disciples left Him and fled.**

The “little faith” disciples did not trust Jesus to save them and were afraid to risk suffering and perhaps even dying with Him. Just as He had predicted earlier that evening, when the Shepherd was struck the sheep scattered (Matt. 26:31).

It is easy to criticize the disciples for their faithlessness and cowardice. But every honest believer knows that at times he has run from possible embarrassment, ridicule, or mockery because of his association with Christ. We have to confess that we, too, have left our Lord and fled when the cost of discipleship has seemed too high.

Just as there are common marks of false disciples there are common characteristics of defective disciples, as the eleven proved to be on this occasion. First of all, they were unprepared. All of them, including the three Jesus chose to accompany Him into the garden, had fallen asleep at this time of Jesus' great struggle. Because they confused good intentions with spiritual strength, they were powerless when testing came. They were overconfident and felt no need of prayer. Had they taken to heart the Lord's marvelous promises in the Upper Room discourse (John 13-17), they would have had the divinely provided wisdom and strength to meet the crisis.

But because they had paid little attention to Jesus' teaching and had neglected prayer, the disciples discovered they were unprepared and inadequate. It is an absolute spiritual law that a believer who neglects the study of God's Word and neglects fellowship with Him in prayer will be unprepared (cf. Matt. 26:41). When testing comes he will be weak, afraid, unfaithful, and ineffective.

A second mark of a defective disciple is impulsiveness. The eleven disciples, and Peter in particular, reacted on the basis of emotion rather than revelation. They did not look at the situation from the perfect perspective of God's truth but from the imperfect and distorted perspective of their own understanding. Therefore, instead of acting on the basis of God's Word and in the promised power of His Spirit, they reacted on the basis of their emotions and in the weakness of their own resources.

The believer who fails to saturate himself in God's Word and to have fellowship in God's presence becomes a captive of circumstances. His thinking is based on the emotions of the moment, and his actions are based on the impulses of the moment.

A third mark of a defective disciple is impatience. Because the disciples refused to take Jesus' truth and promises to heart, they became anxious and impatient when things did not go as they thought they should. They could not wait for the Lord's deliverance and so devised their own.

Many Christians take the easy route of fleeing from trouble rather than trusting God to see them through it. Instead of trusting the Savior to deliver them, and in so doing to demonstrate His grace and power, they try to avoid trouble at any cost and thereby bring reproach upon Him.

A fourth mark of a defective disciple is carnality. The disciples, typified by Peter, depended wholly on their own fleshly power to protect them. Because he refused to trust His Lord's way and power, Peter had nothing to rely on but his sword, which was pathetically inadequate even from a human perspective.

When believers lose their fleshly weapons or discover those weapons are ineffective, they sometimes simply flee in desperation.

The major participant in this garden scene was Jesus Himself, and in Matthew's account we see His triumph even while His enemies were taking Him captive. Through their evil plot to put Him to death He would accomplish the divine plan for giving men eternal life.

All of His disciples deserted Him, and one betrayed Him, yet the divine work of redemption continued to be fulfilled on schedule, precisely according to God's sovereign and prophesied plan. As the disciples' faithfulness decreased, Jesus' demonstration of power and glory increased. As the plans of His enemies seemed to prosper, the plan of God prospered still more in spite of them.

It is not clear exactly when it happened, but perhaps right after Judas's kiss, Jesus took the initiative and confronted the multitude. To assure His enemies that He was not trying to hide or escape, and perhaps to strip Judas of any credit for identifying Him, He said, "Whom do you seek?" When they replied, "Jesus the Nazarene," He said, "I am He," and at that those words "they drew back, and fell to the ground" (John 18:4-6). "I am He" translates *egō eimi*, which literally means "I am," the covenant name of God (see Ex. 3:14).

The exact reason for the multitude's temporary immobility is not revealed, but doubtless it was caused by the overwhelming power of Christ. Although the Jews in the group would have associated Jesus' words with the name of God, on a previous occasion when He claimed that name for Himself they were enraged rather than fearful and tried to stone Him to death (John 8:58-59). And that name would have had no significance at all to the 600 Roman soldiers. In addition, it seems almost certain that many of the men in that huge crowd could not hear what Jesus was saying.

Therefore their instantly and involuntarily falling to the ground as one man was not caused so much by fear as by a direct, miraculous burst of the power of God. It was as if the Father were declaring in action what He had previously declared in words: “This is My beloved Son” (Matt. 3:17; 17:5). The multitude was able to rise only when God’s restraining hand was lifted.

Perhaps while they were still lying dazed and perplexed on the ground, Jesus again “asked them, ‘Whom do you seek?’ ” and they again replied, “Jesus the Nazarene” (John 18:7). He then said, “I told you that I am He; if therefore you seek Me, let these go their way” (v. 8), referring to the disciples.

The multitude that night reacted to being cast to the ground much as the homosexuals of Sodom reacted to being struck blind. Those wicked men were so consumed by their sexual perversion that even in blindness they persisted to the point of exhaustion, futilely trying to satisfy their lust (Gen. 19:11). In a similar way the men who came to arrest Jesus were so bent on their ungodly mission that they crawled up out of the dirt as if nothing had happened, determined at all costs to carry out their wicked scheme. Though not to the degree of being indwelt by Satan as was Judas, the entire multitude was subservient to the prince of this world.

Jesus had already unmasked the duplicity and cowardice of the leaders of the multitude when He asked why they had not arrested Him earlier in the week. He not only had been in Jerusalem every day but had been the focus of public attention on several occasions, most notably when He entered the city triumphantly and when He cleansed the Temple of the money changers and sacrifice merchants.

In His confrontation with Judas, the Lord also demonstrated His majesty and His sovereignty. He not only had predicted Judas’s betrayal but had declared that even that vile act would fulfill God’s prophecy (Matt. 26:21, 24). When the moment of arrest came, He faced it without resistance, anger, or anxiety. He was as perfectly confident of following His Father’s plan and of being under His Father’s care at that moment as when He performed His greatest miracles or was transfigured on the mountaintop.

In His confrontation with Peter and the other disciples, Jesus demonstrated His perfect faithfulness in face of their utter faithlessness.

While they demonstrated their absence of trust in the Son, the Son demonstrated His absolute trust in His Father.

The Illegal, Unjust
Trial of Christ 16
(26:57-68)

And those who had seized Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were gathered together. But Peter also was following Him at a distance as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and entered in, and sat down with the officers to see the outcome. Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, in order that they might put Him to death; and they did not find any, even though many false witnesses came forward. But later on two came forward, and said, “this man stated, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.’ ” And the high priest stood up and said to Him, “Do you make no answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?” But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, “I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God.” Jesus said to him, “You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Then the high priest tore his robes, saying, “He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; what do you think?” They answered and said, “He is deserving of death!” Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him, and said, “Prophecy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You?” (26:57-68)

The Jews had always prided themselves on their sense of fairness and justice, and rightly so. The judicial systems in the modern Western world have their foundations in the legal system of ancient Israel, which

itself was founded on the standards set forth in their Scriptures, the Old Testament.

The essence of the Old Testament system of jurisprudence is found in Deuteronomy:

You shall appoint for yourself judges and officers in all your towns which the Lord your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, that you may live and possess the land which the Lord your God is giving you. (16:18-20)

As the Hebrews worked out specific judicial procedures following those general principles, they determined that any community that had at least 120 men who were heads of families could form a local council. In later years, after the Babylonian exile, that council often was composed of the synagogue leadership. The council came to be known as a sanhedrin, from a Greek term (*sunedrion*) that had been transliterated into Hebrew and Aramaic, as it now is into English. It literally means “sitting together.” A local sanhedrin was composed of up to 23 members, and the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem was composed of 70 chief priests, elders, and scribes, with the high priest making a total of 71. In both the local and Great sanhedrins an odd number of members was maintained in order to eliminate the possibility of a tie vote.

When referring to the national body in Jerusalem, *sunedrion* is usually translated “Council” in the *New American Standard Bible* (see, e.g., Matt. 26:59; Mark 14:55) and when referring to a local body is translated “court” (see Matt. 5:22; 10:17; Mark 13:9). As we learn from Luke, the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem was also sometimes referred to as “the Senate of the sons of Israel” (Acts 5:21) or “the Council of the elders” (Luke 22:66; Acts 22:5).

Members of local sanhedrins were to be chosen because of their maturity and wisdom, and the Great Sanhedrin was to be composed of those who had distinguished themselves in a local council and had served a form of apprenticeship in the national council. But long before Jesus’

day, membership in the Great Sanhedrin had degenerated largely into appointments based on religious or political favoritism and influence. The Herods, especially Herod the Great, exercised considerable control over the Great Sanhedrin, and even the pagan Romans sometimes became involved in the appointment or removal of a high priest.

The general requirements of fairness and impartiality prescribed in Deuteronomy 16:18-20 and elsewhere in the Mosaic law were reflected in the rabbinical requirements that guaranteed an accused criminal the right to a public trial, to defense counsel, and conviction only on the testimony of at least two reliable witnesses. Trials were therefore always open to public scrutiny, and the defendant had the right to bring forth evidence and witnesses in his own behalf, no matter how damning the evidence and testimony against him might be.

To guard against false witnessing, whether given out of revenge or for a bribe, the Mosaic law prescribed that a person who knowingly gave false testimony would suffer the punishment the accused would suffer if found guilty (Deut. 19:16-19). A person who gave false testimony in a trial that involved capital punishment, for example, would himself be put to death. For obvious reasons, that penalty was a strong deterrent to perjury and an effective protection of justice. An additional deterrent was the requirement that accusing witnesses in a capital case were to initiate the execution, making them stand behind their testimony by action as well as words (Deut. 17:7). It was that law to which Jesus made indirect reference when He told the accusers of the woman taken in adultery, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7).

Rabbinical law required that a sentence of death could not be carried out until the third day after it was rendered and that during the intervening day the members of the court were to fast. That provision had the effect of preventing a trial during a feast, when fasting was prohibited. The delay of execution also provided additional time for evidence or testimony to be discovered in the defendant's behalf.

Simon Greenleaf was a famous professor of law at Harvard University in the last century. In his book *The Testimony of the Evangelists* ([Jersey City NJ: Frederick P. Linn, 1881], pp. 581-84) a section written by lawyer Joseph Salvador gives fascinating and significant information about proper Sanhedrin trial procedure. Because a defendant was protected

against self-incrimination, his confession, no matter how convincing, was not sufficient in itself for conviction.

On the day of the trial, according to Salvador, the court officers would require all evidence against the accused person to be read in the full hearing of open court. Each witness against him would be required to affirm that his testimony was true to the best of his knowledge and was based on his own direct experience and not on hearsay or presumption. Witnesses also had to identify the precise month, day, hour, and location of the event about which they testified. A council itself could not initiate charges against a person but could only consider charges brought before it by an outside party.

A woman was not allowed to testify because she was considered to lack the courage to give the first blow if the accused were convicted and sentenced to death. Children could not testify because of their immaturity, nor could a slave, a person of bad character, or a person who was considered mentally incompetent.

There was always to be presumption of innocence, and great latitude was given the accused in presenting his defense. In a local council, eleven votes out of the total of twenty-three were required for acquittal, but thirteen were required for conviction. If the accused was found innocent, he was freed immediately. But if he was found guilty, the sentence was not pronounced until two days later and, as mentioned above, the council members were required to fast during the intervening day. On the morning of the third day the council was reconvened, and each judge, in turn, was asked if he had changed his decision. A vote for condemnation could be changed to acquittal, but not the reverse.

If a guilty verdict was reaffirmed, an officer with a flag remained near the council while another officer, often mounted on horseback, escorted the prisoner to the place of execution. A herald went before the slow-moving procession declaring in a loud voice, "This man [stating his name] is led to punishment for such a crime; the witnesses who have sworn against him are such and such persons; if any one has evidence to give in his favor, let him come forth quickly." If, at any time before the sentence was carried out, additional information pertaining to innocence came to light, including the prisoner's recollection of something he had forgotten, one officer would signal the other, and the prisoner would be brought back to the council for reconsideration of the verdict. Before the

place of execution was reached, the condemned person was urged to confess his crime, if he had not already done so, and was given a stupefying drink to dull his senses and thereby make his death less painful.

The governing principle in capital cases was: “The Sanhedrin is to save, not destroy, life.” In addition to the above provisions, the president of the council was required to remind prospective witnesses of the preciousness of human life and to admonish them to be certain their testimony was both true and complete. No criminal trial could be begun during or continued into the night, the property of an executed criminal could not be confiscated but was passed to his heirs, and voting was done from the youngest member to the oldest in order that the former would not be influenced by the latter. And if a council voted unanimously for conviction, the accused was set free, because the necessary element of mercy was presumed to be lacking.

It is obvious that, when properly administered, the Jewish system of justice was not only eminently fair but merciful. It is just as obvious that the system did not operate either fairly or mercifully in Jesus’ trial, because the Sanhedrin violated virtually every principle of its own system of jurisprudence. Jesus was illegally tried without first having been charged with a crime. He was tried at night and in private, no defense was permitted Him, and the witnesses against Him had been bribed to falsify their testimony. He was executed on the same day He was sentenced, and, consequently, the judges could not have fasted on the intervening day that should have transpired and had no opportunity to reconsider their verdict. The only procedure that was properly followed was the offering of the stupefying drink, but that was done by Roman soldiers, not by representatives of the Sanhedrin (Mark 15:23).

As is clear from the gospel accounts, Jesus had two major trials, one Jewish and religious and the other Roman and secular. Because Rome reserved the right of execution to its own courts and administrators, the Sanhedrin was not allowed to dispense capital punishment (John 18:31). The fact that it did so on several occasions, as with the stoning of Stephen (Acts 6:12-14; 7:54-60), does not prove the legality of it. It is likely, however, that many illegal executions by the Sanhedrin were simply overlooked by Roman authorities for the sake of political expediency. For them, the loss of a single life was a small price to pay to keep order and

peace. The only blanket exception that Rome granted was for the summary execution of a Gentile who trespassed a restricted area of the Temple.

It is also significant that both the Jewish religious and Roman secular trials of Jesus had three phases, meaning that, within about twelve hours, Jesus faced legal proceedings on six separate occasions before His crucifixion. The Jewish trial began with His being taken before the former high priest Annas in the middle of the night. Annas then sent Him to the presiding high priest, Caiaphas, who had quickly convened the Sanhedrin at his own house. Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin met a second time after daylight on Friday morning.

After the Jewish religious leaders had concluded their sham hearings, they took Jesus to the Roman procurator, Pilate, first of all because they could not carry out a death sentence without his permission. But they also went to him because a Roman crucifixion would help obscure their own nefarious involvement in what they knew were totally unjust proceedings and condemnation.

When Pilate discovered Jesus was a Galilean, he sent Him to Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, who was in Jerusalem for the Passover. After being questioned and treated with contempt by Herod and his soldiers, Jesus was sent back to Pilate, who reluctantly consented to His crucifixion.

Matthew 26:57-68 reveals at least five aspects of that illegal and unjust treatment of our Lord: the convening of the Sanhedrin (vv. 57-58), the conspiracy to convict Jesus without evidence (vv. 59-61), the confrontation to induce His self-incrimination (vv. 62-64), the condemnation based on false charges and testimony (vv. 65-66), and the conduct of the court in the physical and verbal abuse of Jesus (vv. 67-68).

THE ILLEGAL AND UNJUST CONVENING OF THE SANHEDRIN

And those who had seized Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were gathered together. But Peter also was following Him at a distance as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and entered in, and sat down with the officers to see the outcome. (26:57-58)

After the disciples fled in fear, the Temple police, Roman soldiers, and the others **who had seized Jesus then led Him away**. But we learn from John that, before they took Him to **Caiaphas**, they “led Him to Annas first; for he was father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year” (John 18:13).

Some twenty years earlier, Annas had served as high priest for a period of four or five years. But although he had been replaced as ruling high priest, he not only continued to carry the title but also continued to wield great influence in Temple affairs, largely through the five sons who succeeded him and now through Caiaphas, his son-in-law

It was God’s design for high priests to serve for life. But the position had become so politicized that some of them served only a few years or even months, because they came into disfavor with a king or a Roman official. Some scholars believe that Annas had been removed from office by Rome because they feared too much power was being amassed by one man.

Annas controlled the Temple money changers and sacrifice sellers to such an extent that their operations were sometimes referred to as the Bazaars of Annas. It is likely that no Temple merchant could operate without being approved by Annas and agreeing to give him a large percentage of the profits.

A Jew never came to the Temple empty-handed. He always brought either a gift of money or a sacrifice to offer the Lord. But he could not offer Gentile coins, because they often carried the likeness of a ruler, which was considered a form of idolatry. Since the vast majority of coins used during New Testament times were either Roman or from a Gentile country under Roman control, Jews had to exchange such coins for Jewish ones before they could place their offerings in the bell-shaped receptacles in the Temple. And because the money changers in the Temple held a monopoly, they were able to charge exorbitant exchange fees.

A Jew who came to offer a sacrifice to God had to use an unblemished animal that had been certified by the priests. And although he could legitimately bring one of his own animals, the corrupt priests who were in charge of certification would seldom accept an animal not bought from a Temple merchant. Like those who needed to exchange their money, Jews who wanted to sacrifice were at the mercy of Annas’s Temple establishment. It was for that reason that Jesus had twice cleansed the

Temple of the money changers and sacrifice sellers, declaring in anger that they had profaned His Father's house of prayer by making it a den of robbers (John 2:13-17; Mark 11:15-17). It was immediately after the second cleansing that the infuriated Temple authorities "began seeking how to destroy Him" (Mark. 11:18).

Jesus was a persistent threat to Annas's power, prestige, security, and prosperity, for which He was bitterly despised by the high priest. In addition to that, Annas resented Jesus for His holiness, truth, and righteousness, because those virtues were a judgment on his own vile character. Everything Jesus said and did angered Annas, because, like Judas, his absolute rejection of Christ had placed him utterly in the hands of Satan, the great choreographer who was staging this heinous travesty against God's Son. Annas was one of a large cast of characters who were now manipulated by hell.

Annas may have instructed the arresting officials to bring Jesus to him first, or the officials may have reasoned that a charge against Jesus by such a powerful dignitary would not be contested when He was brought before the Sanhedrin for trial. In any case, taking Him first to Annas allowed Caiaphas time to assemble the Sanhedrin at his own house (see v. 59).

Although Annas had many personal reasons for hating Jesus and wanting Him dead, his first comments to the Lord indicate that he was still searching for a capital charge that would appear legal. In questioning Jesus "about His disciples, and about His teaching," (John 18:19), Annas violated two major procedural requirements. First, he had Jesus arraigned before an indictment was brought against Him, and, second, he tried to induce Jesus to incriminate Himself.

Jesus did not answer the question directly, but His response was a stinging exposure and indictment of Annas's duplicity and chicanery. "I have spoken openly to the world," He said; "I always taught in synagogues, and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and I spoke nothing in secret. Why do you question Me? Question those who have heard what I spoke to them; behold, these know what I said" (John 18:20-21). Jesus merely pointed out the obvious. Countless thousands had heard Him teach and preach and could testify first-hand about who His disciples were and about what He taught. Jesus also, in effect, challenged Annas's illegal attempt to make Him testify against Himself.

Annas was embarrassed, infuriated, and frustrated. Because of their complicity, the entire assemblage was also angered, and “one of the officers,” perhaps to help his superior save face, “gave Jesus a blow, saying, ‘Is that the way You answer the high priest?’ ” (John 18:22).

Some years later, the apostle Paul was brought before the Sanhedrin and, like His Lord, was struck simply for telling the truth. But unlike His Lord, he became angry and vehemently rebuked the presiding officer for his illegal treatment. Only when he learned that he was addressing the high priest did he apologize (Acts 23:1-5).

Jesus, however, never lost His composure, accepting His abuse with perfect calmness. He simply said to the officer who struck Him, “If I have spoken wrongly, bear witness of the wrong; but if rightly, why do you strike Me?” (John 18:23).

In complete exasperation and having no other recourse, “Annas therefore sent Him bound to Caiaphas the high priest” (v. 24). It was the middle of the night, perhaps shortly after midnight, because cock crowing, which normally began about 3:00 A.M., had not yet started (see Matt. 26:74).

Jesus was then brought before **Caiaphas, the high priest**, at whose house **the scribes and the elders were illegally gathered together** as the supreme Jewish Council (see v. 59). Contrary to expectations, however, no charge had yet been brought against Him. The high court of Judaism had been illegally convened at night to illegally try a man who had not even been indicted.

Though not as clever as his father-in-law, **Caiaphas** was equally devious and corrupt. He, too, was greedy, unprincipled, materialistic, and power hungry. He, too, despised Jesus’ truthfulness and righteousness because they were a judgment on his own wretched ungodliness.

During this time, **Peter also was following Jesus at a distance**, first to the house of Annas and then **as far as the courtyard of the high priest** Caiaphas. Out of a conflicting mixture of cowardice and commitment, **Peter** tried to be as near His Lord as prudence permitted without being discovered, and he **sat down with the officers to see the outcome**.

The fact that Peter and others were sitting in **the courtyard of the high priest** reveals still another infraction of Jewish legal protocol. As previously noted, the Sanhedrin was permitted to hold a trial involving

capital punishment only in the Temple and only in public. The private meeting at Caiaphas's house clearly violated both stipulations.

THE ILLEGAL AND UNJUST CONSPIRACY TO CONVICT JESUS

Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, in order that they might put Him to death; and they did not find any, even though many false witnesses came forward. But later on two came forward, and said, "this man stated, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.'" (26:59-61)

The **chief priests** are mentioned separately probably because they were the primary instigators of Jesus' arrest (see v. 47). But as Matthew makes clear, **the whole Council**, or Sanhedrin, was present.

The **Council** was empowered to act only as judge and jury in a legal proceeding. They could not instigate charges but could only adjudicate cases that were brought before them. But because they as yet had no formal charge against Jesus, they were forced to illegally act also as prosecutor in order to carry out their predetermined plan to convict and execute Him. Consequently, they **kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, in order that they might put Him to death.**

Because Jesus was innocent of any wrongdoing, the only possible way to convict Him would be on the basis of **false testimony**. His accusers would have to be liars. Because the Council was so controlled by satanic hatred of Jesus, they now were willing to do whatever was necessary to condemn Him, even if that meant violating every biblical and rabbinical rule of justice. To accomplish their wicked conspiracy they found themselves perverting the very heart of the Sanhedrin's purpose, stated earlier in this chapter: "to save, not destroy, life." Their purpose now, however, was not to discover the truth about Jesus and certainly not to save His life. Their single, compelling desire was to **put Him to death.**

But try as they would, **they did not find any** legitimate charges against Him, **even though many false witnesses came forward.** During that first attempt to manufacture a charge, **even the many false witnesses** who were willing to perjure themselves could not devise a story that would stand scrutiny even in that corrupt and biased proceeding! Their

testimonies not only were spurious but grossly inconsistent with each other (Mark 14:56), as is typically the case with liars.

The frustration of the assembly continued to mount until **later on two witnesses** finally **came forward** with a charge that seemed usable. They asserted that Jesus **stated, “I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.”** Mark’s more detailed account reports that they claimed Jesus said, “I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands” (Mark 14:58). Or perhaps Matthew reported one of the witness’s words and Mark the other’s, in which case the testimony even of those two men was not consistent.

Jesus’ actual words were, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19), and His hearers concluded that He was referring to the Jerusalem Temple building He had just cleansed (v. 20). The two false witnesses not only shared that false assumption but accused Jesus of saying, on the one hand, that He Himself was **able to destroy the temple of God**, and on the other, “*I will* destroy this temple” (Mark 14:58, emphasis added). Mark notes that “not even in this respect was their testimony consistent” (v. 59).

In addition to the inconsistency of their statements, which itself made the testimonies inadmissible in a legitimate hearing, the two men did not relate the year, month, day, and location of the incident they claimed to have witnessed, as they were required to do by law.

The fact that not a single witness could be found to convict Jesus of wrongdoing is one of the strongest apologetics in all of Scripture for His moral and spiritual perfection. If any fault could have been found in Him it would have come to light. Even if demons had to provide the information, it would certainly have been presented. Demons are not omniscient, but they would have known of any sin Jesus committed had He been guilty of it, and they would have rushed to produce such evidence against Him through their wicked minions in the Sanhedrin. But neither Jesus’ human nor demonic enemies could find in Him the least transgression of God’s moral or spiritual law. His only transgressions had been against the man-made, legalistic, and unscriptural rabbinic traditions.

The ones who were ultimately on trial that day were those who stood in judgment of the perfect, sinless Son of God. That tribunal of sinful, unjust, and hate-filled men will one day stand before God’s

heavenly tribunal and themselves be eternally condemned to the lake of fire.

THE ILLEGAL AND UNJUST CONFRONTATION TO
INDUCE SELF-INCRIMINATION

And the high priest stood up and said to Him, “Do you make no answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?” But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, “I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God.” Jesus said to him, “You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (26:62-64)

The frustration of the Council members became unbearable as they desperately tried to get the trial concluded before dawn, when people would start milling about the city and their illegal venture would risk being discovered. They also, no doubt, wanted to conclude the affair quickly so they could make preparations for their own Passover sacrifices and duties that afternoon.

Trying again to steer Jesus into self-incrimination, **the high priest** and presiding officer therefore **said to Him, “Do you make no answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?”** Probably gazing squarely into Caiaphas’s eyes, **Jesus kept silent**, adding still more to the high priest’s consternation. Since the testimonies of the two **men** were inconsistent, they should have been rejected by the court. A rebuttal by Jesus not only would have been futile but would have given the false testimony and the entire illegal proceedings the appearance of legitimacy.

Jesus stood majestically **silent**. It was the silence of innocence, the silence of dignity, the silence of integrity, the silence of infinite trust in His heavenly Father. It was a silence in which the lying words against Him reverberated in the ears of the guilty judges and of the false witnesses they had bribed. Goaded by that silence, which accentuated the travesty of justice over which he presided, the enraged **high priest** continued to badger Jesus, saying, **“I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God.”**

Appealing to the most sacred oath a Jew could utter, Caiaphas demanded that Jesus either affirm or deny His messiahship and deity. He was saying, in effect, “Answer my question truthfully, on the basis that You are standing before the living God, who knows all things.”

Although none of the Council, except Joseph of Arimathea, if he was still present, believed in Jesus’ deity, they were strongly hoping He would openly make that claim for Himself so that they could charge Him with blasphemy. The Mosaic law provided that “the one who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death” (Lev. 24:16).

But a claim to deity would be blasphemous only if it were false, which it would be for any human being ever born—except Jesus. Although He had never flaunted or made public issue of His messiahship and deity, He had given numerous attestations to both; beginning early in His ministry. In the synagogue at His hometown of Nazareth, He read a well-known messianic passage from Isaiah and then declared, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:18-21). His first specific claim to messiahship was made to the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well. In response to her statement that “Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ),” Jesus said, “I who speak to you am He” (John 4:25-26). He had readily accepted the messianic epithets shouted to Him as He entered Jerusalem the previous Monday (Matt. 21:9). He continually referred to God as His heavenly Father, which the Jewish leaders rightly interpreted as a claim of deity (John 5:17-18), and He had declared to the unbelieving Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, “Before Abraham was born, I am” (John 8:58), taking that ancient appellation of God (see Ex. 3:14) for Himself.

Jesus finally gave the affirmation the Sanhedrin had been waiting to hear. **You have said it yourself;** He replied. Mark’s account makes the acknowledgment of messiahship and deity even more explicit, as he quotes Jesus’ saying directly, “I am” (Mark 14:62).

Then, referring to Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13, Jesus added, **“Nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.”** “Not only am I the Messiah and the Son of God,” He was saying, “but one day you will see Me glorified with My Father in heaven and returning to earth as your Judge” (cf. Matt. 25:31-46).

Son of Man was a commonly acknowledged title of the Messiah, the one Jesus most often used of Himself, and **Power** was a figurative designation of God. Because the ungodly members of the Sanhedrin had refused to receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior, they had sealed their doom to face Him at the end time as their Judge and Executioner. The accused would then become the accuser, and the judges would become the judged.

THE ILLEGAL AND UNJUST CONDEMNATION OF JESUS

Then the high priest tore his robes, saying, “He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; what do you think?” They answered and said, “He is deserving of death!” (26:65-66)

Upon that unambiguous confession by Jesus, **the high priest tore his robes** in horror, **saying, “He has blasphemed!”** The unbelieving members of the Sanhedrin had long ago discounted Jesus’ claims of deity. He had pleaded with them, “If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father” (John 10:37-38). In other words, even if they could not believe the divine source of His teaching, how could they argue against the divine power behind His countless public miracles?

They had closed their minds to the truth, and no amount of evidence would open their eyes to it. Like many people throughout the ages who have rejected Christ, it was not that they had carefully examined the evidence about Him and found it to be untrue or unconvincing but that they refused to consider the evidence at all. Even God’s own Holy Spirit cannot penetrate such a willful barrier to His truth and grace. Miracles do not convince the hard-hearted.

When **the high priest** ceremoniously **tore his robes**, he did so not out of grief and indignation over the presumed dishonor of God’s name but rather out of joy and relief that, at last, Jesus had placed Himself into their hands, condemning Himself out of His own mouth. Although Leviticus 21:10 strictly forbade the high priest’s tearing his garments, the Talmud held that judges who witnessed blasphemy had a right to tear their robes if

they later sewed them up. By his traditional and theatrical display, Caiaphas dramatically gave the appearance of defending God's name, but inwardly he gloated over the illegal, unjust, and devilish victory he imagined he had just won.

“What further need do you have of witnesses?” he asked the Council rhetorically. And with that he asked for an immediate verdict: **“Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; what do you think?”** He did not bother to have the members polled individually and the results tabulated by scribes, as judicial protocol required, but simply called for verbal support of the predetermined conclusion of guilt.

With one voice **they answered and said, “He is deserving of death!”** The decision was unanimous as “they all condemned Him to be deserving of death” (Mark 14:64). The unanimous vote to convict should have given Jesus His freedom automatically, because the necessary element of mercy was lacking. But by this time the Sanhedrin had relinquished even the semblance of legality and justice. Because we know that Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the Council but did not consent to Jesus' condemnation (Luke 23:50-51), he obviously had left the proceedings before this final judicial farce transpired.

The verdict of guilty and the sentence of death were not based on careful consideration of full and impartial evidence and testimony. It was a senseless mob reaction, much like the one which, a few hours later, these same leaders would instigate and orchestrate regarding the release of Barabbas and the crucifixion of Jesus (Matt. 27:20-21).

THE ILLEGAL AND UNJUST CONDUCT OF THE COURT

Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him, and said, “Prophecy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You?” (26:67-68)

Discarding the last vestige of decorum and decency, the supreme court of Israel degenerated into a crude, mindless rabble. With total lack of inhibition, the religious aristocracy of Judaism—the high priest and chief priests, the elders, the scribes, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees—revealed their true decadence, as some of them **spat in Jesus' face and beat Him with their fists.**

To Jews, the supreme insult was to spit in another's face (see Num.12:14; Deut. 25:9). The impressive tomb of Absalom is still standing in the Kidron Valley just outside Jerusalem. But for thousands of years that monument has been spat on by Jewish passersby to show their contempt for Absalom's treacherous rebellion against his father, David.

Others in the Council, perhaps the less rowdy older members, merely **slapped Him**. And instead of spitting on Jesus they threw verbal abuse in His face. After blindfolding Him (Luke 22:64), they demanded sarcastically, **“Prophecy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You?”**

Luke also reports that “they were saying many other things against Him, blaspheming” (22:65). The true blasphemers here were the accusers, not the accused. Jesus had not blasphemed because He was indeed God, but the ungodly Sanhedrin blasphemed repeatedly as they condemned, humiliated, and abused the sinless Son of God. And when these judges of Israel tired of tormenting Jesus, they turned Him over to the Temple police for further maltreatment (Mark 14:65).

As the later mob reaction before Pilate would prove conclusively, the ungodly religious leaders who rejected and profaned Jesus were a microcosm of the Jewish nation. Spiritually and morally Israel was a rotting carcass waiting to be devoured by vultures, as indeed it was devoured by Rome less than forty years later. In A.D. 70 the Temple was burned and razed, most of Jerusalem was destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of its citizens were slaughtered without mercy.

Every person who rejects Christ spits in His face, as it were, and is guilty of blasphemy against God, who sent His beloved Son to save that person and all mankind from sin. The irony is that all who misjudge Jesus will themselves be rightly judged by Him one day. Men continually misjudge Jesus, but He will never misjudge them. The tables will be turned. The criminals will no longer unjustly condemn and crush the innocent but will themselves be justly condemned and crushed.

Even in the midst of the cruel injustice against Him, our Lord's grace shined undiminished. Throughout His ordeal, “while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Pet. 2:23). This was His divinely-appointed time, and He resolutely and gladly faced hell's moment of seeming victory. He would not turn or be turned from suffering

and death, because only in that way could He bear “our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (v. 24).

**The Restoration of
a Sinning Saint 17**
(26:69-75)

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard, and a certain servant-girl came to him and said, “You too were with Jesus the Galilean.” But he denied it before them all, saying, “I do not know what you are talking about.” And when he had gone out to the gateway, another servant-girl saw him and said to those who were there, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.” And again he denied it with an oath, “I do not know the man.” And a little later the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Surely you too are one of them; for the way you talk gives you away.” Then he began to curse and swear, “I do not know the man!” And immediately a cock crowed. And Peter remembered the word which Jesus had said, “Before a cock crows, you will deny Me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly. (26:69-75)

The single greatest gift God could conceivably give to mankind is forgiveness of sins. Without forgiveness, there could be no salvation from sin, no reconciliation with God, no spiritual life, no victory over death, no prospect of heaven.

The Lord revealed Himself to Moses as “the Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin” (Ex. 34:6-7). The prophet Micah proclaimed, “Who is a God like Thee, who pardons iniquity?” (Mic. 7:18). The apostle John declared, “If we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. . . . If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:7, 9).

Peter's denial of the Lord is usually looked on as a great tragedy, which it obviously was. But viewed in the light of Peter's repentance and the Lord's gracious forgiveness, the story also brings great encouragement.

In all the history of redemption, few saints have fallen to the depths of sin and unfaithfulness that Peter did in denying Jesus. Yet few saints have been so powerfully used by God as Peter was after he repented and was restored. The account of his denial is a sobering testimony to the weakness of the flesh, but it is also an encouraging testimony to the power of God's grace. Even in the extremity of His children's sin, the Lord is there to forgive and to restore.

Every Christian at times comes before the Lord overwhelmed and broken by the awareness of his sinfulness. A person who never has such an experience either is very cold spiritually or is not a Christian at all. Nothing is more shattering to a believer than suddenly realizing he has denied the Lord by what he has said or not said, done or not done. And yet nothing is more exhilarating to him than knowing God's gracious forgiveness of the unfaithfulness after it is confessed.

Peter's denial was not merely a spontaneous response to unexpected danger or embarrassment. He had already laid the groundwork for defection. Or, to use another metaphor, he had taken many steps toward denying Christ before he entered the courtyard of Caiaphas.

The first step was his boasting that "even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away" (Matt. 26:33). In speaking those words Peter not only revealed unfounded confidence in himself but directly contradicted His Lord's prediction that all the disciples would fall away that very night (v. 31). Based on his feelings of self-confidence and devotion to Jesus, Peter considered himself incapable of disloyalty. He could imagine nothing that would cause him to waver, and not even the Lord's explicit prediction could convince him otherwise. He was certain he had come to the place of spiritual maturity, with his priorities straight, his convictions steadfast, and his faithfulness invulnerable. It was therefore inconceivable to him that he could be capable of defecting from the Lord.

Peter's second step toward denial was insubordination, manifested in his defiantly persisting to reject Jesus' assessment of him. Even when the Lord singled him out and predicted he not only would flee like the rest but would deny Him three times before the next morning dawned, Peter blatantly contradicted Him and continued to defend his own faithfulness.

Intensifying his previous assertion, he declared, “Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You,” and his unjustified but impressive-sounding verbiage prompted the other disciples to say “the same thing” (v. 35). Mark reports that Peter repeatedly insisted on his loyalty (Mark 14:31).

Peter did not take seriously the voice of the living God he confessed with his mouth, and he rejected and resented His reproof. Like many believers since, he proudly refused to submit Himself to God’s Word and Spirit.

Peter’s third step toward denying Christ was prayerlessness. Like his boasting and insubordination, his prayerlessness was a manifestation of sinful self-confidence.

When Jesus took Peter, James, and John farther into the garden and left them to watch and pray while He spoke intimately with His Father, all three of the disciples fell asleep. When He found them asleep, Jesus addressed Peter as leader and spokesman of the Twelve, saying, “So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? Keep watching and praying, that you may not enter into temptation” (Matt. 26:40-41). The Lord went away to pray privately two more times, and each time Peter and the others fell back to sleep (vv. 43, 45). Jesus had just warned them that “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (v. 41), but they felt no weakness and saw no need to be watchful or prayerful. Because they did not take seriously the Lord’s warnings about their deficiencies and frailties, they did not take seriously His admonition to be prepared and strengthened. Self-confidently trusting their own judgment above the Lord’s, they were indifferent to His call to prayer.

Peter’s fourth step toward denial was his independent, self-generated impulsiveness. Sensing no need to ask the Lord’s advice or help, he took matters into his own hands. As soon as the officers laid hands on Jesus, Peter “reached and drew out his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear” (Matt. 26:51; cf. John 18:10). Although Jesus had repeatedly taught the disciples that it was the Father’s plan for Him to suffer, die, and be raised (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19), Peter refused to believe Him. And because it was not in Peter’s plan for his Master to be harmed, he was willing to defy both human and divine authority in drawing his sword against those who came to arrest Jesus.

A fifth step toward Peter’s denial of Christ was his compromise in allowing himself to be in a place of spiritual danger—such as the

courtyard of the high priest—where his faith might be tested above his ability to resist. The Lord's promises not to allow His children "to be tempted beyond what [they] are able" (1 Cor. 10:13) and "to rescue the godly from temptation" (2 Pet. 2:9) do not apply to willful disobedience.

Peter could not accept the word of the Lord because he was so controlled by his ego and self-sufficiency that he felt infallible. And perhaps because he had just seen the entire multitude suddenly fall at Jesus' feet (John 18:6), he also felt invincible as long as the Lord was nearby. If Jesus could miraculously save him from drowning when he tried to walk on the water (Matt. 14:31), He could protect him now.

But again Jesus had to tell Peter he was out of God's will and pointed out to him how foolishly presumptuous he was to think that He, Jesus, needed to depend on Peter for safety (Matt. 26:52-53). Well-meaning and humanly courageous as he was, Peter continually placed his self-centered human understanding above the Lord's divine revelation. His own human will was a barrier to obeying the Lord's will.

It was therefore inevitable that Peter would collapse when his bravado proved hollow and his self-sufficiency came up deficient.

PETER'S COLLAPSE

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard, and a certain servant-girl came to him and said, "You too were with Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you are talking about." And when he had gone out to the gateway, another servant-girl saw him and said to those who were there, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." And again he denied it with an oath, "I do not know the man." And a little later the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Surely you too are one of them; for the way you talk gives you away." Then he began to curse and swear, "I do not know the man!" And immediately a cock crowed. And Peter remembered the word which Jesus had said, "Before a cock crows, you will deny Me three times." (26:69-75a)

At first reading, the gospels seem to give contradictory accounts of the first phases of Jesus' trial. John reports that He was first taken to the house of Annas, the former high priest (John 18:13), whereas Matthew

speaks of His being taken to the house of Caiaphas, the son-in-law of Annas and the ruling high priest at the time (Matt. 26:57).

The seeming discrepancy, however, is easily explained. In the ancient world it was common for several generations of a family to live under the same roof. It is therefore likely that the palatial mansion of the high priest had been enlarged over the years to accommodate Annas's five sons, who had successively served as high priests, and now Caiaphas and his family. Large homes of that day backed to the street, with living areas facing a private, inner courtyard. With such a layout, Annas and Caiaphas would have had separate "houses," or wings, of the manor while sharing a common courtyard. Consequently, the courtyard of Annas, of which John speaks (18:15-16), and the courtyard of Caiaphas, which Matthew mentions (26:57-58), were the same place. When Jesus was transferred from Annas's house to Caiaphas's, He was simply taken through the common courtyard or perhaps through a connecting passageway.

Peter had followed Jesus and His captors as far as the gate of the high priests' mansion, but he was not allowed to enter the courtyard until another "disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to the doorkeeper, and brought in Peter" (John 18:16). It seems most likely that the other disciple was John, since he liked to refer to himself anonymously, but there is no indication from the New Testament or from other sources as to how he had come to know the high priest. Nor is there any indication as to how long John was in the courtyard or what he did while there. He was used of the Lord to gain Peter's entrance, and after that he disappeared from the scene.

Peter wanted to see the outcome of Jesus' trial, although he should have known what it would be, because the Lord had told the disciples of it so often. He was afraid, yet he could not keep from following the Lord at a distance, even into the very lair of His enemies. His love for Christ was weak, but it was real. As he kept vigil, he hoped to go unnoticed in the large crowd of minor officials, soldiers, servants, and other onlookers who had assembled in the large courtyard.

By the time Jesus appeared before Caiaphas, it was probably about 1:00 A.M. While **Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard**, "with the officers, and warming himself at the fire" (Mark 14:54), **a certain servant-girl came to him and said, "You too were with Jesus the Galilean."** The term **Galilean** was frequently used as an epithet of

derision by citizens of Jerusalem, who felt themselves superior to their less sophisticated neighbors to the north. To refer to someone as a **Galilean** was to suggest he was backward and unprogressive.

The words of the **servant-girl** are slightly different in the various gospels, which suggests she made the same basic statement several times, and the fact that Peter **denied it before them all** indicates that many people in the crowd had heard her accusation. The order of the denials also seems to vary among the four gospels, which could be explained by the writers' reporting different aspects of the three incidents of denial, each of which may have lasted several minutes or longer and involved considerably more dialogue than is recorded in Scripture.

Apparently Peter first said to the girl, "Woman, I do not know Him" (Luke 22:57), and then to the others (**them all**) who had been listening, "**I do not know what you are talking about.**" Peter had been called by Christ, lived with Him, learned from Him, and witnessed thousands of miracles performed by Him. He was not a young or new convert but the veteran of three years of intensive discipleship and the leader of the Twelve. Yet this intimate friend who only a few hours earlier had vowed to die before he would forsake Christ now denied even knowing Him.

Had Jesus commanded Peter to physically stand beside Him and defend Him whatever the cost, perhaps Peter could have mustered the courage for such a heroic display. He had, after all, drawn his sword and started to take on the entire retinue of soldiers and Temple police singlehandedly. But he stumbled when a much less dangerous demand was made of him. He may have planned how he would defend himself if confronted by soldiers in the courtyard, but he was totally unprepared when caught off guard by the much less threatening challenge that now faced him. He was prepared to do battle on his own terms but not on Satan's and much less on Christ's. Because of his self-assurance, he had neglected the Lord's admonition to be on guard and to pray. Consequently he was vulnerable to a blind-side attack from a source he never expected.

In much the same way, Christians can plan detailed strategy for evangelism or for the defense of a cherished doctrine or moral standard, only to be confronted by an issue or circumstance they had never considered and for which they are totally unprepared. Like Peter, we often carefully prepare on the basis of our own wisdom and resources while

neglecting the guidance of God's Word and the empowering and leading of His Spirit which He provides through prayer.

Peter was like Elijah, who was brave when facing the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah, but who, after he left the mountaintop of victory, foundered in fear over what one woman, Jezebel, might do to him. Peter was a living illustration of Paul's admonition "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). In the courtyard his valiant protestations were no longer heard, and the arrogant hero shriveled into a cringing coward. His self-preserving instincts prevailed, and his boldness evaporated.

A person's involuntary response to the unexpected is a more reliable indicator of his character than his planned reaction to a situation he anticipates. It is when we are caught off guard that our true character is most likely to show itself. Peter's proud self-confidence was his Achilles' heel, and that, of course, was precisely where Satan aimed his arrow of temptation. Peter's stubborn trust in himself and his unwillingness to fully trust in the Lord made him vulnerable to the simple taunt of a young servant girl.

To escape embarrassment, Peter inconspicuously "went out onto the porch" (Mark 14:68), which apparently was near **the gateway**. He probably walked away slowly so as not to attract attention or give the impression he was running away after being caught in a lie. The porch, or vestibule, was the second warmest place in the courtyard, protected by a wall in back and a roof overhead. Perhaps Peter wanted to be nearer the exit in case a Temple officer tried to arrest him. It was also darker there, and he would less likely be recognized than by the fire. But despite his precautions, "a little later" (Luke 22:58), **another servant-girl saw him**.

Obviously seeking to humiliate Peter, this **servant-girl** did not address him directly but rather **said to** the other bystanders **who were there**, "**This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.**" An unidentified man also joined in the accusation, saying, "You are one of them too!" (Luke 22:58a). To the girl, Peter **denied . . . with an oath**, "**I do not know the man,**" and to the other person he said with growing irritation, "Man, I am not!" (Luke 22:58b). This time he not only lied but did so **with an oath**, hoping to reinforce the deceit. A Jewish **oath** was always assumed to be made in God's presence, whether or not His name was invoked. In effect, therefore, Peter called God as a witness to his lie. Angry, frustrated,

embarrassed, trapped, and frightened, Peter desperately tried to hide his identity and especially his association with Jesus.

Going against the very grain of his nature as a child of God, Peter vehemently refused to acknowledge his relationship to his Savior and Lord. Because he was relying on his own wisdom and resources, he did not have the courage to confess Christ publicly. Although he was perplexed and weak, he continued to resist the Lord's truth and the Lord's help. Even when his exposure was obvious, Peter persisted in arrogant self-reliance.

Like many Christians who know the Bible well, are experienced in the things of God, and are active in the church, Peter felt himself to be spiritually complete. As Peter would soon discover, however, that is when a believer is most vulnerable of all.

Determined to stay near his Lord despite the embarrassment and danger, Peter perhaps drifted across the courtyard toward Caiaphas's wing of the mansion, hoping perhaps to discover how the proceedings were going. By this time Jesus had been declared a blasphemer and was being beaten, spat upon, and taunted (see Mark 14:64-65). Because at one point Jesus was able to look at Peter (Luke 22:61), it is possible that much of Jesus' abuse was witnessed by Peter and the others in the courtyard.

Probably incited by the events they saw transpiring in Caiaphas's chambers, the crowd intensified its dogging of Peter. **A little while later**, which Luke specifies as being "after about an hour" (22:59), **the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Surely you too are one of them; for the way you talk gives you away."** Peter's Galilean accent was readily recognized, and he was cornered again.

We learn from John that Peter was also recognized by sight. One member of the crowd was a slave of the high priest and a relative of Malchus, the man "whose ear Peter cut off." Having been among the multitude who came to arrest Jesus, he said to Peter, "Did I not see you in the garden with Him?" (John 18:26).

At this point Peter hit rock bottom. Still refusing either to claim or to rely on Jesus, he dug himself still deeper into the denial as **he began to curse and swear, "I do not know the man!"** *Katanathematizō* (to curse) is a very strong term that involved pronouncing death upon oneself at the hand of God if one were lying. In perhaps the most serious taking of the Lord's name in vain that is conceivable, Peter said, in essence, "May God kill and damn me if I am not speaking the truth." *Omnumi* (to swear) was

a less extreme pledge of truthfulness but was nevertheless a strong affirmation.

Peter had lost all sense of reality and seemingly all awareness of God. Comparison of the gospel accounts reveals that there were three periods or incidents of accusation and denial and that each incident involved repeated accusations by members of the crowd and repeated denials by Peter. As the accusations became more specific and incriminating, Peter's denials became more intense and extreme.

Even "while [Peter] was still speaking" (Luke 22:60), **immediately a cock crowed** "a second time" (Mark 14:72). At this time also "the Lord turned and looked at Peter" (Luke 22:61), apparently through a window overlooking the courtyard. The look must have penetrated the disciple's very soul, burning deep into his heart and conscience the evil of his sin. Seeing his Lord standing there with His hands bound and His face covered with spit and bruises was more than Peter could bear.

As if that visual indictment were not enough, while he stood transfixed, suffering the most excruciating pain of his life as he looked into his Lord's eyes, **Peter also remembered the word which Jesus had said, "Before a cock crows, you will deny Me three times."** As Jesus' remembered words augmented His gaze, Peter's already unbearable anguish was made still more unbearable.

PETER'S REPENTANCE

And he went out and wept bitterly. (26:75b)

The true Peter is not seen in his denial but in his repentance, the first stage of which was deep remorse. Finally realizing the grievousness of his sin, he turned from it in revulsion. Like Judas, he fled into the night; but unlike Judas, he returned to the Lord in faith. His faith had slipped and weakened, but it was genuine faith, and Jesus Himself had prayed that it would not fail (Luke 22:32).

When the magnitude of what he had done finally dawned on Judas, he experienced great regret and a kind of remorse. He probably wished he could live the last three years, and especially the last few hours, of his life over again. But he had no change of heart. He had never repented of his sins and received Jesus as Lord and Savior, and therefore, contrary to

Peter, Judas had no faith to weaken. Jesus could not hold Judas because Judas never belonged to Him.

Overwhelmed by His Savior's love and grace and by his own sin and unfaithfulness, Peter **went out and wept bitterly**. We are not told where he went or how long he stayed there. He may have returned to the Garden of Gethsemane, where earlier he had felt no need to pray. Wherever it was, it became a private place of confessing sin and seeking forgiveness.

Peter's tragic experience in the garden teaches a profound lesson about self-trust and unpreparedness and about God's forgiveness and restoration of a sinning saint. Although the awareness probably did not come to the disciple until his anguish subsided, he had learned never to distrust Jesus' word again. It finally dawned on him that what the Lord said would happen would happen.

It was not until Peter saw the Lord's face and remembered the Lord's words that he came to his senses, acknowledged his sin and helplessness, and repented. His sin did not make him repent. Many people are very much conscious of sin in their lives, readily admitting its reality and its consequences. But until it is surrendered to Christ for forgiveness and cleansing, the mere acknowledgement of it will only drive a person deeper into despair and hopelessness and even deeper into sin. Forgiveness and restoration come only from turning from sin to God. That is why true preaching and teaching of the gospel is not simply calling people to turn from their sin. It is lifting up the Lord Jesus Christ so that, in His righteousness and grace, sinful men not only will discover the heinousness of their sin but also the only hope for its removal.

The Lord made good His promise that Peter's faith would not fail. After appearing to the disciples several times after His resurrection, Jesus three times questioned Peter about his love for Him, just as Peter had three times denied that love. And just as he had thrice denied his love for Christ, Peter then thrice affirmed it (John 21:15-17).

Many years later, near the end of his life, Peter no doubt still remembered vividly that experience in the courtyard. The tragic event was probably in his mind as he admonished fellow believers: "Beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard lest . . . you fall from your own steadfastness, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:17-18).

The Traitor's Suicide

(27:1-10)

18

Now when morning had come, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put Him to death; and they bound Him, and led Him away, and delivered Him up to Pilate the governor.

Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to that yourself!" And he threw the pieces of silver into the sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hanged himself. And the chief priests took the pieces of silver and said, "It is not lawful to put them into the temple treasury, since it is the price of blood." And they counseled together and with the money bought the Potter's Field as a burial place for strangers. For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one whose price had been set by the sons of Israel; and they gave them for the Potter's Field, as the Lord directed me." (27:1-10)

In recent years in the United States, twice as many people have killed themselves as have killed others. Because experts believe that many seemingly natural deaths are actually self-inflicted, the incidence is probably much higher than what is reported. Suicide ranks among the top ten killers in the United States, and many other countries have rates that are even higher.

Researchers who analyze human behavior list five primary reasons for committing suicide. I believe most people kill themselves for retaliation. Because they are angry over an offense or mistreatment, they

take their own lives as a means of hurting those who have hurt them. Whether their abuse was real or imagined, they invariably succeed in inflicting deep pain on those they seek to hurt. This is almost always the case when young people kill themselves. And usually it is their parents they want to hurt irremediably.

Some people take their own lives for the sake of reunion with loved ones who have already died. Older spouses who were particularly dependent on their mates sometimes decide to join them in death rather than endure the loneliness and frustration of life without them.

Some people take their lives out of a desire for rebirth. With the increased influence of Eastern religions, many Westerners have been persuaded of the reality of reincarnation, and by committing suicide they hope to be reborn into a better form or circumstance.

A particularly distorted reason for suicide is referred to as retroflex, the killing of oneself in place of someone else who is unreachable. Some years ago a man killed himself because a brutal Nazi war criminal could not be found and brought to justice.

For some people, suicide is an extreme form of self-retribution. Considering their guilt to be unforgivable and unremediable, some people, in effect, sentence themselves to capital punishment and carry out the sentence by their own hand.

Because every human being is made in the image of God and belongs to Him, no one has the right to murder anyone, even himself. Suicide is self-murder and is rebellion against God's sovereign right over life and death. It is an act of sin and unbelief, a clear violation of the sixth commandment, "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13).

According to the common definition of suicide, Scripture reports only two instances. Although Saul and his armor bearer took their own lives, they did so only because they faced a much more brutal and humiliating death at the hands of the enemy. But in the usual sense, only the deaths of Ahithophel (see 2 Sam. 17) and Judas were suicide.

Because Judas's sin was so monstrous, it is not difficult to understand how unrelieved guilt drove him to take his own life. He committed the most heinous crime any man has ever committed or could commit, betraying the only truly innocent and perfect man who has ever lived. Because he could not live with his guilt, Judas had only two choices. He could have gone to Jesus for forgiveness and salvation, which the Lord

had so often offered. But because he would not do that, his only recourse was self-destruction.

For the account of Judas's suicide, Matthew briefly interrupts his portrayal of Jesus' trial. His purpose in presenting the story of Judas's final hours of life was not simply to show the dreadful fate of Christ's betrayer but also to show, by several contrasts, the beauty, purity, and majesty of the one betrayed. Jesus is exalted even against the backdrop of sordid sin and death.

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THE WICKED LEADERS AND THE SINLESS CHRIST

Now when morning had come, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put Him to death; and they bound Him, and led Him away, and delivered Him up to Pilate the governor. (27:1-2)

Contrary to rabbinical law, the first two phases of Jesus' religious trial were carried out during the night and away from the Temple. He had first been brought before the former high priest Annas, probably in the hope that this wicked conniver could concoct a charge against Jesus that would justify the death penalty. When that failed, Christ was brought before the acting high priest, Caiaphas, and the hastily-assembled Sanhedrin. Even with willing false witnesses that group was also unable to indict Jesus. Only when He confessed to being the Christ and God's Son did they discover a way to destroy Him. Although He spoke the truth, they convicted Him of blasphemy and being worthy of death (Matt. 26:63-66). He was sentenced to death for the truth, for being who He indeed is.

Now when morning had come, Matthew recounts, **all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put Him to death.** Although they had already reached a verdict about His guilt and punishment, they still had two hurdles. First, they had to devise a way to make their decision appear legal under rabbinical law. Mark mentions that in addition to **all the chief priests and the elders**, "scribes, and the whole Council" were present (15:1). Second, because the people knew that all trials involving the death penalty had to be conducted in the daytime and in the Temple court, they had to wait until **morning** of that Passover

Friday to reconvene the Sanhedrin in its legitimate council chamber (Luke 22:66). The **counsel** they took among themselves amounted to reasserting the charges **against Jesus** and reaffirming the verdict **to put Him to death** (see Luke 22:67-71).

After that point, however, the Jewish leaders dropped all pretense of legality. As explained in [chapter 16](#) of this volume, rabbinical law required that a sentence of death could not be carried out until the third day after it was rendered and that during the intervening day the members of the court were to fast. The delay of execution provided additional time for evidence or testimony to be discovered in the defendant's behalf. Because Friday was a holy day for Judean Jews, which included virtually all the religious leaders, and the next day was the Sabbath, the earliest legitimate execution of Jesus could not have been until Sunday—assuming the trial itself had been legitimate. On this occasion, however, the Sanhedrin did not bother to give even the semblance of compliance with that requirement. Now that Jesus was finally in their custody, they determined to destroy Him as quickly as possible.

But because they were not allowed to administer the death penalty themselves (John 18:31), the Jewish leaders now had to convince the Roman governor to give immediately the required permission for Jesus' execution. Therefore **they bound Him, and led Him away, and delivered Him up to Pilate the governor.** With that hearing, the first phase of Jesus' secular, Roman trial would begin.

Pontius **Pilate** had been the Roman **governor** of Judea since A.D. 26, when Tiberius Caesar was emperor, and continued to govern until the year 36. Jesus was taken to the Praetorium, the official provincial residence of the governor, and to keep from being ceremonially defiled and thereby prevented from celebrating the Passover later that day, the Jewish leaders waited outside (John 18:28).

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN GUILTY JUDAS AND INNOCENT JESUS

Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to that

yourself!” And he threw the pieces of silver into the sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hanged himself. (27:3-5)

We are not told where Judas was during the Jewish mock trials. He doubtless had followed the multitude from the Mount of Olives to Annas’s house and was waiting nearby, perhaps in the courtyard where Peter was. It is possible that he was called as one of the witnesses against Jesus, but that seems unlikely. Judas still had the onus of being a disciple of Jesus, and, in any case, the very fact he was a traitor would have made his testimony suspect. Because Judas had fulfilled his usefulness to them, the chief priests and elders wanted nothing more to do with him. He was now a rejected outcast—to them, to the disciples, and to Jewish society in general.

Then when could be translated “at that time,” which seems to fit the context. Even before dawn it had become obvious to Judas and the others in the courtyard that the foregone verdict of the Jewish leaders had been confirmed. Now **Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw** with his own eyes **that He had been condemned.** Although *horaō* (**saw**) was sometimes used in the figurative sense of being aware of or perceiving, its use here suggests literal, physical sight. If Peter was able to see Jesus during at least part of the trial (Luke 22:61), then others in the courtyard could have seen Him as well. Judas had seen Jesus maligned, spat upon, beaten, and mocked. Now he watched in bewilderment as his **condemned** Teacher was taken to Pilate.

As Judas watched Jesus being carried away to Pilate, the full enormity of his treachery finally began to dawn on him as he realized the Jewish leaders did indeed intend to put Jesus to death. The one last obstacle was the permission of Pilate, which Judas had no reason to believe would be denied. Once Pilate consented, Jesus’ death would be inevitable.

The sight was devastating to Judas, more than even his money-hungry mind, his sordid soul, and his seared conscience could deal with. **He felt remorse** as he began to experience the intense, excruciating pain that is unique to profound guilt.

No man could be more evil than Judas Iscariot. Only eleven other men in all of history have had the intimate, personal relationship he had with the incarnate Son of God. No man has ever been more exposed to

God's perfect truth, both in precept and example. No man has been more exposed firsthand to God's love, compassion, power, kindness, forgiveness, and grace. No man has had more evidence of Jesus' divinity or more firsthand knowledge of the way of salvation. Yet in all of those three indescribably blessed years with Jesus, Judas did not take so much as the first step of faith.

In a way that defies comprehension, Judas persistently resisted and rejected God's truth, God's grace, and even God's own Son. Also in a way that defies understanding, he managed to completely conceal his wicked rebellion from everyone but Jesus. His hypocrisy was so complete and deceptive that even when Jesus predicted that one of the disciples would betray Him, Judas was not suspected.

Judas was so totally trapped in the darkness and corruption of sin that he became a willing instrument of Satan. Because this false disciple had totally renounced Christ, "Satan entered into Judas who was called Iscariot" (Luke 22:3), and it was then a simple matter to persuade him to betray Jesus (John 13:2). Judas's heart was so utterly hardened to the things of God that long before he consciously considered betraying Him, Jesus called him a devil (John 6:70).

Even so, Judas could not escape the divinely designed signal of guilt that reminds men of their sin and warns them of its consequences. Just as pain is an intrinsic and automatic warning of physical danger, guilt is an intrinsic and automatic warning of spiritual danger. It was not that Judas suddenly became afraid of God, else he would have turned in desperation to the One he knew could forgive him. Nor was he afraid of men. Although he was now discarded and despised by the Jewish leaders, they had no reason to harm him. It was rather that Judas suddenly realized the horrible wrongness of what he had done. An innate awareness of right and wrong is divinely built into every human being and cannot be totally erased, no matter how deep a person may fall into depravity or how consciously and rebelliously he may turn against God. This is intensified by the convicting pressure of the Spirit of God.

Judas's **remorse** was not repentance of sin, as the King James Version suggests. Matthew did not use *metanoēō*, which means a genuine change of mind and will, but *metamelomai*, which merely connotes regret or sorrow. He did not experience spiritual penitence but only emotional **remorse**. Although he would not repent of his sin, he could not escape the

reality of his guilt. Genuine sorrow for sin (*metamelomai*) can be prompted by God in order to produce repentance (*metanoēō*), as Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 7:10. But Judas's **remorse** was not prompted by God to lead to repentance but only to guilt and despair.

Because he was a kind of witness against Jesus, perhaps Judas thought that by admitting the wickedness of what he had done he would be punished as a false witness, as Deuteronomy 19:16-19 prescribed. Under that provision, he would have been crucified himself, suffering the penalty imposed on the one he caused to be falsely convicted. Instead of looking to Jesus' for forgiveness and trusting in His atoning death, Judas's perverted mind may have led him to believe that by dying he somehow could atone for his own sin.

Proof that Judas's sorrow was ungodly and selfish is seen in the fact that he made no effort to defend or rescue Jesus. He had no desire to vindicate or save Jesus but only to salve his own conscience, which he attempted to do by returning **the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders.**

While some of the Jewish religious leaders were escorting Jesus to Pilate, others remained in the Temple. It was there that Judas confronted them (see v. 5) and confessed that he had **sinned by betraying innocent blood.** Had he been concerned about forgiveness for his sin and had he really believed on the Lord, he would have approached Jesus, not the chief priests and elders. He hoped somehow to assuage his guilt simply by returning the blood money. Like Pilate, who recognized Jesus' innocence but nevertheless permitted His death, Judas knew he had betrayed **innocent blood**, but he did not come to Christ's defense or seek His forgiveness.

Had Judas been able to remember one fault in Jesus, one deficiency or sin, he may have been able to rationalize his treachery. But even Jesus' arch enemy in the human realm could not escape confessing His innocence. Like the Jewish religious leaders, the Roman political leaders, the false witnesses, and even the demons, Judas could find no fault in Jesus. In His sovereign power, God caused even His enemies to testify to the Son's sinless purity.

Yet despite his confession, Judas had not changed his mind about who Jesus was or about his own need for salvation. He had simply become aware of the wickedness of what he had done and wanted relief from the

overwhelming guilt that now tormented every part of his being. The money he had wanted so badly now burned in his hands like a live coal.

Sin never brings the satisfaction it promises. Instead of happiness it brings sorrow, and instead of pleasure it produces pain. It poisons with a pang that cannot be relieved apart from God's forgiving grace.

In reply to Judas's agonized appeal, the chief priests and elders callously replied, **"What is that to us? See to that yourself!"** True to the characterization Jesus had given of them a few days earlier, the religious leaders of Israel were adept at laying heavy religious burdens on men's shoulders, while not lifting a finger themselves to help relieve those burdens (Matt. 23:4). They had no more concern for Judas than for Jesus and were as cold-heartedly indifferent to his remorse as they were to Jesus' innocence, which, in effect, they had already acknowledged.

Judas likely realized he was cursed, because the Mosaic law made clear that "cursed is he who accepts a bribe to strike down an innocent person" (Deut. 27:25). But because the Sanhedrin had paid the betrayal bribe, they were hardly in a position to indict and punish Judas for taking it. If they cared nothing for justice regarding Jesus, they certainly cared nothing for it regarding Judas, especially if it would bring their own indictment as well.

In utter desperation and frustration Judas defiantly **threw the pieces of silver into the sanctuary and departed.** Some interpreters assert that the money was cast into the Temple treasury, suggesting that Judas's final public act was a gesture of charity. But *naos* (**sanctuary**) refers specifically to the inner holy place of the Temple, where only priests were allowed to enter. Judas intentionally threw the money into a place where only the priests could retrieve it. He did not throw it there out of charity but out of spite, wanting them to feel guilty and forcing the chief priests to handle the blood money again themselves.

Following that, **he went away and hanged himself.** Considering himself already cursed because of his treachery and having unrelieved pain from having committed the greatest crime in human history, he may have reasoned that hanging was the only escape and a fitting death, knowing that "he who is hanged is accursed of God" (Deut. 21:23). We cannot know Judas's mind, but self-retribution seems a credible explanation for what he did. If so, he took his own life as an act of ultimate self-punishment, in a way that was certain to be cursed by God,

thereby inflicting upon himself what his overpowering sense of guilt caused him to believe he justly deserved.

But death does not relieve guilt; it makes it permanent and intensified beyond comprehension. As Jesus repeatedly declared, hell is a place of eternal torment, of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). It is a place of “unquenchable fire, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:43-44). Judas today cries out in the eternal pain of his undiminished guilt.

According to Acts 1:18, when Judas committed suicide he fell headlong and “burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out.” Although this account and the one in Matthew report different aspects of his death, they are compatible. He must have hanged himself from a weak limb of a tree on a hillside, and when the limb broke under his weight he fell down the slope and was crushed on the rocks below.

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THE HYPOCRISY OF MEN AND THE PROPHECY OF GOD

And the chief priests took the pieces of silver and said, “It is not lawful to put them into the temple treasury, since it is the price of blood.” And they counseled together and with the money bought the Potter’s Field as a burial place for strangers. For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying, “And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one whose price had been set by the sons of Israel; and they gave them for the Potter’s Field, as the Lord directed them.” (27:6-10)

Because **the chief priests** were forced to take back **the pieces of silver**, they had to devise a way to dispose of it. After their unjust and despicable treatment of Jesus, one wonders why they suddenly became concerned about legal propriety. They knew it was **not lawful to put** the money **into the temple treasury, since it was the price of blood**, and for some hypocritical reason they decided to honor that particular restriction. But by admitting it was **blood** money they condemned themselves out of their own mouths. By definition, **the price of blood** referred to money illegitimately paid and received to falsely convict a man of a crime that

led to his execution. Strangely and perversely, the chief priests and elders had no compunction about taking the money out of the Temple treasury to pay Judas for the betrayal, but now they had qualms about putting it back. In doing so, they testified before the world to their guilt and hypocrisy. It is interesting to note how callous and unfeeling they were about their crime, in contrast to the overwhelming agony of Judas that drove him to kill himself in a vain attempt to relieve his guilt.

They counseled together and decided to use **the money** to buy **the Potter's Field as a burial place for strangers**. As a good will gesture to the public and also to salve their own consciences, they hit upon the idea of buying a field where potters had collected clay to use in their trade. Perhaps the clay was depleted and the field was available for a cheap price. The religious leaders may have reasoned that they would use the defiled money to buy a defiled and useless field in which to bury defiled **strangers**, a term often used by Jews as a euphemism for Gentiles. Or the field may have been used to bury any traveler who died while visiting Jerusalem, especially those who were indigent.

For that reason, Matthew explains, **that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day**, referring to the time, some thirty years later, when his gospel was written. The Potter's Field had come to be called **the Field of Blood**, because it was common knowledge that it had been purchased with blood money. And by that name, the entire city testified to Jesus' innocence, acknowledging that He had been falsely accused, falsely condemned, and falsely executed.

In the naming of that field, **that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled, saying, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one whose price had been set by the sons of Israel; and they gave them for the Potter's Field, as the Lord directed me."**

The fact that this quotation comes from Zechariah 13:11-12 and not from the book of **Jeremiah** has caused some interpreters to accuse Matthew of error. Others have tried to relate the quotation to sections of Jeremiah 18 or 19, although it clearly does not fit. The explanation is found in the Jewish division of the Old Testament into three sections—the Law, the Writings, and the Prophets. In the rabbinical order of the prophetic books, Jeremiah was always listed first. For that reason the

entire prophetic category was sometimes referred to as **Jeremiah**, just as the entire section of the Writings was sometimes referred to as the Psalms, its opening book. **Spoken through Jeremiah the prophet** was therefore the equivalent of saying, “recorded in the prophetic books.”

Like every other incident in the life of our Lord, that one did not catch God by surprise but was a precise fulfillment of specific prophecy in His omniscient plan. Even in Judas’s death, God’s Word was honored and the Lord Jesus Christ was glorified.

What Shall I Do
with Jesus? **19**
(27:11-26)

Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor questioned Him saying, “Are You the King of the Jews?” And Jesus said to him, “It is as you say.” And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He made no answer. Then Pilate said to Him, “Do you not hear how many things they testify against You?” And He did not answer him with regard to even a single charge, so that the governor was quite amazed. Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the multitude any one prisoner whom they wanted. And they were holding at that time a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. When therefore they were gathered together, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?” For he knew that because of envy they had delivered Him up. And while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him saying, “Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him.” But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the multitude to ask for Barabbas, and to put Jesus to death. But the governor answered and said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.” Pilate said to them, “Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?” They all said, “Let Him be crucified!” And he said, “Why, what evil has He done?” But they kept shouting all the more, saying, “Let Him be crucified!” And when Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the multitude, saying, “I am innocent of this Man’s blood; see to that yourselves.” And all the people answered and said, “His blood be on us

and on our children!” Then he released Barabbas for them; but after having Jesus scourged, he delivered Him to be crucified. (27:11-26)

Jesus Christ makes a claim on every human heart, and every heart must decide what to do with Him. The most important and inescapable question every human being faces is the one that Pilate asked in this passage: “What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?”

Scripture clearly proclaims Jesus as being fully God. Long before His birth it was divinely predicted that He would be called Immanuel, which means “God with us” (Matt. 1:23; cf. Isa. 7:14). He was called by divine names, such as “the Holy and Righteous One” (Acts 3:14). It declares that to know Jesus is to know God the Father (John 8:19; 14:7), to hate Him is to hate the Father (15:23), and to believe in Him is to believe in the Father (Matt. 10:40; John 12:44; 14:1). It affirms that to see Him is to see the Father (John 14:9), to honor Him is to honor the Father (5:23), and to receive Him is to receive the Father (Mark 9:37). It proclaims that Jesus is omnipotent (Matt. 28:18), omnipresent (Matt. 28:20), changeless (Heb. 13:8), creator of the world (John 1:3), able to forgive sin (Mark 2:5-10), and is to be worshiped as God (Phil. 2:9-11; cf. Matt. 28:9; Heb. 1:6).

Yet Scripture also declares that Jesus was fully human. He was born into the world just as every other infant, He was circumcised, He grew in body and mind, and He experienced hunger, thirst, pain, weariness, temptation, and death.

The Old Testament gave precise details about the coming of the Savior-King. Among many other things, it predicted that in His human life He would be supernaturally conceived (Isa. 7:14), born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2), be Semitic in the line of Abraham and of David (Gen. 9:26; 22:18; 2 Sam. 7:13), be of the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10), and would perform miracles (Isa. 35:5-6). In His death He would be executed by rulers (Ps. 2:1-2), forsaken by God (Ps. 22:1), betrayed by a friend for thirty pieces of silver (Ps. 41:9; Zech. 11:12), and have His beard plucked out and be spit upon (Isa. 50:6). In His resurrection He would rise in three days (Hos. 6:2), would not experience decay of His flesh (Ps. 16:10), and would conquer death (Isa. 25:8).

Scripture declares that Jesus Christ is perfectly holy, perfectly loving of His heavenly Father and of the world He came to redeem, perfectly forgiving of sins and merciful to those who come to Him,

perfectly compassionate, perfectly faithful, and perfectly prayerful. He is the central theme of Scripture, both in the Old and New Testaments. And, whether men recognize it or not, He is the dominant figure in all human history and the determiner of the destiny of every human being.

It is on that incalculably crucial issue that Matthew 27:11-26 focuses.

After reporting Judas's suicide, Matthew resumes the account of Jesus' trial, which began its secular, Roman phase when the Jewish leaders bound Jesus "and led Him away, and delivered Him up to Pilate the governor" (27:2).

Having failed to find a legitimate charge against Jesus, the Sanhedrin had falsely accused Him of blasphemy and being worthy of death when He truthfully acknowledged He was "the Christ, the Son of God" (26:63-66; cf. Luke 22:70). But because they did not have the authority to exact the death penalty themselves (John 18:31), the Jewish leaders were forced to ask permission of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

Most of Palestine was under the nominal monarchical dominion of three sons of Herod the Great. Herod Antipas ruled Galilee and Perea, Philip ruled the sparsely populated northeast area, and Archelaus ruled Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. But the supreme Roman official over Judea was the procurator, or governor, who also had command of the Roman troops.

In reporting Jesus' Roman trial, Matthew continues to exalt Christ as the sinless, pure, sovereign, and glorious King. Like the Jewish religious leaders, the Roman political leaders could find no fault in Him. Even with all their efforts, the courts of men failed to produce a legitimate indictment against the perfect Son of God. The record stands in Scripture for men and women of all ages to discover that Jesus Christ was put to death for no crime or sin of His own but by the hatred of sinful men.

In 27:11-26 Matthew presents four elements in Jesus' trial before Pilate that demonstrate His innocence and His perfection.

THE ACCUSATION OF THE JEWS

Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor questioned Him saying, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And Jesus

said to him, “It is as you say.” And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, (27:11- 12a)

The first element demonstrating Jesus’ perfection and innocence is the negative accusation of the Jewish religious leaders. When the chief priests and elders first brought Jesus to Pilate (Matt. 27:1-2), it was still very early on Friday morning, probably around five o’clock. John reports that “they led Jesus therefore from Caiaphas into the Praetorium, and it was early; and they themselves did not enter into the Praetorium in order that they might not be defiled, but might eat the Passover” (John 18:28). The Praetorium was the governor’s residence in Jerusalem and was probably located in the Fortress of Antonia, which was just north of the Temple. The Praetorium also served as a judgment hall, where the governor adjudicated matters brought before him.

As mentioned in previous chapters, although northern Jews, including those from Galilee such as Jesus and the disciples, had celebrated the Passover on the previous day, the southern Jews, which included the vast majority of the religious leaders, celebrated it a day later, which in that year was Friday. The members of the Sanhedrin therefore had not yet offered their sacrifices or eaten the Passover meal, and because rabbinical tradition taught that entering a Gentile home or building was ceremonially defiling, they refused to enter the Praetorium.

The extreme of their wicked hypocrisy is seen in their knowingly making false accusations against Jesus while in the very process of transgressing both scriptural law and their own standards regarding judicial process. They were meticulous about observing man-made restrictions regarding supposed ceremonial contamination but were totally insensitive to the demands of simple justice. They maintained fastidious commitment to a foolish, arrogant superstition while resolutely seeking the execution of the Son of the living God (cf. Matt. 23:23).

We can be sure that Pilate was more than a little perturbed at being roused at such an early hour, but he was even more concerned about raising the ire of the Jewish leaders, especially in the midst of their great religious festival, when Jerusalem was swelled to bursting with pilgrims. And because they would not come in to him, the governor “therefore went out to them,” probably on a porch or balcony, “and said, ‘What accusation do you bring against this Man?’” (John 18:29). That question was perhaps

the first and only legal act in the trial of Jesus. Before the governor would hear the case, he insisted that a formal indictment be presented.

Doubtlessly taking full advantage of the leverage they had over Pilate because of his fear of political trouble, the Jewish leaders responded with arrogance and sarcasm. They self-righteously asserted, “If this Man were not an evil-doer, we would not have delivered Him up to you” (John 18:30). In effect, they rebuked the governor for indirectly impugning their integrity. But it was not their intent for Pilate to give Jesus a fair hearing but simply to approve and administer the death sentence they had already decreed.

Pilate was already aware of who Jesus was and of the animosity the Jewish leaders had for Him. Because their concerns were purely religious, the governor had no desire to become involved and therefore told them, “Take Him yourselves, and judge Him according to your law” (v. 31). In saying that, Pilate gave tacit, if not explicit, permission for Jesus’ execution, because he knew that, according to their laws, the most serious religious offenses were punishable by death.

The Sanhedrin made no effort to secure Roman permission for execution when they stoned Stephen (Acts 6:12-15; 7:54-60) or when, some years later, they plotted Paul’s death (23:12-15). Their telling Pilate, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death” (John 18:31*b*) was duplicitous. Their design was not simply to have Jesus put to death but to avoid responsibility for it, and possible reprisal from their own people, by having the Romans execute Him for a supposed political offense.

But overshadowing that satanic plan was the divine plan of God, who used the adversary’s destructive scheme to fulfil His own redemptive purpose. By demanding a Roman execution, the Jewish leaders unwittingly made certain that “the word of Jesus might be fulfilled, which He spoke, signifying by what kind of death He was about to die” (John 18:32).

In order to satisfy Pilate’s demand for a specific charge and to secure Jesus’ conviction under Roman law, the chief priests and other leaders fabricated the allegation of sedition. That charge, of course, had nothing to do with the supposed blasphemy for which they had just sentenced Jesus to death. “We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar,” they lied, “and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King” (Luke 23:2). They charged Jesus with being an

insurrectionist, of undermining Roman taxation, and even of claiming to be a competing political ruler.

Had Jesus been guilty of any one of those allegations, Pilate would have known of it and would long since have arrested and executed Him. As virtually every Jew and many Gentiles in Palestine well knew, however, Jesus was a man of peace and was in total submission to Roman political authority. He willingly paid taxes and taught His followers to do likewise. He even taught that if a soldier commanded a person to carry his gear for a mile, which by Roman law he was permitted to do, the person should carry it two miles (Matt. 5:41). Jesus not only did not rebel against the emperor but had publicly declared that citizens should “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Matt. 22:21). And when His admirers had wanted to make Him king by force He had disappeared from their midst (John 6:15). The accusations against Jesus were such obvious lies that one wonders what sort of fool the Jewish leaders thought Pilate to be.

In response to the indictments, as **Jesus stood before the governor, . . . the governor questioned Him saying, “Are You the King of the Jews?”** Pilate knew full well that the charges were spurious, and his question to Jesus was merely procedural. In light of Rome’s absolute intolerance of insurrection, Pilate’s indifferent reaction served to dramatically underscore his awareness of the preposterousness of the Sanhedrin’s allegations.

Jesus’ first response to Pilate was a counter question: “Are you saying this on your own initiative, or did others tell you about Me?” (John 18:34). Surprised and taken aback, the governor retorted, “I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests delivered You up to me; what have You done?” (v. 35). To which Jesus replied, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting, that I might not be delivered to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm” (v. 36).

It was perhaps at this point that Jesus said, **“It is as you say.”** Commenting further about the true nature of His kingship, He said, “You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice” (John 18:37). Although he admitted to having no comprehension of what Jesus meant by “truth,” Pilate “went out again to the Jews, and said to them, ‘I find no guilt in Him.’ ” (v. 38).

In this context, “find” represented a judicial verdict. Pilate acquitted Jesus of any civil or criminal wrongdoing. In modern parlance, He threw the case out of court for lack of evidence. He exercised “summary judgment.”

Not only were the charges patently false, but Pilate knew that the Jewish leaders themselves hated Rome passionately. Had Jesus actually been an insurrectionist, they would have supported Him and sought to protect Him, not brought Him before a Roman court and demanded His execution. He knew quite well that “it was for envy” of Jesus, not loyalty to Rome, that “they had delivered Him up” (Matt. 27:18).

The high priests, chief priests, elders, scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees all hated Jesus because He undermined their religious influence with an authority before the people. He exposed their sinfulness, hypocrisy, and doctrinal error. He was popular, whereas they were not. He could heal, whereas they could not. He taught truth, whereas they did not. Their true motivation was transparent even to a pagan politician. The governor probably suspected something of what they were up to when they requested the escort of Roman soldiers in arresting Jesus. But he already knew that Jesus was no danger to Rome and probably thought that, after condemning and flogging Jesus in their own court, the Jewish leaders would be satisfied and that His threat to them would end.

But the Council leaders would not be put off by Pilate’s verdict of innocent. As he stood before them again on the balcony of the Praetorium, Jesus continued to be **accused by the chief priests and elders**. Luke reports that “they kept on insisting, saying, ‘He stirs up the people, teaching all over Judea, starting from Galilee, even as far as this place’ ” (23:5). They increased the pressure on the governor as they desperately grasped for a charge that would arouse his concern. All this failing effort emphasizes the perfect virtue of the Savior.

THE ATTITUDE OF THE LORD

He made no answer. Then Pilate said to Him, “Do you not hear how many things they testify against You?” And He did not answer him with regard to even a single charge, so that the governor was quite amazed. (27:12b-14)

The second element in this account that demonstrates the perfection and innocence of Christ was His own attitude. To Pilate's consternation, Jesus **made no answer** to the intensified accusations of the chief priests and elders.

The Jewish leaders had already rendered their predetermined verdict of guilty, and the governor his verdict of not guilty, declaring, "I find no guilt in Him" (John 18:38). He knew that the original charges against Jesus not only were religious rather than political but were spurious and made out of envy. He also knew that the charges they had just made regarding insurrection, not paying taxes, and claiming to be a king were manufactured solely for his benefit, in order to give a political basis for judgment against Him.

Pilate knew the truth, and the Jews were opposing the truth. The Jews had unjustly convicted Him, and Pilate had justly exonerated Him. Jesus therefore refused to say anything else because there was nothing more to say.

Hoping that Jesus would come to His own defense and help expose the duplicitous Jewish leaders, **Pilate said to Him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against You?"** But again Jesus **did not answer him with regard to even a single charge.** Understandably, **the governor was quite amazed.** Pilate had confronted hundreds of accused men, most of whom loudly protested their innocence and were willing to say or do anything to save themselves. Many of them doubtlessly made countercharges against their accusers or else passionately pled for mercy. A person who said nothing in his own defense was unheard of and astounding. But Jesus' innocence was so obvious that it demanded no defense on His part.

"Where is the revolutionary who opposes Rome, the tax-dodging protester, and the rival to Caesar's throne?" Pilate must have mused. The Man who stood before him was calm, serene, undefensive, and completely at peace. As Isaiah had predicted some seven centuries earlier, although "He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth" (Isa. 53:7).

Pilate not only was amazed but in a quandary. He was convinced of Jesus' innocence and was repulsed by the chicanery of the chief priests and elders. Yet he did not dare offend them, because his own position with

Rome was now precarious due to the contemptuous miscalculations he had previously made regarding Jewish religious convictions.

He had governed Judea for some four or five years, but his rule had been marked by several serious misjudgments that threatened his office and even his life. First, he had deliberately offended the Jews by having his soldiers carry ensigns into Jerusalem that carried the likeness of Caesar. Because the Jews considered such images to be idolatrous, previous governors had carefully avoided displaying the emblems in public, especially in the holy city of Jerusalem. When a delegation of Jews persistently asked Pilate to remove the ensigns, he herded them into an amphitheater and threatened to have his soldiers cut off their heads if they did not desist. When the group bared their necks and threw themselves to the ground, defiantly asserting their willingness to die, Pilate withdrew both his threat and the ensigns. He had been sent to Palestine to keep the peace, not foment a revolution, which a massacre of those men would surely have precipitated.

A short while later, Pilate forcefully took money from the Temple treasury to erect an aqueduct. When the Jews again openly rioted, Pilate sent soldiers disguised as civilians among them to brutally slaughter many of the unsuspecting and unarmed protesters. Luke's reference to "the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices" (13:1) may relate to an additional cruel facet of that massacre.

Pilate's third public offense against the Jews was almost his undoing. He had special shields made for his guard at Fort Antonia and, no doubt intending to gain favor with the emperor, ordered likenesses of Tiberius engraved on the shields. This time the Jewish leaders appealed directly to Caesar, and Pilate's scheme backfired. Tiberius was more concerned about the genuine prospect of rebellion than the insincere flattery of Pilate, and he demanded that the shields be removed immediately.

Pilate was now justifiably afraid that another riot by the Jews would cost him his procuratorship. His brutal and senseless ambush of some Samaritan worshipers a few years later brought exactly that result. When the Samaritans appealed to the governor's immediate superior, the legate of Syria, that official ordered Pilate to Rome to explain his actions. His political career was ended, and tradition holds that he eventually committed suicide in Gaul, to which he had been banished.

We learn from Luke that when Pilate heard the Jewish leaders say Jesus was stirring up the people, “starting from Galilee, even as far as this place,” he asked if Jesus were a Galilean. When told that Jesus was indeed from that region, he felt certain he had found a solution to his dilemma. He immediately sent Jesus to Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee but was visiting in Jerusalem at the time (Luke 23:5-7). With His appearance before Herod, the second phase of Jesus’ political trial began.

For his own perverse reasons, “Herod was very glad when he saw Jesus; for he had wanted to see Him for a long time, because he had been hearing about Him and was hoping to see some sign performed by Him” (Luke 23:8). Because Antipas had beheaded John the Baptist, Jesus had never visited the tetrarch’s capital city of Tiberias in Galilee, and the ruler had never seen Him. Herod desired to meet Jesus purely out of curiosity, hoping to see this famous miracle-worker perform for his private benefit.

Although Herod “questioned Him at some length,” Jesus “answered him nothing. And the chief priests and the scribes were standing there, accusing Him vehemently” (Luke 23:9-10). Luke does not mention what Herod asked Jesus about, but based on what is known of that ruler, his questions were utterly superficial. Jesus therefore had even less to say to him than to Pilate. He owed the tetrarch no explanation of His teaching or His activities, about which Herod was probably well informed or easily could have been.

Whatever else Herod may have known or believed about Jesus, he knew He was no political threat to himself or to Caesar. By this time Jesus had already been beaten by the Sanhedrin, and His face was bruised, bleeding, and covered with spittle. The accused, silent prisoner appeared anything but regal or dangerous.

But resentful of Jesus’ silence and probably hoping to mollify the howling, infuriated Jews, “Herod with his soldiers, after treating Him with contempt and mocking Him, dressed Him in a gorgeous robe and sent Him back to Pilate” (Luke 23:11). The word rendered “gorgeous” literally means bright and resplendent, suggesting the royal apparel that had often been worn by Jewish kings at their coronations.

Although Herod did not declare Jesus not guilty, as Pilate had done, he acknowledged no charge against Him, and once again Christ’s innocence was manifested. The tetrarch mocked and mistreated Christ, but he could find no fault in Him.

THE ANIMOSITY OF THE CROWD

Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the multitude any one prisoner whom they wanted. And they were holding at that time a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. When therefore they were gathered together, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?” For he knew that because of envy they had delivered Him up. And while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him saying, “Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him.” But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the multitude to ask for Barabbas, and to put Jesus to death. But the governor answered and said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.” Pilate said to them, “Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?” They all said, “Let Him be crucified!” And he said, “Why, what evil has He done?” But they kept shouting all the more, saying, “Let Him be crucified!” (27:15-23)

The third element in this narrative that demonstrates Jesus' perfection and innocence was also the third phase of His political trial. The first two ended in acquittal, one by specific declaration and the other by default.

Had he had the courage to do it, Pilate could have ended the trial after Jesus' first appearance before him, and he could have ended it now. But with his own career and perhaps his life in jeopardy, he could not directly defy the Jewish establishment without risking a riot during the most tumultuous week of the year in Jerusalem.

Christ therefore stood once again before the governor, who at this time “summoned the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them, ‘You brought this man to me as one who incites the people to rebellion, and behold, having examined Him before you, I have found no guilt in this man regarding the charges which you make against Him. No, nor has Herod, for he sent Him back to us; and behold, nothing deserving death has been done by Him’” (Luke 23:13-15).

Having failed in passing off responsibility to Herod and in convincing the Jewish leaders of Jesus' innocence, Pilate discovered

another possible way to avoid executing this obviously guiltless man. When “the multitude went up and began asking [Pilate] to do as he had been accustomed to do for them” (Mark 15:8), he remembered that **at the feast of the Passover the governor was accustomed to release for the multitude any one prisoner whom they wanted.**

As an act of diplomacy and to help reduce tension and bitterness in the subjected nation of Israel, a custom had begun, probably before Pilate took office, of releasing **any one prisoner** during the Passover celebration. Because **they were holding at that time a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas**, the governor probably expected the common people, who were known to have acclaimed and admired Jesus, to choose His release above that of **Barabbas**. If the multitude demanded Jesus’ release, the Jewish leaders could not blame Pilate.

Little is known about **Barabbas** except that he was a robber, murderer, and insurrectionist (Luke 23:25; John 18:40). He was probably not a Zealot but an independent rogue who fought Rome more for personal gain than patriotism. This arch-criminal was as great a threat to his fellow countrymen as to their oppressors. Because of the severity of his crimes, he was doubtlessly scheduled for execution, and Jesus probably was crucified on the cross originally constructed for Barabbas.

It was now “about the sixth hour” (John 19:14), which by Roman reckoning would be 6:00 A.M. By this time a throng of Jews had assembled in front of the Praetorium, attracted by the large gathering of religious leaders as well as by the specific summons of Pilate (Luke 23:13). **When therefore they were gathered together, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?”** Although he despised the Jews, the governor had learned enough about their practices and beliefs to know that they looked forward to a promised deliverer, whom they **called Christ**, or Messiah. He also knew that many Jews had ascribed that title to **Jesus**. And he could hardly have failed to know of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem a few days earlier and His boisterous acclamation by the multitudes.

Pilate **knew that because of their envy of Jesus, the religious leaders had delivered Him up**, and by pitting the people against those leaders, he hoped to safely release Him.

While he was sitting on the judgment seat, Pilate's deliberation was interrupted when his **wife sent to him saying, "Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him."** It was surely not her practice to interrupt her husband when he was in the midst of a trial, especially one so sensitive as this. To be **sitting on the judgment seat** was to be acting in the official capacity of judge, and not even a governor's wife would have dared intrude on such proceedings except in a serious crisis. She knew what Pilate's original verdict had been but was afraid that the Jewish leaders would coerce him into changing his mind.

It is possible that Pilate and his wife already had discussed Jesus many times that week. His triumphal entry was common knowledge, as were His healing miracles, including the recent raising of Lazarus just outside Jerusalem. They knew of His daring and dramatic cleansing of the Temple and probably laughed over the consternation He caused the chief priests and the Temple merchants by that act.

Whatever the wife's personal understanding of **righteous** may have been, she was correct in her assessment of this **Man**, and she **suffered greatly** because of that awareness. Matthew does not explain the source of her **dream**, and there is no justification in insisting it was given directly by God. Everything that happened here was according to "the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). But although God worked supernaturally through the dream, Pilate's wife may simply have been convinced of Jesus' innocence in her own mind and had the dream as a result of that concern. In any case, she was frightened for her husband and insisted that he have no part in Jesus' condemnation or punishment. In doing so, she added her attestation to Jesus' perfection and innocence.

Pilate's problem was now compounded. Pressures both to release and to condemn Jesus were increasing, and he was caught in the middle. While the messenger was relaying the message of caution from Pilate's wife, **the chief priests and the elders** took advantage of the opportunity and **persuaded the multitudes to ask for Barabbas, and to put Jesus to death.** The governor realized that he had again underestimated the craftiness of the Jewish leaders and overestimated the convictions of the fickle **multitudes.**

Unaware of what the leaders had managed to accomplish among the crowd while his attention was turned to his wife's warning, the still-hopeful **governor answered and said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?"** Without hesitation and seemingly with one voice, **they said, "Barabbas."**

Because Jesus had been declared not guilty under Roman law, Pilate was now legally free to release Him as well as Barabbas. He realized, however, that the sole purpose of the crowd in asking for Barabbas's release was to compel him to condemn Jesus. Nevertheless, in a final effort to render justice, the bewildered **Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?"** Again without hesitation and with one voice, **they all said, "Let Him be crucified!"**

The multitude clearly wanted blood, not justice, and even to the hardened, pagan mind of Pilate their vicious response must have been blood chilling. **"Why, what evil has He done?"** he rebutted, again proclaiming the Lord's innocence before the world. As he should have known, that question only inflamed the mob to greater frenzy, causing them to keep **shouting all the more, saying, "Let Him be crucified!"** Just as they had done before Herod, but with even greater vehemence, they demanded nothing less than Jesus' death.

THE ACQUIESCENCE OF THE GOVERNOR

And when Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to that yourselves." And all the people answered and said, "His blood be on us and on our children!" Then he released Barabbas for them; but after having Jesus scourged, he delivered Him to be crucified. (27:24-26)

The fourth element in this account that demonstrates Jesus' perfection and innocence was the acquiescence of the Roman governor to the will of the multitude, which had been incited against Christ by the Satan-led religious leaders. It did not matter to them that not a single accusation against Him had stood before Annas, before Caiaphas, before the entire Sanhedrin, before Herod, or before Pilate. In their willful spiritual blindness they had no concern for truth, for justice, or for

righteousness. They rather pursued unfounded and irrational vengeance on an innocent man who not only had never done them harm but who had healed their diseases and offered them eternal life.

Therefore, **when Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the multitude, saying, “I am innocent of this Man’s blood; see to that yourselves.”** Finally realizing that no amount of reasoning or evidence would prevail with the obsessed mob, the governor made public testimony that he did not concur with their decision and that he disavowed any complicity in it.

Pilate could not afford another Jewish **riot**. As noted above, the last riot had brought severe censure by Caesar himself. Another uprising would end his career and quite possibly his life. The mob was totally out of control, and it was clear that their only pacification would be Jesus’ crucifixion.

Pilate had never been known for mercy or diplomacy. Herod Agrippa I is reported to have said that Pilate was “naturally inflexible—a blend of self-will and relentlessness” (Philo of Alexandria in the *Legatio ad Gaium* [38]). It was his previous cruel indifference to the people under his jurisdiction that had gotten him into so much trouble.

Yet he did have a sense of justice. Had he been able to discover the least evidence that Jesus was guilty of a capital crime, he would have been greatly relieved and more than willing to grant His execution. That would have been by far the easier route. He had condemned many men to death and had no compunction about executing one more. But the fact that he unwaveringly maintained Jesus’ innocence, rendering at least five public verdicts of not guilty, testifies to his inability to find any guilt in Him. He therefore repeatedly appealed to the Jewish leaders and to the multitudes to relinquish their demand for Jesus’ death. But he was not courageous enough to risk his own welfare to protect Christ’s life.

It was ironic, and doubtlessly intentional, that the governor chose a Jewish ritual to depict his renunciation of responsibility for Jesus’ fate. If the ruling elders of a city were not able to determine the identity of a murderer, the Mosaic law provided that they could publicly wash their hands, pray to God, and thereby absolve themselves of any guilt regarding their inability to render justice. Using a modified form of that Jewish

ceremony which he had heard of, Pilate proclaimed he was **innocent of this innocent Man's blood.**

Doubtlessly with a tone of both dismay and disgust, the governor then said, **“See to that yourselves.”** And when he gave them what they wanted, **the people** gave him what he wanted. If he would permit Jesus' death, they would assume all blame. **“His blood be on us and on our children!”** they shouted. That declaration did not, of course, absolve Pilate of guilt, but it did proclaim for all time the people's acknowledgment of their own guilt. They soon forgot that assumption of guilt, however, and not many months later the Sanhedrin self-righteously rebuked the apostles for holding them accountable for Christ's blood (Acts 5:28).

The multitude of perhaps several thousand Jews who stood outside the Praetorium made their verdict in behalf of all Israel. It was that verdict, acknowledged by all the other unbelieving Jews through their silence, that caused the branch of Israel to be broken off the tree of God's redemptive blessing (Rom. 11:17). It is no wonder that since that fearful day, as a nation and as individuals, unredeemed Jews have been under the chastening hand of God.

At the end of Jesus' second hearing before Pilate, the governor's intent had been to “punish Him and release Him” (Luke 23:16). But the Jews would not settle for mere punishment, no matter how severe. They insisted on death. Therefore, after **he released Barabbas** according to the wishes of the crowd, Pilate had **Jesus scourged and delivered . . . to be crucified.**

The whip used for scourging had a short wooden handle, to the end of which were attached several leather thongs. Each thong was tipped with very sharp pieces of metal or bone. The man to be scourged was tied to a post by the wrists high over his head, with his feet dangling and his body taut. Often there were two scourgers, one on either side of the victim, who took turns lashing him across the back. Muscles were lacerated, veins and arteries were torn open, and it was not uncommon for the kidneys, spleen, or other organs to be exposed and slashed. As would be expected, many men died of scourging before they could be taken out for execution. We do not know the full extent of Jesus' wounds, but He was so weakened by them that He was not able to carry His own cross (Mark 15:21).

Despite the accusatory verbiage of that tragic night, it was not really Jesus who was on trial, but the rest of the world. The Jewish religionists condemned themselves as they viciously demanded His crucifixion. The fickle multitudes condemned themselves as they mindlessly went along with their leaders. Herod condemned himself as he mocked the King of kings. Pilate condemned himself as he willingly allowed an innocent man to be put to death, choosing the world above the Son of God.

And through that ridicule, scorn, and blood, the sinless Son of God was still further exalted.

**The Wickedness of
the Crucifixion 20**
(27:27-44)

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him. And they stripped Him, and put a scarlet robe on Him. And after weaving a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they kneeled down before Him and mocked Him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” And they spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head. And after they had mocked Him, they took His robe off and put His garments on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him.

And as they were coming out, they found a man of Cyrene named Simon, whom they pressed into service to bear His cross.

And when they had come to a place called Golgotha, which means Place of a Skull, they gave Him wine to drink mingled with gall; and after tasting it, He was unwilling to drink. And when they had crucified Him, they divided up His garments among themselves, casting lots; and sitting down, they began to keep watch over Him there. And they put up above His head the charge against Him which read, “THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.” At that time two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and one on the left. And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking Him, and saying, “He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we shall believe in Him. He trusts in God; let Him deliver Him now, if He takes pleasure in Him; for He said, ‘I am

the Son of God.’ ” And the robbers also who had been crucified with Him were casting the same insult at Him. (27:27-44)

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ was the climax of redemptive history, the focal point of God’s plan of salvation. God’s redeeming work culminated in the cross, where the Lord Jesus bore the sins of the world. But also in the crucifixion of Christ the wickedness of man reached its apex. The execution of the Savior was the vilest expression of evil in human history, the utter depth of man’s depravity. The death of Jesus Christ was therefore the supreme revelation of the gracious love of God while also being the ultimate expression of the sinfulness of man.

And whereas John’s gospel focuses on the crucifixion primarily from the perspective of God’s redemptive love and grace, Matthew’s focus is primarily from the perspective of man’s wickedness. Man’s wickedness attempted to kill Jesus shortly after His birth, tried to discredit His teaching, and made every effort to mislead and corrupt His disciples. Man’s wickedness had betrayed Him, denied Him, arrested, maligned, and battered Him. But the incomparable manifestation of man’s wickedness was in His crucifixion.

David Thomas wrote:

[For thousands of] years wickedness had been growing. It had wrought deeds of impiety and crime that had wrung the ages with agony, and often roused the justice of the universe to roll her fiery thunderbolts of retribution through the world. But now it had grown to full maturity; it stands around this cross in such gigantic proportions as had never been seen before; it works an enormity before which the mightiest of its past exploits dwindle into insignificance, and pale into dimness. It crucifies the Lord of life and glory. (*The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1979 (reprint of 1873 edition)], p. 536)

Jesus’ enemies so hated Him that even His death seemed to be a disappointment, because it ended their opportunity to spew venom on Him even as He suffered the agony of crucifixion. The heartless intensity of the evil words and deeds of those who participated in His death beggar description.

Matthew 27:27-44 portrays four groups of evil people at the crucifixion who derided and abused Christ: the ignorant wicked (vv. 27-37), the knowing wicked (v. 38), the fickle wicked (vv. 39-40), and the religious wicked (vv. 41-44).

THE IGNORANT WICKED

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him. And they stripped Him, and put a scarlet robe on Him. And after weaving a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they kneeled down before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head. And after they had mocked Him, they took His robe off and put His garments on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him.

And as they were coming out, they found a man of Cyrene named Simon, whom they pressed into service to bear His cross.

And when they had come to a place called Golgotha, which means Place of a Skull, they gave Him wine to drink mingled with gall; and after tasting it, He was unwilling to drink. And when they had crucified Him, they divided up His garments among themselves, casting lots; and sitting down, they began to keep watch over Him there. And they put up above His head the charge against Him which read, "THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS."(27:27-37)

The ignorant wicked were the callous Roman soldiers who actually performed the crucifixion under orders from Pilate, who finally had succumbed to the intimidation of the Jewish religious leaders. The Roman governor had publicly declared Jesus' innocence several times, but for fear of a riot that almost certainly would have cost his career and possibly his life, he capitulated to the execution. He had perverted Roman justice by agreeing to convict a man whom no one was able to legitimately charge with a crime against the state. He had sinned against his own convictions, integrity, and conscience, and against the truth. He bargained his eternal soul for temporary security.

In an even worse way, the Jewish leaders had perverted not only scriptural principles of justice but their own rabbinical traditions. Although they had been unable to properly charge Jesus with sin against God, they were determined to destroy Him, whatever the cost to Scripture, justice, truth, or righteousness.

Although **the soldiers of the governor** were under his orders to scourge and crucify Jesus (v. 26), they exhibited their own wickedness by far exceeding what basic duty required. As they **took Jesus into the Praetorium**, they decided to make public sport of their prisoner **and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him** to watch.

A full **Roman cohort** amounted to 600 soldiers, and because this particular cohort served the Roman governor at his **Praetorium** at Fort Antonia in Jerusalem, it was probably composed of elite legionnaires. They were not necessarily all, or even mostly, Italian, because Rome typically conscripted soldiers from among its occupied countries. Because most men would be reluctant to fight against their own countrymen, they were frequently sent to neighboring regions that spoke the same or similar language. We can be sure that none of this cohort was Jewish, because Rome had granted a special exemption of Jews from Roman military service. It is likely that the contingent in Jerusalem was composed largely of Syrians, who spoke Aramaic, the most common conversational and trade language of Palestine.

Because Pilate's primary headquarters were in Caesarea, this **cohort** may have been stationed there, traveling from place to place with the governor as his military escort. If so, they would have been even less familiar with Judaism than the average Roman soldier in Jerusalem and probably had never heard of Jesus. To them, He was simply another condemned prisoner, whom they were free to abuse as much as they pleased, as long as he was not killed before the designated execution. If they considered Jesus to be in any way unique, it was only in that He had apparently claimed to be some sort of king. What they did to Him was therefore unrelated to religious or personal animosity. Their torment of Jesus was wicked and inexcusable, but it was done out of spiritual ignorance.

Jesus' face was swollen from the slaps and beatings He received from the Temple police and was covered with spittle from His Jewish tormentors. He was bleeding profusely from the scourging, with terrible

lacerations from His shoulders down, exposing muscles, ligaments, blood vessels, and perhaps even internal organs. Because He had not spoken for the past hour or so, the soldiers may have considered Him mentally deranged and worthy only of ridicule. They played Him as the fool, making sport of the comments they had overheard about His claim to kingship.

It did not matter to them that Jesus had never personally harmed them or that technically He was innocent according to Roman law. They had been trained to obey orders, which frequently required killing and torture. Jesus had been officially condemned, and no sense of justice or propriety, much less of mercy or compassion, tempered their cold-hearted entertainment at Jesus' expense. Although in an extreme way, they expressed the natural wickedness of every human heart that is ignorant of God.

Pilate did not initiate the mockery, but neither did he oppose it. Despite his half-hearted efforts to acquit Jesus, Pilate was noted for cruelty and mercilessness. Having ordered Jesus' scourging and crucifixion, he would hardly have had qualms about the relatively mild abuse of mockery. It is possible that the soldiers performed their derisive actions under the governor's amused eye. The soldiers probably shared their commander's hatred of Jews and took this opportunity to vent their malice on a Jew condemned by fellow Jews. With every nerve in agony and His body quivering in pain, Jesus became the object of a fiendish game.

Jesus was either naked or nearly naked for the scourging, after which He was probably clothed with His seamless inner garment. First, the soldiers **stripped Him** of that garment **and put a scarlet robe on Him**, still further irritating His exposed, bleeding flesh. The **scarlet robe** probably belonged to one of the soldiers, who used it to keep warm while standing guard on cold nights. Mark and John report that the robe was purple (Mark 15:17; John 19:2), suggesting that the actual **scarlet** color was the closest the soldiers could come to purple, the traditional color of royalty.

Although it was far from the soldiers' intent, the use of scarlet was reminiscent of Isaiah's declaration that "though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool" (Isa. 1:18). Just as the soldiers clothed Jesus in the scarlet

robe, He willingly clothed Himself in the scarlet sins of the world in order that those who believe in Him might be freed from that sin.

To add to the pain as well as to the ridicule, **after weaving a crown of thorns**, the soldiers **put it on His head**. Many kinds of **thorns** were prevalent in Palestine at that time, and the particular variety used is unknown. The purpose was to mimic the wreath that Caesar wore on official occasions and that could be seen on Roman coins that bore his image. As the mock **crown** was pressed **on His head**, blood ran down from the new wounds to mingle with the blood that already covered the rest of His body. Like the scarlet robe, the crown of thorns became an unintended symbol of the sins that Jesus was about to take upon Himself. After the Fall, thorns and thistles became painful reminders of the curse that sin had brought to the world (Gen. 3:18), the curse from which the world ever since has longed to be freed (Rom. 8:22).

Jesus' face was now even more unrecognizable and His pain more intense. But still not content, the soldiers next placed **a reed in His right hand**. Like the robe and the crown of thorns, the **reed** was meant to represent royalty, mimicking a monarch's scepter, the symbol of his authority and power. Such a scepter could also be seen in Caesar's hand on Roman coins.

To complete the sarcastic taunt, the soldiers even **kneeled down before Him and mocked Him saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"** The Jewish religious leaders had mocked Jesus as a prophet (Matt. 26:68), and now the Roman soldiers mocked Him as a king. Then, just as the Jews had done, **they spat on Him**, casting on Him what was considered the ultimate indignity.

Next in their brutal amusement they **took the reed** from His hand and, to further ridicule His supposed authority, **began to beat Him on the head**, which was already swollen, lacerated, and bleeding. It was as if to say, "Your kingliness is a joke. Look how easily we strip you of your dignity and your authority. We beat you with your own scepter. Where is your power? Where is your royal army to defend you from your enemies?" From John we learn that they struck Jesus with their fists as well as with the reed (John 19:3).

One day Christ will wield a true scepter, a rod of iron with which He will rule the world, including His subdued enemies (Rev. 19:15). Then the tables will be turned, and the mocking and derision will be by God of

the ungodly. Then He who sits in the heavens will laugh, and the Lord will scoff at them (Ps. 2:4).

But in His incarnation, Jesus' humiliation was essential to God's plan for the Son, "who emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:7-8).

Through all of that torment and pain Jesus said nothing either in defense or in reproach. He had predicted His mocking, His suffering, and His crucifixion long before Pilate or his soldiers knew who He was (Matt. 16:21; 20:18-19). That was God's plan countless ages before it was the plan of wicked men, and it was for that very purpose that He had come to earth. As men fulfilled their evil and destructive design, God fulfilled His gracious and redemptive design. Christ was on the divine schedule, which even His enemies were unwittingly fulfilling in minute detail.

We learn from John that during this time Pilate brought Jesus out before the Jews, asserting again that he found no fault in Him. Jesus stood again on the porch of the Praetorium, "wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said to them 'Behold, the Man!'" (John 19:4-5). Although he had agreed to the crucifixion and had permitted Jesus to be brutally beaten and mocked, the governor obviously still hoped, perhaps due to his wife's warning, that Jesus' life could be spared. But "when the chief priests and the officers saw Him, they cried out, saying, 'Crucify, crucify!'" As if to wash his hands of the whole unjust affair again, "Pilate said to them, 'Take Him yourselves, and crucify Him, for I find no guilt in Him.' The Jews answered him, 'We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God.' When Pilate therefore heard this statement, he was the more afraid" (vv. 6-8). Although they repeated only the religious charges against Jesus, the clear implication is that the Jewish leaders were insisting on Rome's complicity in His execution. In effect, they refused to crucify Jesus by themselves, even with Pilate's permission.

Taking Jesus back into the Praetorium, Pilate asked Him where He was from but received no answer. When he then told Jesus that he had power of life and death over Him, the Lord responded, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me up to you has the greater sin" (John 19:10-

11). Although he had little comprehension of what Jesus meant, Pilate was convinced all the more of His innocence of any civil crime and once again “made efforts to release Him, but the Jews cried out, saying, ‘If you release this Man, you are no friend of Caesar’ ” (v. 12).

Still holding out against them, Pilate brought Jesus to “the judgment seat at a place called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha,” and mockingly said, “Behold your King!” Infuriated by Pilate’s continued defiance of them, the Jewish leaders “cried out, ‘Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!’” In one last taunt, Pilate asked, “Shall I crucify your King?” to which the chief priests hypocritically replied, “We have no king but Caesar.” Frustrated and exhausted, Pilate resigned himself to the injustice and “delivered Him to them to be crucified” (John 19:13-16).

As representatives of the people, the chief priests here pronounced the culminating apostasy of Israel. Rejecting God’s Son, they publicly, although insincerely, declared allegiance to the pagan emperor.

Picking up the account at this point, Matthew reports that **after they had mocked Him further, they took His robe off and put His garments on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him.**

Some interpreters suggest that only the cross-beam or the upright post was carried, but in all probability it was the entire cross, weighing in excess of 200 pounds, that the victim carried. He would normally be surrounded by a quaternion, four soldiers who would escort the prisoner through the crowds to the place of execution. A placard bearing the prisoner’s indictment was often placed around his neck, giving notice to others of the high price to be paid for the crime.

It was during the grueling procession through the streets of Jerusalem that Jesus gave His last, and very brief, public message. “There were following Him a great multitude of the people, and of women who were mourning and lamenting Him,” Luke reports. Turning to them Jesus said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ For if they do these things in the green tree, what will happen in the dry?” (Luke 23:27-31).

Having children was considered the greatest blessing a Jewish woman could have, and only a tragedy of awesome dimensions could

cause her to wish otherwise. Jesus' reference to the green and dry tree related to a popular proverb that meant if something bad occurred under good circumstances, it would be much worse under bad. His point was that if the Romans did such a terrible thing as to crucify one innocent Jewish man, what could they be expected to do to the guilty nation of Israel? If they executed a man who had committed no offense against them, what would they do to a people who rebelled?

The Lord was, of course, referring to A.D. 70, when the Temple would be utterly destroyed and the majority of its inhabitants slaughtered by the Roman legions of Titus. From that holocaust the nation of Israel has not yet fully recovered even in modern times, because there is still no temple in Jerusalem, no sacrifices, no priesthood to offer them, and no priestly records to verify lineage. That was the horror of which Israel should have been fearful, Jesus said.

Because He was sinless and completely undefiled in body as well as in mind and spirit, Jesus was physically all that Adam was before the Fall and more. But Jesus' severe beatings and the scourging had made even Him too weak to carry the heavy cross. Not only was He suffering excruciating physical pain, but He had had no sleep the previous night and was suffering the added agonies of betrayal, defection, and denial. In addition to that, He was still suffering the accumulated pain of having been tempted by and being in continual spiritual battle with Satan. There were now no angels sent to minister to Him as they had after the wilderness temptations, and His body was all but depleted of strength. More even than all of that, He knew perfectly that He faced the indescribably painful prospect of taking upon Himself the sin of all mankind, of becoming sin for their sakes. And for that He would suffer the wrath of His heavenly Father which that sin deserved.

All of those agonies—physical, emotional, and spiritual—combined to utterly weaken His perfect but now emaciated body. Consequently, **as they were coming out** from the Praetorium, the soldiers **found a man of Cyrene named Simon, whom they pressed into service to bear His cross.**

Cyrene was a Greek settlement located west of Alexandria on the North African coast of the Mediterranean, directly south of Greece in what is modern Libya. It was a prosperous trade center and had a large population of Jews. **Simon** was a common Jewish name, and in all

probability this man was a pilgrim who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

Simon was “a passer-by coming from the country” (Mark 15:21) as Jesus was being taken out of the city. Perhaps because he looked strong he was conscripted by the Roman soldiers to carry Jesus’ cross. Mark also identifies Simon as “the father of Alexander and Rufus” (v. 21), indicating that those two men were Christians known to Mark and to many other believers at the time he wrote his gospel. Because Mark probably wrote from Rome, Alexander and Rufus may have been active in the church there. This Rufus may have been the man Paul greeted in his letter to Rome, and, if so, “his mother and mine” would refer to Simon’s wife (see Rom. 16:13).

It may have been the carrying of Jesus’ cross that led Simon to faith in Him. What began as a forced and probably resented act of physical servitude became the opportunity for spiritual life. Not only Simon himself but his entire family came to salvation, and his wife became like a mother to the apostle Paul.

Because the Mosaic law required that executions be performed outside the city (Num. 15:35) and also because hanging on a tree was considered a curse (Deut. 21:23; cf. Gal. 3:13), Jesus was taken outside Jerusalem to be crucified. And because crucifixion was a vivid means of showing the populace the price for opposing Rome, crosses were generally erected beside a well-traveled road, if possible on a hill, bluff, or other promontory where they would be visible to all.

The place chosen for Jesus’ crucifixion was a hill on the outskirts of Jerusalem **called Golgotha, which means Place of a Skull**. As an outcast both of Israel and of Rome, Jesus “suffered outside the gate” (Heb. 13:12).

Luke refers to the hill of crucifixion as “the place called The Skull” (23:33), and as several gospels explain, **Skull** translates a Greek term (*kranion*) equivalent to the Hebrew/Aramaic **Golgotha** (see John 19:17). The name Calvary is derived from the Latin word (*calvaria*) for skull, or cranium.

Contrary to what some scholars have suggested, the **Place of a Skull** was not a burial ground where skulls were commonly found. Jews would not allow dead bodies to be exposed, and no part of a human skeleton was to be seen in Israel. Rather the name referred to a particular

site that had the appearance of a skull. Such a hill, commonly called Gordon's Calvary, is the traditional site and can still be viewed today a short distance from Jerusalem's northern wall.

Before the soldiers nailed Jesus to the cross and it was placed upright in the ground, **they gave Him wine to drink mingled with gall.** The word translated **gall** simply referred to something bitter, which Mark identifies as myrrh (15:23), a narcotic that also was used as a perfume (see Ps. 45:8; Prov. 7:17), as an ingredient of anointing oil for priests (Ex. 30:23), and for embalming (John 19:39). It was quite expensive and was one of the gifts presented to the infant Jesus by the magi (Matt. 2:11).

Because crucifixion was designed to inflict maximum pain, the **gall**, or myrrh, was not offered as an act of mercy on the part of the soldiers. It was simply used to stupefy a victim to keep him from struggling violently as the nails were driven into his hands and feet.

From extrabiblical sources it is known that wealthy Jewish women would often provide wine mixed with myrrh to those about to be executed, especially by crucifixion. Contrary to the soldiers, their purpose was to ease the pain of "him who is perishing," following the admonition of Proverbs 31:6. It may have been that such a group of women also offered Jesus the stupefying drink.

But Jesus did not want His senses dulled, **and after tasting** the mixture, **He was unwilling to drink.** As He had already declared in the garden, first in prayer to His heavenly Father (Matt. 26:39) and then to Peter as He was being arrested (John 18:11), He was determined to drink the cup the Father had given Him. He would endure the full measure of pain—physical, emotional, and spiritual.

When they had crucified Him does not refer to the finished execution but to raising Him upright and placing the vertical beam into the hole prepared for it. It was at that point that the actual crucifixion began.

Crucifixion originated in Persia, where a deity named Ormazd was believed to consider the earth sacred. Because a criminal who was executed had to be raised above the earth in order not to defile it, he was suspended on a large pole and left there to die. The practice was picked up by the Carthaginians and then by the Greeks and especially the Romans, whose extensive use caused it to become identified with them. It is estimated that by the time of Christ the Romans had crucified some 30,000 men in Israel alone, primarily for insurrection. The crucifixion of only

three men outside Jerusalem was therefore virtually insignificant in the eyes of Rome.

None of the gospel writers describes the procedure for securing Jesus to the cross. The literal Greek text is even less revealing than most English renderings, saying simply, “The having crucified Him ones parted His garments.” It is only from Thomas’s comments several days after the resurrection that we learn about Jesus’ being nailed by His hands and feet (John 20:25), rather than being tied with cords or thongs as was often the case.

Judging from nonbiblical descriptions of crucifixion in New Testament times, Jesus was placed on the cross as it lay flat on the ground. First His feet were nailed to the upright beam and then His arms stretched across the horizontal beam and nailed through the wrists just above the hand, allowing a slight bend at the knees when the body was extended. The cross was then picked up and dropped into the hole, causing excruciating pain as the weight of His body pulled at the already torn flesh around the nails.

In his book *The Life of Christ*, Frederick Farrar describes crucifixion as follows:

A death by crucifixion seems to include all that pain and death can have of the horrible and ghastly—dizziness, cramp, thirst, starvation, sleeplessness, traumatic fever, shame, publicity of shame, long continuance of torment, horror of anticipation, mortification of intended wounds—all intensified just up to the point at which they can be endured at all, but all stopping just short of the point which would give to the sufferer the relief of unconsciousness.

The unnatural position made every movement painful; the lacerated veins and crushed tendons throbbed with incessant anguish; the wounds, inflamed by exposure, gradually gangrened [when a victim took several days to die]; the arteries—especially at the head and stomach—became swollen and oppressed with surcharged blood, and while each variety of misery went on gradually increasing, there was added to them the intolerable pang of a burning and raging thirst, and all these physical complications caused an internal excitement and anxiety, which

made the prospect of death itself—of death, the unknown enemy, at whose approach man usually shudders most—bear the aspect of a delicious and exquisite release.

One thing is clear. The first century executions were not like the modern ones, for they did not seek a quick, painless death nor the preservation of any measure of dignity for the criminal. On the contrary, they sought an agonizing torture which completely humiliated him. And it is important that we understand this, for it helps us realize the agony of Christ's death. (Vol. 2 [New York: E. P. Dutton, 1877], pp. 403-4)

Dr. Truman Davis gives an additional description of Jesus' crucifixion:

At this point another phenomenon occurs. As the arms fatigue, great waves of cramps sweep over the muscles knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain. With these cramps comes the inability to push Himself upward. Hanging by His arms, the pectoral muscles are paralyzed and the intercostal muscles are unable to act. Air can be drawn into the lungs but cannot be exhaled. Jesus fights to raise Himself in order to get even one short breath. Finally, carbon dioxide builds up in the lungs and in the blood stream and the cramps partially subside. Spasmodically He is able to push Himself upward to exhale and bring in the life-giving oxygen. . . .

Hours of this limitless pain, cycles of twisting, joint-rending cramps, intermittent partial asphyxiation, searing pain as tissue is torn from His lacerated back as He moves up and down against the rough timber; then another agony begins. A deep crushing pain in the chest as the pericardium slowly fills with serum and begins to compress the heart.

It is now almost over . . . the compressed heart is struggling to pump heavy, thick, sluggish blood into the tissues. The tortured lungs are making a frantic effort to gasp in small gulps of air. ("The Crucifixion of Jesus; The Passion of Christ from a Medical Point of View," *Arizona Medicine*, vol. 22, Mar. 1965, pp. 183-87)

It was not Matthew's purpose, however, to focus on the physical particulars of the crucifixion that led to Christ's yielding up His life, but rather on the character of the crucifiers.

Through all of that torment the callous soldiers sat impassively, as they had done many times before. They had no idea who Jesus was, except for what was written on the sign above His head as a sarcastic taunt by Pilate. They doubtlessly were aware that Pilate, governor of the region and their military commander, had repeatedly declared Jesus innocent of any crime against Rome. But Jesus was probably not the first innocent man they had seen executed. They had no religious concern about Jesus' identity and no moral concern about His innocence. Out of their wicked ignorance they, too, eventually joined in mocking Jesus, saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!" (Luke 23:36-37).

Jesus had repeatedly told the disciples of His coming suffering, scorn, and death, and it had been predicted by Isaiah and other prophets hundreds of years before that. The Messiah would be "despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised, and we did not esteem Him" (Isa. 53:3). Not only was He to suffer unjustly at the hands of wicked men but He endured that affliction for the very sake of those responsible for it—which, in the fullest sense, includes every fallen, sinful human being who has ever lived and who will ever live. "He was pierced through for our transgressions," Isaiah goes on to say, "He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. . . . The Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him" (vv. 5-6).

Christians in the early church are reported to have begged God's forgiveness for the unknown sufferings they caused Jesus, realizing they could not conceive of the full extent of the pain He endured at men's hands, a pain to which they knew their own sins had contributed.

The King James Version of verse 35 contains the additional words: "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots." The oldest known manuscripts of Matthew, however, do not include those words, suggesting that some well-intentioned scribe added to Matthew's gospel the prediction from Psalm 22:18 that is quoted in John 19:24.

Jewish men normally wore five pieces of clothing: sandals, an inner cloak, a headpiece, a belt, and an outer cloak, or tunic. The four soldiers **divided up** the first four pieces of Jesus' **garments among themselves by casting lots**. Because "the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece," they decided not to cut it into four pieces but to "cast lots for it, to decide whose it shall be" (John 19:23-24). Having done that, they sat down near the cross and **began to keep watch over Him there**. The quaternion was required to remain with the victim until his death was certain, making sure that friends or family members did not rescue him or seek to reduce his suffering by putting him to death by a swifter means.

As a final mockery of Jesus and affront to the Jewish leaders, Pilate had instructed the soldiers (see John 19:19a) to **put up above His head the charge against Him which read, "THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS."** Matthew recorded an abbreviated version of the full inscription, which read, "JESUS THE NAZARENE, THE KING OF THE JEWS," and was "written in Hebrew, Latin, and in Greek" (John 19:19b-20). Greek was the most nearly universal language in the empire at that time, Aramaic (closely related to Hebrew) was the language of Palestine, and Latin was the official language of Rome. By those three languages the governor made certain that virtually every person who passed by could read the inscription.

The chief priests insisted that the wording of the inscription be changed to "He said, 'I am King of the Jews.'" But Pilate refused to concede to them again, declaring with finality, "What I have written I have written" (John 19:21-22).

THE KNOWING WICKED

At that time two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and one on the left. (27:38)

The second group present at the crucifixion was simply composed of the **two robbers**, who might be described as the knowing wicked. **Robbers** translates *lēstēs*, which denotes a brigand who plunders as he steals. These men were not petty thieves or even common robbers, but cruel bandits who took pleasure in tormenting, abusing, and often killing their victims. It is possible they were associates of Barabbas, who had

probably been destined for the middle cross between them before he was released and Jesus took his place. They were not patriots who plundered the Romans to help secure the freedom of their country but hardened criminals whose only loyalty was to themselves. They were as great a threat to their own countrymen as to the Romans.

In all likelihood the **two robbers** were Jewish or at least lived in the Jewish society of Palestine. Consequently, they would have had some knowledge of Judaism and the Jewish Messiah. They likely would have known something about Jesus of Nazareth and the fact that He and His followers claimed He was the predicted Messiah. Therefore their rejection of Jesus was more serious than that of the soldiers.

Like the soldiers, they must have known about the groundless charges of the Jewish religious leaders and the numerous exonerations by Pilate. Yet they were not content to ignore Jesus but rather, as Matthew mentions later in his account (v. 44), cast insults at Him.

The specific, conscious reason for their hatred of Jesus is not clear. They apparently were not driven by religious concerns, and Jesus had certainly done them no harm. But their naturally wicked hearts somehow recognized His life as a righteous judgment on their sinfulness, and they joined the jeering crowds and the religious leaders in the mocking.

Like those of many people today, the lives of the two robbers revolved around material possessions and fleshly satisfaction. They had as little concern for religion, common morality, and justice as did the pagan Roman soldiers. Having a greater love for the things of the world than the things of God, they used their dying breath to vent their pent-up anger on the only one who could give them hope.

THE FICKLE WICKED

And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” (27:39-40)

Another group present at the crucifixion might be called the fickle wicked. Referred to by Matthew simply as **those passing by**, this crowd was probably composed largely of Jewish pilgrims who had come to

celebrate the Passover. Because Jerusalem could not house all the visitors, the majority of them had to camp outside the city or stay in nearby towns and villages. Consequently, there was much heavier traffic in and out of Jerusalem than usual.

This particular crowd of passers-by almost certainly included inhabitants of Judea and Galilee who had previously admired Christ and perhaps even followed Him for a while. They had heard Him preach and seen Him perform miracles and expose the malicious hypocrisy of the scribes, Pharisees, and other religious leaders. Some of them no doubt had participated in His triumphal entry a few days earlier and had joined in shouting hosannas to His name. They had seen Him cleanse the Temple of the money changers and sacrifice sellers and probably cheered Him for that while listening to His teaching.

It is also almost certain that these former admirers had earlier in the day called for Jesus' crucifixion and had followed the soldiers and Jesus to the Place of the Skull to witness the execution they had demanded. These were the fickle wicked who had a place for Jesus only when He satisfied their wants. They were fascinated by Him, knew who He claimed to be, and had witnessed countless demonstrations of power that verified that claim.

But although they were grateful for His miracles and awed by His preaching, they had no desire for Him to cleanse them of cherished sins or to give Him control of their lives. They had expected Him to be their kind of Messiah, a Messiah who would overthrow Rome and establish Israel as sovereign over the Gentile world. The fact that He had allowed Himself to be arrested, mocked, beaten, scourged, and tried before the pagan Pilate while offering no verbal, much less miraculous, defense was proof enough in their minds that He was not the Messiah whom they, and most of Israel, wanted and expected.

As they passed by beneath the cross they **were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads**. The verb behind **hurling abuse** is in the imperfect tense, indicating repeated, continuous defamation. To emphasize their disdain, they were also **wagging their heads** in mockery, **and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself!"** Just as David had predicted some thousand years earlier, those who looked on the Messiah sneered at Him, mocked Him, and wagged their heads, saying, in essence, "Commit yourself to the Lord; let

Him deliver him; let Him rescue him, because He delights in him” (Ps. 22:7-8).

You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days referred to the testimony of the false witnesses during the hearing before Caiaphas. Misusing a statement Jesus had made almost three years earlier referring to His death and resurrection (see John 2:19-21), those witnesses accused Him of claiming power to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple in three days (Matt. 26:61). “If you could really do such a miraculous thing as that,” His tormentors were saying, “surely You can **save yourself** from death now. **If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.**”

While Pilate was listening to the warning sent by his wife, the chief priests and elders had been inciting the multitude to demand the release of Barabbas and the crucifixion of Jesus, perhaps telling them of His claims to rebuild the Temple and to be the Son of God (see Matt. 27:19-20). Some of those people were now throwing the accusations in Jesus’ face as He was suspended on the cross. It was not enough that He was dying in agony. The wicked, mindless, heartless, and fickle crowd had changed in a few days from acclaiming Jesus as the Messiah to condemning Him as a blasphemer.

Many people today are like them. They may have been raised in the church, heard the truths of the gospel many times, and know that Jesus Christ claimed to be the Son of God. They may have been baptized, made a profession of faith, and attended church regularly for a while. But because Jesus does not fulfill their worldly, selfish expectations they lose interest in the things of God. They may be quite willing to have the church attack evils in society but are quite unwilling to be confronted with their own sin and need for repentance and forgiveness. In effect, they mock and sneer at Jesus as they turn their backs on His truth, His righteousness, and His lordship. The world is full of passers-by who once praised Jesus but now ridicule Him.

THE RELIGIOUS WICKED

In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking Him, and saying, “He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we shall believe in Him. He trusts in God; let Him

deliver Him now, if He takes pleasure in Him; for He said, ‘I am the Son of God.’ ” And the robbers also who had been crucified with Him were casting the same insult at Him. (27:41-44)

By far the most wicked of those who harassed Jesus at the cross were the religious leaders, in particular **the chief priests and the scribes and elders**. They were the primary instigators of the crucifixion, just as Jesus had predicted (Mark 8:31; Matt. 20:18; cf. Mark 14:43). The Pharisees had been Christ’s earliest and most persistent critics, and they had begun to plot His death many years before (Matt. 12:14) and were involved in His arrest (John 18:3). But apparently they played a somewhat secondary role in His trials and condemnation, not being mentioned again until the day following the crucifixion, when, with the chief priests, they asked Pilate to order the tomb sealed (Matt. 27:62-64).

The chief priests and the scribes and elders represented the entire religious leadership of Israel, including the reigning and the retired high priests and the Pharisees and Sadducees, all of whom resolutely opposed Jesus and sought His destruction. Although its hearings and condemnation of Jesus were illegal by its own standards as well as by Mosaic law, the supreme ruling council of Israel, the Sanhedrin, fully approved the ultimate and irreversible decision to put Jesus to death (26:59; Mark 15:1).

Those men were the religious authorities and the supposed spiritual leaders of Judaism. Many of them, such as the scribes, had devoted their lives to the study of God’s Word and the rabbinical traditions. Because Judaism was rightly seen as the only true religion, these men were held to be the most revered religious men not only in Israel but in the world. If any group of people should have known God’s truth and recognized and received the Messiah, it was those men. Yet they not only opposed and condemned Jesus themselves but enticed the people to support them in their wicked rejection of Him.

Perhaps because they felt above addressing Jesus directly as He hung like a criminal on the cross, the leaders spoke to the crowds as they **were mocking Him, and saying, “He saved others; He cannot save Himself.”** In saying that Jesus **saved others**, those men again acknowledged the reality of His miracles, which they had never been able to deny. They criticized Him for healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:2) and accused Him of receiving His miraculous power from Satan (Matt. 12:24),

but the reality of His miracle-working power was far too obvious and extensive to repudiate. But because He attacked their apostasy and they were convinced that God was on their side, the religious leaders were also convinced that Jesus was *not* of God and therefore could not now **save Himself**.

If **He is the King of Israel**, as He claims, they continued, **let Him now come down from the cross, and we shall believe Him**. That declaration, of course, was knowingly false and meant only as a taunt. They had not believed Jesus either for the truths He taught or for the miracles He performed. If He came **down from the cross**, they would not **believe Him**, any more than they believed in Him when He rose from the dead, just as Abraham had declared in Jesus' story about Lazarus (Luke 16:30-31). One more miracle, or a dozen more, would not have persuaded them to **believe Him**.

The only kind of power, natural or supernatural, with which those religious leaders were concerned was that which would serve their own expectations and interests. It would seem certain that, if Jesus had used His power to conquer Rome and establish Israel as the supreme nation on earth as most Jews expected, those leaders and most other Jews would have followed Him enthusiastically. But they would not have believed in Him as Lord and Savior but only given Him the superficial loyalty necessary to achieve their own ends—just as His nominal followers have done throughout history and continue to do today.

Jesus was not their kind of Messiah, and they had no desire to follow Him in the way He demanded. They did not want to be made righteous but successful. They did not want to be cleansed but selfishly satisfied. They did not want to give up anything for God but wanted from Him only the worldly, material advantages they cherished. When they realized Jesus offered no such favors, they had no more use for Him.

“He trusts in God,” they continued hypocritically; **“let Him deliver Him now, if He takes pleasure in Him.”** They did not believe Jesus truly trusted in God but that He was an ungodly fraud. And they obviously did not think God would **deliver Him** or that God took **pleasure in Him**, because they considered Jesus a blasphemer. Nor does it seem likely that they intentionally quoted Psalm 22:8, derisively applying it to Jesus. Even to their perverse minds that would have been an irreverent treatment of Scripture. It was rather that they unwittingly fulfilled

Scripture as they mocked Jesus, just as Judas, Caiaphas, Pilate, and many others had unwittingly fulfilled it.

Next they mocked Jesus' person, throwing in His face the many claims He had made, but which they had never believed, to being **the Son of God**. To their unbelieving and ungodly minds, the fact that Jesus either could not or would not save Himself was ultimate proof that He was not the Messiah and God's Son. It was inconceivable to them that the Messiah would permit such mistreatment of Himself or that God would permit such mistreatment of His Son. They were utterly blind to what Scripture taught about the Messiah's suffering and atoning death, and they took Jesus' crucifixion to be final and irrefutable proof that His claims were spurious.

Those men had much to do with religion but nothing to do with God. But because they professed great knowledge of Him and presumed to be pleasing to Him, they were the guiltiest of those who participated in Jesus' death (cf. John 19:11). Although they claimed to stand in Moses' seat, they contradicted what Moses taught, and although they claimed to speak for God, they were in fact His enemies and children of Satan (John 8:44).

One day the Lord "will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him" (Zech. 12:10). In the crucifixion the religious leaders represented all Israelites who at that time rejected their Messiah and "pierced" Him. Everyone who rejects Christ shares in the guilt of His crucifixion and of putting Him to open shame, even more so if, like those religious leaders, a person has had special privileges from God and exposure to His truth (Heb. 6:4-6).

Matthew again mentions (see v. 38) the two **robbers . . . who had been crucified with Him**. As already noted, they took the lead of the chief priests, scribes, and elders in vilifying Jesus, **casting the same insult at Him**.

However, one of them would have a change of heart and come to saving faith. Through the Holy Spirit he came to see Jesus for who He really is and pleaded in his dying moments: "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom," to which the Savior graciously replied, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:42-43).

Many others who had mocked Christ at the cross later came to trust Him as Savior and Lord. After Peter's Spirit-empowered message at Pentecost, the hearers "were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?' And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.' . . . So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:37-38, 41).

By the working of God's sovereign grace, even some of the scoffing, condemning religious leaders came to salvation during the early days of the church, including "a great many of the priests" (Acts 6:7).

God's Miraculous
Commentary 21
on the Cross
(27:45-53)

Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” And some of those who were standing there, when they heard it, began saying, “This man is calling for Elijah.” And immediately one of them ran, and taking a sponge, he filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink. But the rest of them said, “Let us see whether Elijah will come to save Him.” And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, and the earth shook; and the rocks were split, and the tombs were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. (27:45-53)

Some years ago as I was driving to a meeting on Good Friday morning, I heard a radio program on which the speaker was making an attempt to acknowledge it as a very special day. It was a day, he said, when a certain man was prosecuted for crimes he did not commit and, although innocent, was sentenced to death. The speaker was of course talking about the crucifixion of Christ. He commented on the inspiration of that special Person and of all others like Him who stand unflinchingly for what they believe in, disregarding the consequences.

But as well-meaning as that speaker may have been, he utterly missed the true significance of Jesus' death. Like most people in Western society, he knew many of the bare facts of the crucifixion but had no grasp

of its meaning apart from the obvious travesty of human justice. And from what was said on that program, Jesus' resurrection was considered to be more myth and legend than history. No divine purpose, activity, or accomplishment were so much as hinted at.

As noted in a previous chapter, by the time of Christ the Romans had crucified some 30,000 men in Palestine alone. It seems probable that some of whose men were also innocent of the charges against them. The majority of them were executed for insurrection and doubtlessly were sincere patriots who hoped to free their people from oppression. They died nobly for a cause they believed in. Why, then, we may ask, does history remember the name of only one of those men?

The answer is clear almost from the opening words of Scripture. The sin of Adam and Eve not only caused their own fall and that of all their descendants but also brought corruption of the entire earth. It was for that reason Paul declared that the physical world groans like a woman in childbirth, longing to be restored to its God-designed perfection (Rom. 8:19-22).

Immediately after the Fall, God gave the first veiled promise of deliverance from the sin that had cursed mankind and the rest of the world. He told Satan, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel" (Gen. 3:15). Because men, not women, carry the seed of procreation, the seed of Eve was a prediction of the virgin birth of Christ, who would have no human father and who would be bruised temporarily "on the heel" by Satan but would bruise Satan permanently "on the head."

When God provided the ram as a substitute for Isaac, whom He had ordered his father, Abraham, to sacrifice (Gen. 22:1-14), He provided a beautiful picture of the sacrificial offering of His own Son, Jesus Christ—except that for Him no substitute was or could be provided. And through the animal sacrifices prescribed in the law of Moses, God portrayed to His people the necessity of shedding blood for the remission of sin. But the blood of those animals had no power to remove the slightest sin, and the sacrifices had to be repeated continuously throughout the history of Israel. Yet imperfect as they were, they nevertheless pictured the true, sufficient, and once-for-all sacrifice for sins that Christ's blood shed on the cross

would provide. Only one of the 30,000 crucified died for the sins of the world!

Isaiah graphically predicted that the coming Messiah would be “pierced through for our transgressions, . . . crushed for our iniquities,” carrying in His own body the sins of all fallen mankind (Isa. 53:5). Zechariah predicted that one day God’s chosen people will turn as a nation to the One whom they had pierced, “and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son” (Zech. 12:10).

In the New Testament Paul explains that on the cross Christ was made a curse for us who deserve to be cursed (Gal. 3:13). Peter declares that He “died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit” (1 Pet. 3:18; cf. Heb. 9:28), and John speaks of Christ as the supreme sacrificial “Lamb who has been slain” (Rev. 13:8).

But nowhere in Scripture is the meaning of the cross delineated more powerfully than in Matthew 27:45-53, which records six miracles that form Almighty God’s own commentary on the meaning of the cross.

SUPERNATURAL DARKNESS

Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour. (27:45)

When Jesus was born, the night sky around Bethlehem was filled with supernatural light as “the glory of the Lord shone around” the shepherds in the field (Luke 2:9). John spoke of Jesus as “the light of men” and “the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man” (John 1:4, 9). Jesus spoke of Himself as “the light of the world” (John 8:12; cf. 12:35-36).

But the first miraculous sign that accompanied Jesus’ death was not glorious light but dread darkness. **From the sixth hour** (noon), when the sun is at its zenith, supernatural **darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour** (3:00 p.m.). Jesus’ crucifixion had begun at the third hour, or 9:00 A. M. (Mark 15:25), and when the darkness began He had been on the cross for three hours.

During those first three hours, the silence was broken by Jesus only three times. The first was by His saying, “Father, forgive them; for they do

not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34), and a short while later He said to the penitent thief beside Him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise” (23:43). Shortly after that He said to His mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” and to John, “Behold your mother!” (John 19:26-27).

At the beginning of the second three hours the great **darkness fell upon all the land**. The Greek *gē* (**land**) can also be translated *earth*, indicating the entire world. It is therefore not possible from the text to determine how widespread the darkness was. God was equally able, of course, to make the darkness local or universal. Shortly before the Exodus, He caused a great darkness to cover the land of Egypt (Ex. 10:14-15), and some forty years later He caused the sun to “stand still,” probably by temporarily stopping the rotation of the earth (Josh. 10:12-13; cf. 2 Kings 20:9-11).

Several interesting reports in extrabiblical literature suggest that the darkness at Jesus’ crucifixion was worldwide. The early church Father Origen (*Against Celsus*, 2.33) reported a statement by a Roman historian who mentioned such a darkness. Another church Father, Tertullian, wrote to some pagan acquaintances about an unusual darkness on that day, “which wonder is related in your own annals and preserved in your own archives to this day.” There was also a supposed report from Pilate to Emperor Tiberius that assumed the emperor’s knowledge of a certain widespread darkness, even mentioning that it was from twelve to three in the afternoon.

To describe this darkness Luke used the word *ekleipō*, which has the literal meaning of failing, or ceasing to exist, and is the term from which *eclipse* is derived. But a normal astronomical eclipse would have been impossible during the crucifixion, because the sun and moon were far apart on that day. Regardless of its extent, therefore, the darkening of the sun was by the supernatural intervention of God. During that three-hour period, Luke explains, the sun was obscured (23:45).

The purpose for the darkness is not explained in the gospels or elsewhere in Scripture, but according to the *Babylonian Talmud* many rabbis had long taught that darkening of the sun was a judgment of God on the world for an unusually heinous sin. If, indeed, that was God’s intention at the crucifixion, He presented a gigantic object lesson to the world regarding the greatest sin ever committed by fallen mankind.

Some interpreters have suggested the darkness was a means of God's casting a great veil over the sufferings of Christ, and others that it was an act of divine fatherly sympathy given to cover the nakedness and dishonoring of His Son.

But in light of many scriptural teachings and events, it would seem that the crucifixion darkness was indeed a mark of divine judgment. In speaking of Assyria's being used by God to punish Israel, Isaiah spoke of "darkness and distress" that would cover the land, when "even the light is darkened by its clouds" (Isa. 5:30). In describing the day of the Lord, the same prophet declared that "the stars of heaven and their constellations will not flash forth their light" and that "the sun will be dark when it rises, and the moon will not shed its light. Thus I will punish the world for its evil," God said, "and the wicked for their iniquity" (13:10-11).

Also speaking of the day of the Lord, the prophet Joel wrote of "a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness" (Joel 2:2). Amos asked rhetorically, "Will not the day of the Lord be darkness instead of light, even gloom with no brightness in it?" (Amos 5:20). Zephaniah wrote, "Listen, the day of the Lord! In it the warrior cries out bitterly. A day of wrath is that day, a day of trouble and distress, a day of destruction and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness" (Zeph. 1:14-15).

In those Old Testament passages and many others the judgment of God is directly associated with darkness, and similar association is found in the New Testament. Peter declares that God cast the rebellious angels "into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment" (2 Pet. 2:4). In much the same words, Jude speaks of those angels being "kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day" (Jude 6). Jesus Himself frequently spoke of divine judgment in terms of "outer darkness," where "there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30).

The cross was a place of immense divine judgment, where the sins of the world were poured out vicariously on the sinless, perfect Son. It was therefore appropriate that great supernatural darkness express God's reaction to sin in that act of judgment.

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” And some of those who were standing there, when they heard it, began saying, “This man is calling for Elijah.” And immediately one of them ran, and taking a sponge, he filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink. But the rest of them said, “Let us see whether Elijah will come to save Him.” (27:46-49)

A second miracle occurred at **about the ninth hour**, or three o'clock in the afternoon, through an inexplicable event that might be called sovereign departure, as somehow God was separated from God.

At that time **Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?”** As Matthew explains, the Hebrew **Eli** (Mark uses the Aramaic form, “Eloi,” 15:34) means, **My God**, and **lama sabachthani** means, **Why hast Thou forsaken Me?**

Because Jesus was quoting the well-known Psalm 22, there could have been little doubt in the minds **of those who were standing there** as to what Jesus was saying. They had been taunting Him with His claim to be God's Son (v. 43), and an appeal for divine help would have been expected. Their saying, **“This man is calling for Elijah,”** was not conjecture about what He said but was simply an extension of their cruel, cynical mockery.

In this unique and strange miracle, Jesus was crying out in anguish because of the separation He now experienced from His heavenly Father for the first and only time in all of eternity. It is the only time of which we have record that Jesus did not address God as Father. Because the Son had taken sin upon Himself, the Father turned His back. That mystery is so great and imponderable that it is not surprising that Martin Luther is said to have gone into seclusion for a long time trying to understand it and came away as confused as when he began. In some way and by some means, in the secrets of divine sovereignty and omnipotence, the God-Man was separated from God for a brief time at Calvary, as the furious wrath of the Father was poured out on the sinless Son, who in matchless grace became sin for those who believe in Him.

Habakkuk declared of God, “Thine eyes are too pure to approve evil, and Thou canst not look on wickedness with favor” (Hab. 1:13). God

turned His back when Jesus was on the cross because He could not look upon sin, even—or perhaps especially—in His own Son. Just as Jesus loudly lamented, **God** the Father had indeed **forsaken** Him.

Jesus did not die as a martyr to a righteous cause or simply as an innocent man wrongly accused and condemned. Nor, as some suggest, did He die as a heroic gesture against man's inhumanity to man. The Father could have looked favorably on such selfless deaths as those. But because Jesus died as a substitute sacrifice for the sins of the world, the righteous heavenly Father had to judge Him fully according to that sin.

The Father forsook the Son because the Son took upon Himself "our transgressions, . . . our iniquities" (Isa. 53:5). Jesus "was delivered up because of our transgression" (Rom. 4:25) and "died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3). He "who knew no sin [became] sin on our behalf" (2 Cor. 5:21) and became "a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross" (1 Pet. 2:24), "died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust" (1 Pet. 3:18), and became "the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

Jesus Christ not only bore man's sin but actually *became* sin on man's behalf, in order that those who believe in Him might be saved from the penalty of their sin. Jesus came to teach men perfectly about God and to be a perfect example of God's holiness and righteousness. But, as He Himself declared, the supreme reason for His coming to earth was not to teach or to be an example but "to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

When Christ was **forsaken** by the Father, their separation was not one of nature, essence, or substance. Christ did not in any sense or degree cease to exist as God or as a member of the Trinity. He did not cease to be the Son, any more than a child who sins severely against his human father ceases to be his child. But Jesus did for a while cease to know the intimacy of fellowship with His heavenly Father, just as a disobedient child ceases for a while to have intimate, normal, loving fellowship with his human father.

By the incarnation itself there already had been a partial separation. Because Jesus had been separated from His divine glory and from face-to-face communication with the Father, refusing to hold on to those divine privileges for His own sake (Phil 2:6), He prayed to the Father in the presence of His disciples, "Glorify Thou Me together with

Thyself, Father, with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was” (John 17:5). At the cross His separation from the Father became immeasurably more profound than the humbling incarnation during the thirty-three years of His earthly life.

As already mentioned, the mystery of that separation is far too deep even for the most mature believer to fathom. But God has revealed the basic truth of it for us to accept and to understand to the limit of our ability under the illumination of His Spirit. And nowhere in Scripture can we behold the reality of Jesus’ sacrificial death and the anguish of His separation from His Father more clearly and penetratingly than in His suffering on the cross because of sin. In the midst of being willingly engulfed in our sins and the sins of all men of all time, He writhed in anguish not from the lacerations on His back or the thorns that still pierced His head or the nails that held Him to the cross but from the incomparably painful loss of fellowship with His heavenly Father that His becoming sin for us had brought.

Soon after He cried out to God about being forsaken, “Jesus, knowing that all things had already been accomplished, in order that the Scriptures might be fulfilled, said, ‘I am thirsty’” (John 19:28). As John then makes clear (v. 29), it was at that time that **immediately one of them ran, and taking a sponge, he filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink.**

The **one** who **ran** to help Jesus was probably one of the Roman military guards, and by **taking a sponge** and filling **it with sour wine**, he hoped temporarily to slake Jesus’ thirst. The **sour wine** was a cheap wine highly diluted with water that was a common drink for laborers and soldiers. Because it had a high water and low alcohol content, it was especially helpful in quenching thirst. John gives the added detail that the **reed** was a hyssop branch (John 19:29), which would not have been longer than eighteen inches. In order for such a short branch to reach Jesus’ lips, the horizontal beam of the cross would have had to be rather low to the ground.

Offering the **drink** to Jesus was perhaps an act of mercy, but it was minimal in its effect and served only to prolong the torture before death brought relief. **But the rest** of those standing near the cross used that gesture of kindness as another opportunity to carry their mockery of the

Lord still further, saying, “**Let us see whether Elijah will come to save Him.**”

It seems incredible that even the pitch darkness of midday did not alarm the wicked crowd. They were so bent on scorning Jesus that even such a momentous phenomenon as the blocking out of the sun did not deter them. Being aware of the many Old Testament associations of unnatural darkness with judgment, it would seem they would at least briefly have considered the possibility that divine judgment was occurring at that very moment. But the single thought now on their minds was to make Jesus’ death painful and humiliating. They had no comprehension of the amazing alienation of the Son from the Father.

SELF-GIVING DEATH

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit.
(27:50)

A third miracle of the cross was Christ’s self-giving death, the Son’s willing sacrifice of Himself for the sins of the world in obedience to His Father’s will.

The fact that **Jesus cried out again with a loud voice** (cf. v. 46; Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46) demonstrated considerable physical strength, even after the beatings, scourging, crown of thorns, nail wounds, and hanging in agony for several hours. Jesus did not gradually fade away, His life ebbing little by little until gone. Even now He made it evident that He was not at the point of utter exhaustion and that He had the resources to stay alive if He so desired.

The last words the Lord **cried out** from the cross were first, “It is finished” (John 19:30), indicating that the work His Father had sent Him to accomplish was complete. Then, once again addressing God as His Father, He said, “Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit” (Luke 23:46).

Aphiēmi (**yielded up**) has the basic meaning of letting go or sending away, indicating an act of volition. Jesus’ life was not taken from Him by men, but rather He surrendered **His spirit** by the conscious act of His own sovereign will. As He had explained to the Twelve, no one could or would take His life from Him. “I lay it down on My own initiative,” He

said. “I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again” (John 10:18).

As just noted, Jesus’ ability to speak from the cross in a loud voice indicated a reserve of energy unheard of for a person in His physical condition. Nevertheless, even in light of His severe bodily condition, Jesus died much sooner than normal. Therefore when Joseph of Arimathea informed Pilate of Jesus’ death and asked for His body, the governor was surprised and asked a centurion to give verification (Mark 15:43-45).

Both of those facts attest to Jesus’ voluntary surrendering of **His spirit**. He did not take His own life, but He willingly gave it up to those who sought to take it and who otherwise could not have succeeded.

On the cross the Father judged the sin of the world that the Son took upon Himself, and the Son, who divinely controls living and dying, willingly surrendered His life as penalty for that sin.

SANCTUARY DEVASTATION

And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, (27:51a)

The fourth miracle that occurred during the crucifixion was the divine devastation of the sanctuary, as **the veil of the temple was torn in two**.

Naos (temple) does not refer to the Temple as a whole but to the inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, where God dwelt in His symbolic presence. A huge woven **veil** separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple, and Josephus reports that this massive curtain was predominantly blue and was ornately decorated.

Once a year the high priest was allowed to pass through the veil on the Day of Atonement to sprinkle blood on the altar for the sins of the people, and that only for a brief period of time. Because, like God’s presence in the Holy of Holies, even that special sacrifice was only symbolic. The ritual had to be repeated every year, anticipating the one, true sacrifice for sins that the Son of God Himself one day would offer.

When Christ gave up His spirit, that once-for-all sacrifice was completed and the need for a **veil** no longer existed. By coming to the Son, any man could now come to God directly, without need of priest, sacrifice,

or ritual. Consequently, **the veil was torn in two from top to bottom** by God's miraculous act, because the barrier of sin was forever removed for those who put their trust in the Son as Lord and Savior.

By rending the Temple veil, God was saying, in effect, "In the death of My Son, Jesus Christ, there is total access into My holy presence. He has paid the full price of sin for everyone who trusts in Him, and I now throw open My holy presence to all who will come in His name." The writer of Hebrews admonished, "Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

The Father's dramatic tearing of the veil was made while the Temple was filled with worshipers, which included not only countless priests but also many thousands of pilgrims who were at that very moment celebrating the Passover sacrifice. Although the Temple was not destroyed until some forty years later, in A.D. 70, the sacrificial system of Israel and its attendant priesthood ceased to have even symbolic value when the veil was torn in two and the Holy of Holies was exposed. The ceremonies and priestly functions continued until the Temple was destroyed, but their divine significance ended when Christ died, as the Old Covenant was abrogated and the New inaugurated.

SOIL DISTURBANCE

and the earth shook; and the rocks were split, (51a)

A fifth miracle that occurred during the crucifixion was a supernaturally caused earthquake. Immediately after Jesus died and the Temple veil was torn in two, **the earth shook; and the rocks were split.** Making still another statement about His Son to the world, and especially to His chosen people, the Father brought a devastating earthquake to Jerusalem and the surrounding area.

Again the Old Testament gives insight into the significance of the occurrence. When God appeared to Moses on Mt. Sinai, "the whole mountain quaked violently" (Ex. 19:18), and when He appeared to Elijah on a mountain, "a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the Lord, . . . and after the wind an earthquake" (1 Kings 19:11). David sang of the earth's shaking and

trembling when the Lord became angry (2 Sam. 22:8; Ps. 18:7; cf. 77:18). Isaiah spoke of the Lord's punishing His people through "thunder and earthquake and loud noise" (Isa. 29:6), and Jeremiah of His venting His wrath on the nations of the earth by causing it to quake (Jer. 10:10; cf. Nah. 1:5). The book of Revelation tells of God's causing the stars to fall to earth and of mountains and islands being "moved out of their places" during the final judgment (6:13-14).

In the original creation there were no earthquakes, because the earth, like all else that God made, was perfect. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve lived in a perfect environment on earth in the very presence of God. But when they sinned, not only were they cursed and separated from God but the earth they inhabited was cursed as well. Since that time, both literally and figuratively, the earth has been reeling under the destructive forces both of Satan's evil corruption and of God's divine judgment. One day there will be a new heaven and a new earth, but until that time when the usurper will be forever banished to the lake of fire and the true Sovereign, Jesus Christ, reigns in His kingdom, the earth will continue to suffer corruption and destruction.

Speaking of God's judgment on unbelievers, the writer of Hebrews declares, "His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven.' And this expression, 'Yet once more,' denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, in order that those things which cannot be shaken may remain" (Heb. 12:26-27).

At the cross Jesus earned the right to take the title deed to the earth from the hand of His Father (Rev. 5:9-10). Therefore when God shook the earth at the death of His Son, He gave the world a foretaste of what He will do when one day He shakes the earth in judgment at the coming of the King of kings. Because Jesus became "obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross," His heavenly Father "highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:8-11).

SUBDUING DEATH

and the tombs were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. (27:52-53)

The sixth miracle at the crucifixion was closely related to the previous one, as the supernatural earthquake not only gave the world a foretaste of divine judgment but also caused many **tombs** to be **opened**.

The significant miracle of that event, however, was not the mere opening of tombs, as could occur during any earthquake. The great miracle was that **many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised**. After the veil of the Temple was torn in two and the earth around Jerusalem was violently shaken, the Lord selectively **raised** the **bodies** of certain believers who had died.

Matthew points out that **many**, but not all, **bodies of the saints** who had died **were resurrected**, making clear that this **resurrection** was divinely restricted to a limited number of believers. They had trusted in God during the time before and under the Old Covenant, and some of those bodies may have been in their graves many hundreds of years. When Jesus died, their spirits came from the abode of righteous spirits and were joined with their glorified bodies that came out of the graves. This was full and final resurrection and glorification, making this miracle another foretaste of God's sovereign work during the end times, when "all the dead in Christ shall rise" (1 Thess. 4:16).

It is important to note that the phrase **and coming out of the tombs** should be followed by a period, indicating the close of the sentence. **After His resurrection** begins a new sentence and introduces a distinct truth, namely, that those select resurrected saints then **entered the holy city and appeared to many**.

Those saints did not appear in Jerusalem until after the Lord's own resurrection, because He was divinely appointed to be "the first fruits of those who are asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20). And just as Christ Himself appeared after His resurrection only to those who already believed in Him, it would also seem that the **many** to whom the resurrected saints appeared were all believers. We are not told what they said to their brethren in **the holy city**, but their appearance in bodily form not only testified to Christ's

resurrection but also to God's promise to raise all those who put their trust in Christ (1 Cor. 15:22, 51-53).

Through those six miracles the Father was saying that the cross is the only hope for eternal life. When one's sin is carried away by Christ's atoning death, the wrath of God is appeased for that believer, and he is delivered from the death and condemnation that the Lord endured on his behalf. For those who believe in the Son, access to God is open wide, and they are assured of living in His eternal and indestructible kingdom in eternal and indestructible bodies.

Responses
to the Death 22
of Christ
(27:54-56)

Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!” And many women were there looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him, among whom was Mary Magdalene, along with Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. (27:54-56)

This brief passage presents two responses to the death of Christ, both of them positive. The first was by the centurion and his fellow soldiers who stood at the foot of cross, and the second was by the women standing some distance away. Another response at this same time (by the unbelieving crowd) is recorded by Luke, and a fourth (by the fearful disciples) is implied in all four gospels.

Those responses are representative of the responses men have made to God throughout history, and they have a powerful and practical application even for our own time.

SAVING FAITH

Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!” (27:54)

As the title might suggest, a **centurion** (from the Latin word for 100) was a military officer in charge of 100 men and was therefore of

significant rank. This particular officer had been given the responsibility of supervising the three crucifixions. It is likely that he and the other soldiers **who were with him keeping guard over Jesus** had been in the Praetorium when He was first brought there by the Jewish leaders. They may have been with the cohort of Roman soldiers who accompanied the chief priests and elders to the Garden of Gethsemane to arrest Jesus. They doubtlessly had heard the charges brought against Him by those leaders and had also heard Pilate's repeated declaration of Jesus' innocence of any crime against Rome. They may even have overheard the conversation between Pilate and Jesus about His being King of the Jews (John 18:33-37).

Those soldiers probably participated in Jesus' scourging, in placing the crown of thorns on His head, in taunting Him, and in beating Him with the mock scepter. On Golgotha they had nailed Him to the cross, indifferently gambled for His garments, and jeered at Him while He hung there in agony.

If those men were religious at all, they were idolaters. And if they were from the garrison at Pilate's headquarters in Caesarea they probably had little knowledge of Judaism and perhaps no previous knowledge at all about Jesus. If they knew anything of Jesus' teachings or activities it was by hearsay. They were at the cross simply because it was their duty to make certain the execution was carried out properly and without interference.

Because Pilate had pronounced Jesus innocent, they knew He was no threat to Rome. But because the governor finally consented to His crucifixion, they had no choice but to carry out the command. To those men Jesus was no more than a bizarre figure who apparently made a foolish and utterly harmless claim to be some sort of religious king. It was obvious when they first saw Jesus that He posed no military or political threat to Rome, and it must have seemed strange to them that the Jewish leaders took Him so seriously. When He was brought before Pilate, He had already been beaten and spit upon, and He looked anything but regal or dangerous. He neither looked nor talked like the many insurrectionists the soldiers had seen and probably helped execute. He not only had no band of fighting men to come to His defense but had no visible followers at all. And because He did not even offer any self-defense, the guards may have thought Him mentally deranged. When He eventually spoke to Pilate, He

claimed to rule a kingdom that was not of this world, sounding to them like He was completely out of touch with reality.

The hatred of Jesus by the Jewish leaders and the multitude was obvious enough to the soldiers, but the reason for it was anything but obvious. They had heard the screams of “Crucify, crucify,” but could hardly have had any idea what was behind the intense bitterness. His supposed claim to be the Son of God seemed just as ludicrous and harmless as His claim to be a king.

But as the fourth hour of His crucifixion began, several things happened to change the soldiers’ attitude, and **when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening**, the soldiers **became very frightened**.

The first thing to unnerve them would have been the sudden darkness. They would not have been aware of the tearing of the Temple veil and probably not the opening of the graves. But they could not escape noticing the earthquake with its violent splitting of rocks, and that was a terrifying experience even for hardened legionnaires. *Phobeō* (**very frightened**) is the term from which we get *phobia* and refers to sheer terror, the absolute panic that causes rapid heartbeat, profuse sweating, and extreme anxiety. It is the verb form of the word used by Matthew to describe the disciples’ response to seeing Jesus walk on the water, thinking He was a ghost (14:26). It is also the word used to describe the reaction of Peter, James, and John when they glimpsed Jesus’ divine glory and heard the Father speak directly to them on the Mount of Transfiguration (17:6).

The context and circumstances of the passage clearly indicate, however, that the centurion and his men were **frightened** of much more than the darkness and earthquake. They sensed that those awesome natural phenomena had a supernatural origin, and their primary fear was not of those events themselves but of the divine power behind them. Their emotional fright soon turned to spiritual, reverential awe, as testified by the fact that they did not run for their lives or try to find a place of safety but rather declared, **“Truly this was the Son of God!”**

Mark (15:39) tells us that it was the centurion who actually spoke the words, but Matthew makes clear that he spoke for his men as well. All of them suddenly realized that Jesus was not deluded or deranged but was indeed who the Jews had accused Him of claiming to be. As already noted,

they had heard their own commander repeatedly affirm Jesus' innocence, and they may have heard of the warning by Pilate's wife, who declared Jesus not only to be innocent but righteous (Matt. 27:19). More than that, the few words Jesus spoke during His appearances before Pilate and from the cross must have penetrated their pagan, hardened minds. They now knew they stood in the presence of One somehow related to deity.

The soldiers' fear gives witness to their awareness of sin, and their reverential awe gives witness to their being confronted by God's holiness and righteousness. And just as Isaiah in his Temple vision (Isa. 6), they suddenly realized they stood under God's judgment and condemnation.

And I believe the soldiers' confession of Jesus' deity gives witness to the possibility of their salvation. Both their fear and their confession were spiritual responses to Christ. From Luke we learn that the centurion, and presumably the other soldiers as well, not only confessed Jesus' divinity but "began praising God" (23:47).

The deep conviction of the men is seen in their introducing the confession with **truly**. They proclaimed without reservation or qualification that the Man at whose feet they now stood was indeed **the Son of God**.

Some scholars maintain that, because of the Greek construction of the text and because of the soldiers' pagan background, their statement should be rendered, "Truly this was *a* son of God," as seen in some modern versions. The linguistic argument is based on what is called an anarthrous construction, meaning the Greek noun does not have a definite article ("the"). Such is the case in the text of Matthew 27:54, where there is no Greek article (**the**) before **Son**. Ordinarily in such constructions the indefinite article ("a") is understood. But it is clear from secular Greek literature, as well as from many other passages in the New Testament, that the anarthrous construction does not always demand the indefinite article.

When Caiaphas commanded Jesus, "I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God" (Matt. 26:63), he used the definite article (Greek *ho*) before "Son." By saying, "I adjure You by the living God," the high priest had already made obvious that he was talking about the true, biblical God of the Jews, and it goes without saying that their Messiah could only be *that* God's Son, not the son of any other god. He was accusing Jesus of claiming to be the Son of Yahweh, the creator, covenant God of Israel revealed in the Old Testament.

The same accusation was made by the Jews before Pilate, except without the definite article. “We have a law,” they said, “and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God” (John 19:7). If Jesus had been claiming to be the Son of any but the true God, the Jews would have considered Him a heretic but not a blasphemer. Not only that, but the Jews believed their God had but one divine Son. It is completely untenable, therefore, to take the Greek phrase *huios theou* in John 19:7 to mean anything but “*the* Son of God,” despite the fact that it does not contain the definite article.

The same Greek phrase (without the definite article) was used by the angel who announced to Mary that the child born to her would “be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). And after Jesus walked on the water, a similar phrase (*theou huios*), also without the definite article, was used by the disciples when they confessed before Jesus, “You are certainly God’s Son” (Matt. 14:33). In both of those anarthrous constructions the idea of *the* Son, rather than *a* Son, is indisputable.

It was doubtlessly the very words that the Jewish leaders used to accuse Jesus before Pilate (“He made Himself out to be *the Son of God*”) that the centurion picked up and used himself. The great difference was that he and his fellow soldiers now believed those words to be true. The declaration “**Truly this was the Son of God!**” became for them a profession of faith in Christ. I firmly believe with the noted commentator R. C. H. Lenski that “this Gentile, called Longinus in tradition, came to faith beneath the dead Savior’s cross” (*The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961], p. 1133).

The gracious and profound words of Jesus that they heard, His humble, self-giving demeanor, and His complete lack of anger or vindictiveness all worked in the hearts of the soldiers. But the only way they could have known with such certainty that Jesus was **truly** God’s **Son** was through the illumination and conviction of the Holy Spirit.

Even after Peter had spent several years under Jesus’ instruction and had witnessed hundreds and perhaps thousands of divinity-affirming miracles, Jesus made clear to him that it was God the Father, not Peter’s human wisdom and understanding, that inspired his confession that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God (Matt. 16:16-17). Paul assured the Corinthians that “no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3).

Only God's Spirit could have inspired the confession of the centurion and his men, and only His Spirit could have inspired them to praise God (Luke 23:47). The gospel writers, not to mention the Holy Spirit who inspired them, would not have left the soldiers' meaning open to question. Had the soldiers had in mind *a* son of some unnamed pagan deity, Matthew and the other writers would have made that clear. When Scripture speaks of God in the singular it always refers to the true God, unless the context specifically indicates otherwise. Luke did not speak of the soldiers' praising their own god or gods, that is, some pagan deity, but rather "praising God," which could mean only the true God. However limited their theological understanding may have been at that time, those men **truly** confessed the true **Son** of the true **God**.

The faith of the soldiers is of great significance, and was especially so in the early church. Their testimony was, as it were, Jesus' own final testimony from the cross. Although given after He had died, that testimony dramatically proclaimed that His grace extends to every sinner, even to those who put him to death. During the very process of His crucifixion, Jesus Christ became the object of the faith of His crucifiers!

His prayer "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34) did not go unanswered. First, one of the thieves who had been jeering Christ turned to faith in Him. Now, after He had breathed His last, the men who had beaten, taunted, and crucified Christ turned to Him and were forgiven and saved. Jesus had declared, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself" (John 12:32). The very men who in unbelief and derision had literally lifted Him from the earth had indeed been drawn to Him in repentance and faith.

A contrasting response to that of the soldiers is seen in that of the crowd of observers around the cross. "And all the multitudes who came together for this spectacle, when they observed what had happened, began to return, beating their breasts" (Luke 23:48).

Like the soldiers, those people were alarmed about the darkness and the earthquake. And also like the soldiers, they realized that those terrifying phenomena were not caused naturally. Many of them doubtlessly had heard Jesus preach and seen Him perform miracles. Perhaps some of them had themselves been healed by Him. These people knew much better than the soldiers what Jesus stood for and who He claimed to be. They knew how He had all but banished disease from Palestine and had even

raised people from the dead. They remembered that, with the rest of the multitude a few days earlier, they had hailed Jesus as the Messiah. They had heard Jesus' gracious words from the cross and could not have helped suspecting that God's hand was in the awesome events they were now observing.

But as they "began to return, beating their breasts" in fear and remorse, they showed no sign of repentance. They were perhaps overwhelmed by a sense of guilt and foreboding about their participation in the execution of an innocent man. Like Judas, they may have wished sincerely that they could somehow undo the terrible wrong they had done. They probably realized that God was expressing disfavor through the darkness and earthquake and that they were the objects of that disfavor. But they made no confession, either of their sin or of Christ's lordship. They felt sorry for Him, but they did not try to help Him. They knew they were under His judgment, but they did not seek His mercy. They neither gave Christ help nor sought help from Him, and instead of turning to Him like the soldiers, they turned away.

It is probable that many people in this crowd eventually returned to Him in faith. A few weeks later, upon hearing Peter's indictment that "God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified," many of his hearers "were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?'" After he explained the way of salvation, many who had been in the crowd beneath the cross became numbered among the 3,000 souls converted at Pentecost (Acts 2:36-41).

But the convictions of most of those who turned away from Jesus at the cross remained shallow, and the seed of the gospel was never able to take root and grow into saving faith. Unlike those whom Paul commended in Corinth, most of those who beat their breasts at Golgotha did not have the sorrow "that is according to the will of God [and that] produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation." They evidently had only "the sorrow of the world [that] produces death" (2 Cor. 7:10).

SYMPATHETIC LOYALTY

And many women were there looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him, among whom was

Mary Magdalene, along with Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. (27:55-56)

The reaction of the second group Matthew mentions was especially beautiful. Unlike the soldiers, who went from unbelief to belief, the **many women who were there** were already believers. Their response to the crucifixion could be described as sympathetic loyalty.

From John's account we know that some of the **women**, as well as John, had earlier been at the foot of the cross (John 19:25-27). But perhaps because they could not bear to observe the suffering of their Lord so closely, those women were now **looking on from a distance**. They were not afraid of the soldiers or the Jewish leaders and had no concern for their own safety or welfare. They were not ashamed of being identified with Jesus. They withdrew because they were devastated at the suffering and death of the one they had loved so dearly. Their grief was deep and their hopes seemed shattered, but their courage was undaunted.

Sympathetic loyalty is one of most beautiful and distinguishing characteristics of godly women, generally being more evident in them than in godly men. A spiritual woman has the capacity for incredible loyalty in the face of ridicule and danger. Except for John, the rest of the disciples had fled in fear. Even Peter, who mustered enough courage to follow Jesus as far as the house of Caiaphas, was not to be found at the cross.

The great Bible expositor G. Campbell Morgan described those women as "hopeless, disappointed, bereaved, heartbroken; but the love He had created in those hearts for Himself could not be quenched, even by His dying; could not be overcome, even though they were disappointed; could not be extinguished, even though the light of hope had gone out, and over the sea of their sorrow there was no sighing wind that told of the dawn" (*The Gospel According to Matthew* [Old Tappan, N. J.: Revell, 1929], p. 318).

We do not know the number of women who were there, but Matthew's speaking of them as **many** perhaps would suggest up to a dozen. However many they were, these women were among those **who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him**.

Devoted women had traveled with and served Jesus for a long while. Among the earliest of them were "Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Chuza,

Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who were contributing to their [Jesus' and the disciples'] support out of their private means" (Luke 8:2-3). Throughout His ministry, such women ministered generously and lovingly to Jesus and the Twelve with their financial resources, their talents, and their hospitality. It is probable that many, if not most, of the meals they ate were prepared by those faithful women.

Ministering translates *diakoneō*, which has the basic meaning of serving and is the verb form of the noun from which *deacon* is derived. Although the feminine form of the term was not used to describe a specific type of ministry until many years later in the early church, if at all (see Rom. 16:1, where "servant" could be translated "deaconess"), those **ministering** women were, in effect, the first deaconesses.

Throughout the Old Testament, godly women are acclaimed. The psalmist extolled the Lord by declaring that "He makes the barren woman abide in the house as a joyful mother of children. Praise the Lord!" (Ps. 113:9). And even apart from the possible office of deaconess, the role of women in the early church centered in their faithfulness as wives and mothers and in their practical care for fellow believers. The kind of elderly widow Paul declared was worthy of support by the church was one who has "a reputation for good works, . . . has brought up children, . . . has shown hospitality to strangers, . . . washed the saints feet, . . . assisted those in distress, and . . . devoted herself to every good work" (1 Tim. 5:10; cf. Luke 4:39; 10:40).

Far from being spiritually demeaning, such self-giving acts of practical helpfulness are a mark of womanly excellence and spiritual maturity—a truth Jesus had a very difficult time teaching the disciples (see John 13:3-16).

The ministry of godly women has always been of great significance in the church. Those women by the cross were the primary believing eyewitnesses to Jesus' crucifixion, and a woman was the first person to see the Lord after His resurrection. Those faithful women certainly would have had a special place of respect and affection in the early church. When the apostles were first preaching the gospel and testifying of their experiences with Jesus, it is hard to imagine that they did not frequently acknowledge the courage and devotion of those women—who remained with the Lord during His time of agony and death, while they, His

specially chosen and trained men, had fled and were hiding out in some obscure part of Jerusalem.

Through His direction of Matthew's pen, the Holy Spirit identifies some of those godly women by name. The first is **Mary Magdalene**, the one from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons (Luke 8:2). **Magdalene** was not part of her family name but simply indicated she was from the town of Magdala, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, just south of Capernaum. She probably was identified in that way because she was unmarried and could not be identified by her husband or sons, as was the common practice in that day.

The second woman mentioned is **Mary the mother of James and Joseph**. This **James** was one of the apostles and was commonly referred to as James the Less (Mark 15:40) or James the son of Alphaeus (Matt. 10:3; Acts 1:13) to distinguish him from the other James, who, with Peter and his brother John, constituted the inner circle of the Twelve. John identifies this Mary as "the wife of Clopas" (John 19:25), apparently a variant of Alphaeus.

The third woman is identified as Salome by Mark (15:40) but is referred to by Matthew simply as **the mother of the sons of Zebedee**, in other words, Zebedee's wife. The **sons** of Zebedee were James and John (Matt. 4:21) and were nicknamed by Jesus "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17). From John's gospel we learn that Mary the mother of Jesus was also at the cross (19:26), although she may not have been with the other women at this time.

The first of the three women Matthew mentions was not married, the second was identified by her children, and the third by her husband. The implication seems to be that divine dignity is bestowed on all categories of womanhood. God has a marvelous and blessed role for women He has gifted with singleness, for women who are faithful mothers, and for women who are faithful wives. And perhaps in order not to suggest a secondary rank for the single woman or for the formerly wicked woman, Mary Magdalene is here named first.

Conspicuously absent from the scene at the cross were the Twelve, except for John. Judas had committed suicide, and the other ten were hiding for fear of their lives. During their Lord's greatest time of need, they had temporarily violated the basic principle of discipleship. "He who does not take his cross and follow after Me," Jesus said, "is not worthy of

Me” (Matt. 10:38). At this time the disciples not only did not have the courage to risk bearing their own crosses but did not even have the courage to stand with their Lord as He bore His.

The Amazing
Burial of Jesus 23
(27:57-66)

And when it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given over to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away. And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the grave.

Now on the next day, which is the one after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, and said, “Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I am to rise again.’ Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, lest the disciples come and steal Him away and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last deception will be worse than the first.” Pilate said to them, “You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how.” And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone. (27:57-66)

One of the majestic attributes of God is His absolute sovereignty, His supreme rulership and ultimate control over all things in the universe. He has created and He sustains all things that exist, and He ordains and brings to pass all things that happen.

The chronicler wrote, “Thine, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Thine is the dominion, O Lord, and Thou dost exalt Thyself as head over all. Both riches and honor come from Thee, and Thou dost rule over all, and in Thy hand is power and might;

and it lies in Thy hand to make great, and to strengthen everyone” (1 Chron. 29:11-12). Again he declared, “O Lord, the God of our fathers, art Thou not God in the heavens? And art Thou not ruler over all the kingdoms of the nations? Power and might are in Thy hand so that no one can stand against Thee” (2 Chron. 20:6).

Job said of the Lord, “He is unique and who can turn Him? And what His soul desires, that He does” (Job 23:13). The psalmist wrote, “Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases” (Ps. 115:3), and, “Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps” (Ps. 135:6). The writer of Proverbs said, “There is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel against the Lord” (Prov. 21:30). Through Isaiah, the Lord Himself proclaimed, “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’ ” (Isa. 46:9-10).

After a period of divinely-inflicted madness because of his arrogant pride, even the pagan Nebuchadnezzar confessed that God’s “dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing. But He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What hast Thou done?’” (Dan. 4:34-35).

The apostle Paul summarized all those truths in the simple statement that God “works all things after the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:11).

It is, of course, far beyond human ability to fathom *how* the infinite, eternal mind of God is able to execute the greatest as easily as the least thing He devises. In order to have even a small grasp of that great truth it is necessary to understand that God rules this world through two interrelated means: miracles and providence.

In order to accomplish His purposes, God sometimes supernaturally interrupts the natural processes that He Himself has ordained and ordered. In doing so, He overrules what we commonly call natural law, thereby accomplishing what is scientifically inexplicable. Such divine interruption is called *miracle*.

Creation itself was the first great interruption of the natural status quo, when in six days God created the universe from nothing, *ex nihilo*. The flood of Noah's day was a worldwide, supernatural disruption of virtually every natural process. The plagues in Egypt and the death of the firstborn were a local, but no less supernatural, intervention in the course of nature, as were the parting of the Red Sea and the provision of manna in the wilderness. The Lord supernaturally caused the sun to stand still for Joshua and caused the walls of Jericho to fall without any mechanical means. He caused the ground to swallow Korah and his rebellious followers and miraculously provided Samson with extraordinary physical strength, by which, among other things, he singlehandedly killed 1,000 men (Judg. 15:15-16).

God made an ax head float, a donkey speak, a chariot of fire carry Elijah to heaven without dying, the mouths of hungry lions to be shut, and a great fish to swallow Jonah and carry him in his belly for three days without harm to the prophet.

The second supernatural way in which God executes His will is through divine providence. Like *Trinity*, the term *providence* is not found in Scripture, although the reality of it is explicit or implicit on every page. Providence refers to God's independent superintendency of the universe through the operation of normal and natural processes and happenings. Through His sovereign providence, God is able to take the virtually infinite number of events and circumstances, as well as the innumerable personal attitudes, ambitions, and abilities that exist in the natural and demonic worlds and cause them all to work together in meticulous precision to perfectly fulfill His divine will.

Through miracle, God interrupts and overrules the operation of normal and natural processes and events, whereas through providence He takes them as they are and orchestrates them to accomplish His predetermined will. From a human perspective, therefore, providence seems even more astounding than miracle. In miracle, God "simply" replaces natural events and circumstances with those of His own special making, usually within a short period of time and often instantaneously. Providence, however, involves the infinitely more complex task of taking natural events and circumstances, as well as the limited but real freedoms of human and demonic minds and wills and, often over vast periods of time, superintending all of those elements in the flawless fulfillment of

His own foreordained plans. Multiplied myriads of individual and seemingly random plans, choices, actions, and events continually work together in a divinely-synchronized strategy to perform God's predestined plan.

Throughout Scripture, God is shown to control the thunder and the lightning, the rain and the snow, the rivers and the mountains, the heat and the cold, the animals and the birds, the cities and the nations, the newborn and the dying, the healthy and the sick, the poor and the rich, the weak and the strong, the simple and the complex, the ruler and the ruled, the human and the demonic, and the natural and the supernatural in sovereign freedom.

Joseph was one of twelve brothers born to Jacob in fulfillment of God's covenant promise to Abraham. Because of the jealous hatred of his brothers, Joseph was sold into slavery, taken to Egypt, falsely accused of seducing his employer's wife, thrown into prison, and divinely enabled to interpret dreams for a fellow prisoner and then for the pharaoh. Joseph was eventually elevated to rulership second only to Pharaoh himself and because of that high position was able to rescue his own family from famine and was marvelously reunited with them. Without the use of a single miracle, God sovereignly, by providence, directed every moment of Joseph's life and the lives of those around him. Realizing that profound truth, Joseph was able to say to his repentant brothers, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (Gen. 50:20; cf. 45:5).

In another beautiful picture of providence, God directed the lives of the godly Naomi, her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth, and her future son-in-law, Boaz. Through the faithful witness of Naomi, Ruth was brought to faith in the true God, and through the unselfish love of Boaz, Ruth was brought into the lineage of the Messiah, becoming the great-grandmother of David.

Although the book of Esther does not contain the name of God, it relates one of the most profound testimonies in Scripture to His power in providence. There are no miracles recorded in the book, yet God is shown to be at work in a way that goes beyond the miraculous. The Jewish exile Esther found favor with King Ahasuerus, ruler of the great Medo-Persian empire, and became his highly favored queen. When a plan by a wicked official named Haman to annihilate all the Jews in the empire became

known to her and her foster-father Mordecai, Esther interceded for her people at great personal risk. Even as queen, she not only could have been put to death for coming before the king uninvited but also for revealing herself as being Jewish. But by the king's subsequent edicts given on Esther's behalf, the evil Haman was hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai, and the Jewish people were spared extermination.

In his divinely inspired wisdom, the ancient writer could declare, "The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps" (Prov. 16:9), and, "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but the counsel of the Lord, it will stand" (Prov. 19:21). Jeremiah confessed, "I know, O Lord, that a man's way is not in himself; nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23). Paul reminds believers that their lives are uniquely directed by their heavenly Father. "For it is God who is at work in you," he says, "both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). Jesus declared, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working" (John 5:17). Even during the incarnation, the Father and the Son were functioning in perfect harmony to carry out Their sovereign, divine will.

Nowhere in Scripture is God's incredible and amazing providence more evident than in Jesus' burial. His burial is often passed over quickly in commentaries, sermons, and Bible studies as being simply a necessary event between His death and resurrection. There is a strong tendency to rush immediately from His death to His resurrection, mentioning His burial only in passing. Yet Matthew's account of His burial conveys several astounding truths that give remarkable testimony to the superintendency of God.

Although a touching and interesting story, the burial of Jesus seems somewhat mundane and ordinary compared to His dramatic and substantive death and resurrection. Yet even His burial provides its own demonstrations of God's sovereign control. There were no miracles in the trial of Christ, in His crucifixion, or in His burial, but the providence of God controlled every detail.

Especially in Matthew's account, every detail of Jesus' burial, including the scheming of His enemies, is a testimony to His Sonship, messiahship, and kingship. There is no human explanation for these events. He is again shown to be none other than the promised Son of God and the sovereign Ruler of God's kingdom.

JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA

And when it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given over to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away. (27:57-60)

The first focal point in Matthew's account relates to the fulfillment of two key prophecies, one by Isaiah and the other by Jesus Himself.

Isaiah 53 is the Old Testament's most beautiful and detailed prediction of the Messiah's suffering and death. Included in that prediction is the statement that "His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death" (v. 9). That obscure prophecy would have been impossible to comprehend fully until the Messiah's burial actually took place. We now understand that the Holy Spirit was revealing that, although Christ's enemies intended to bury Him with common criminals, God's plan was that He be buried not with the wicked but in the tomb of a wealthy man, who, by inference, was godly.

The second prophecy fulfilled in Jesus' burial was His own declaration that "just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40; cf. 16:21; 26:61).

When it was evening refers to the period from 3:00 P. M. until 6:00 P. M., which period the Jews considered to be the end of the day and the beginning of the **evening**. It was "about the ninth hour," or 3:00 P. M., that Jesus spoke His last words from the cross and "yielded up His spirit" (Matt. 27:46-50).

For two reasons it was imperative that Jesus die several hours before the end of the day. First, because the Sabbath began at six o'clock that day, He had to be taken down from the cross before then and prepared for burial in order not to profane the Sabbath. Second, as explained in detail below, He had to be buried before the end of that day, Friday, in order to be in the earth at least a part of three separate days before His resurrection, as He Himself declared He would be.

John explains that “the Jews therefore, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away” (John 19:31). The fact that it was the day before the Sabbath proves conclusively that Jesus was crucified on Friday, commonly referred to by Jews as “the day of preparation.”

Although rabbinical tradition had added many extreme and foolish restrictions to Sabbath observance, God Himself had commanded His people to “remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Ex. 20:8). Among other things, even food preparation had to be done the day before in order not to work on the Sabbath. When the Lord provided manna for the children of Israel in the wilderness, He gave a double portion on Friday in order that no collection of it would have to be made on the Sabbath.

The Mosaic law also required that the corpse of an executed criminal not be left hanging “all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is accursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance” (Deut. 21:23). If such a thing was defiling on an ordinary day of the week, it would be more defiling on the Sabbath. And, as John points out in the passage above, the particular Sabbath that was about to begin was especially holy because it was also the high day of the Passover feast. It would therefore have been extraordinarily defiling for dead bodies to be hanging on crosses just outside the north wall of Jerusalem, possibly in sight of the Temple, on such a high holy day.

Nowhere is the ungodly hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders more evident than in their insistence that Jesus’ body be taken down before the Sabbath. They had no compunction about murdering the Lord of the Sabbath, yet they were meticulous in not wanting to defile the Sabbath by having His body hanging on the cross after that day began.

Because the Romans would not permit a crucified man to be taken down before he was dead, the Jewish leaders requested of Pilate that the legs of the three men be broken to insure quick death. In such cases a large wooden mallet was used to shatter the legs of a victim, making it impossible for him to raise himself in order to breathe. Although the added pain would be excruciating, it was short-lived, because death resulted quickly from suffocation.

According to the eminent Bible scholar Alfred Edersheim, the soldiers would then administer what was called the death stroke, which consisted of jabbing a spear into the heart (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953], 2:612). The reason for adding the death stroke to the crushing of the legs seems to have been to remove all doubt as to death having occurred.

Because Pilate did not dare to offend the Jewish leaders any further, he gave orders for the men's legs to be broken. After breaking the legs of the two men on either side of Jesus, however, the soldiers saw that He was already dead. Consequently, "one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately there came out blood and water" (John 19:34). Once more Scripture was fulfilled. As John went on to explain (v. 36), the psalmist had declared of the Messiah centuries earlier that "He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken" (Ps. 34:20). The Romans would not have known of that psalm and, in any case, would not have fulfilled it purposely. They fulfilled the prediction because they were divinely directed to do so, whatever their human reasons may have been.

Again as John explains, prophecy was also fulfilled by the spear wound, because "another Scripture [Zech. 12:10] says, 'They shall look on Him whom they pierced'" (John 19:37). Because the soldier already acknowledged that Jesus was dead, he had no human reason to administer the death stroke with the spear. But he unwittingly did so in fulfillment of God's Word, and the resulting wound was so deep that Jesus could tell Thomas to place his hand into it (John 20:27). Precisely as prophesied, no bone in Jesus' body was broken, and His side was pierced.

In what many Bible students take to be a messianic psalm, David wrote, "Reproach has broken my heart" (Ps. 69:20). Some medical experts believe that, under extreme circumstances, it is possible for the human heart literally to burst from emotional strain, causing blood to spill into the pericardium surrounding the heart and mix there with the lymphatic fluid. If that were the case with Jesus, His death fulfilled yet another prophecy.

As soon as a victim was declared dead, his body was taken down from the cross and ordinarily was thrown into a common grave for criminals, as Isaiah had prophesied the Messiah's enemies had planned for Him (Isa. 53:9). The Romans had absolutely no respect for the corpses, which often were thrown into a grave left open to scavenger animals and

birds. Sometimes the bodies were simply cast onto a burning garbage dump, such as the one that continually smoldered in the Hinnom Valley (Gehenna) just south of Jerusalem.

By the time Jesus died, even John apparently had left Golgotha and only the few faithful women remained. They were not able to care for the body by themselves, especially in the short time remaining before the end of the day, and, in any case, they had no burial place for Jesus.

But at the exact moment necessary, God moved in the heart of a godly man. Therefore, **when it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus.** As explained above, the **evening** hours were from 3:00 to 6:00 P. M., at which time the next day, in this case the Sabbath, was considered to begin. Had Joseph asked for the body any earlier, Jesus would not have been dead, and had he come any later, he could not have prepared the body for burial before the Sabbath began.

Joseph not only was **a rich man**, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy (Isa. 53:9), but was "a prominent member of the Council," the Sanhedrin, and "was waiting for the kingdom of God" (Mark 15:43). Contrary to the other members, however, he was "a good and righteous man" who "had not consented to their plan and action" to condemn and execute Jesus (Luke 23:50-51).

The only thing known with certainty about **Arimathea** is that it was "a city of the Jews" (Luke 23:51), that is, in Judea. Although Galilee was in the heartland of ancient Israel, it had become populated with many Gentiles and often was associated with the region to the east frequently referred to as Galilee of the Gentiles (see Matt. 4:15; cf. Isa. 9:1). Judea, however, was by far the most distinctly Jewish area of Palestine and was considered the land of the Jews. Because Joseph presumably would have had his burial site close to where he lived, it is generally assumed that **Arimathea** was near Jerusalem. Many scholars believe Arimathea was a form of the ancient Ramah, the city a few miles north of Jerusalem from which Samuel came.

At some point during the past three years, Joseph had **become a disciple of Jesus**, although "a secret one, for fear of the Jews" (John 19:38). The Greek text uses the verb form of **disciple** and could be translated, "was disciplined to (or by) Jesus." Joseph was a follower of and

learner from **Jesus**, suggesting that he must have heard our Lord preach and teach and that he probably witnessed many of His miracles.

Because, as already noted, he was a secret disciple, Joseph had followed and learned from Jesus at a distance. It is possible he had first heard Jesus in the company of other Sanhedrin members as they came to criticize and condemn Him and, while listening to Him preach, was convinced of Jesus' messiahship. But to have made his allegiance to Christ public not only would have cost him his place in the Sanhedrin but would have jeopardized his economic, social, and family welfare as well.

But now Joseph "gathered up courage" (Mark 15:43) and **went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus**. We learn from Mark that "Pilate wondered if He was dead by this time, and summoning the centurion, he questioned him as to whether He was already dead. And ascertaining this from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph" (Mark 15:44-45).

The body of a victim normally would be given only to a family member. Often, however, even that humane consideration was not permitted, because public desecration of the body by throwing it into an open grave or onto a garbage heap was sometimes used as an additional warning about the serious consequences of opposing Rome.

But having already granted the Jewish leaders' request to make sure the crucified men were dead and removed from their crosses before the Sabbath, and not wanting to anger those leaders any further, **Pilate** may have been glad to grant **the body of Jesus** to Joseph and have the matter ended. Because of their humiliation and intimidation of him, Pilate had no inclination to do the Sanhedrin a favor. But he could ill afford offending them again. He would not have known Joseph's motive and perhaps assumed he was acting in behalf of his colleagues. Without asking for an explanation, Pilate immediately ordered Jesus' body **be given over to Joseph**.

Joseph probably came to Pilate with little hope of receiving the body, and there are many reasons why his request might not have been granted. He certainly did not expect Jesus to rise from the dead or else he would not have given such careful attention to the body's preparation and permanent interment. Yet his great love for Jesus led him to face the wrath of his fellow Council members and friends as well as the wrath of Pilate in order to offer this last gesture of respect to Christ.

The Lord had sovereignly caused the Jewish leaders to do their part in demanding that the bodies be taken down from the crosses before the end of the day. He had caused Pilate to grant that permission, caused Joseph's request for the body, and caused Pilate's permission once again. Now the Lord caused Joseph to secure, prepare, and inter Jesus' body before Friday evening ended. None of those people realized they were fulfilling prophecy. As far as his own motives and understanding were concerned, even the godly Joseph did what he did for personal reasons. It seemed only right that this innocent Man in whom he had placed his faith have a respectable burial. There is no indication Joseph was even aware he was doing God's will, much less fulfilling God's Word.

Joseph did not hurry because he was afraid of violating the Sabbath. He had already defiled himself for Sabbath observance by going into the Praetorium to see Pilate and was about to defile himself further by handling the dead body of Jesus. He operated with haste because, like every other participant in this great drama, he was being moved under God's divinely ordained and scripturally predicted power and according to His timetable.

The more God's Word is studied honestly and objectively, the more convincingly its inerrancy is demonstrated. Over and over it proves itself accurate in every detail.

After removing it from the cross, **Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock.** Because of his devotion to Christ and because the tomb was very near Golgotha (John 19:42), it seems probable that, although he was a wealthy man and had many servants, Joseph carried **the body** himself.

John reports that Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee and almost certainly a member of the Sanhedrin (see John 3:1), joined Joseph at the tomb, "bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight." Together, "they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews" (19:39-40). Unlike the Egyptians, the Jews did not attempt to embalm bodies but simply encased them in strongly perfumed burial cloths to help mask the stench of decay.

As pointed out in *The Harmony of the Gospels* (Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, eds. [Chicago: Moody, 1978], p. 250), "The

disciples who had openly followed Jesus during His lifetime ran away at the end, but the two who had kept their faith secret while He was alive . . . came forward publicly to give Him an appropriate burial.”

Although the gospels mention only that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joses were watching the burial (Matt. 27:61; Mark 15:47), it is possible that they assisted Joseph and Nicodemus. Later, they prepared their own spices and came to the tomb early Sunday morning, planning to further anoint Jesus’ body (Luke 23:56-24:1).

After the body was wrapped, Joseph **rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away.** Graves were commonly secured in some way, often with **a large stone** placed over **the entrance**, in order to prevent desecration of the body by animals or birds and to prevent grave robbers from stealing the valuables that were often buried with the deceased.

TWO MARYS

And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the grave. (27:61)

A second group of people at Jesus’ burial were used to give evidence of the deity of Christ in an unusual and wonderful way.

Of the “many women” who had observed the crucifixion from a distance and who had faithfully served Jesus during His Galilean ministry (vv. 55-56), only **Mary Magdalene . . . and the other Mary**, the mother of James the Less and Joseph (Mark 15:47), had followed Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb. After they perhaps helped Joseph and Nicodemus wrap Jesus’ body in the spices and after the great stone was rolled into place to secure it, the two Marys were **sitting opposite the grave.** Apparently the two men had left, and these women were now alone at the tomb, engulfed by deep sorrow.

The special contribution of those two women is not evident until early on Sunday morning, when they returned to the sepulcher to finish anointing Jesus’ body. At that time they became the first witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection. When they arrived, the stone had already been rolled away from the entrance by an angel, and the women entered the tomb (Mark 16:45a). While the guards stood frozen with fear (Matt. 28:4), the

angel, “sitting at the right, wearing a white robe, . . . said to them, ‘Do not be amazed; you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who has been crucified. He has risen; He is not here; behold, here is the place where they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples and Peter, “He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He said to you” ’ ” (Mark 16:5b-7).

God did not choose any of the disciples but rather two women to be the priority witnesses to the resurrection of Christ. Mary Magdalene not only was one of the first two persons to know of Jesus’ resurrection but was the first person to whom He appeared (John 20:11-17).

CHIEF PRIESTS AND PHARISEES

Now on the next day, which is the one after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, and said, “Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I am to rise again.’ Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, lest the disciples come and steal Him away and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last deception will be worse than the first.” Pilate said to them, “You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how.” And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone. (27:62-66)

The third group God providentially directed in relation to Jesus’ burial was **the chief priests and the Pharisees**. Unwittingly, and certainly unintentionally, they provided still further testimony to Jesus’ deity.

As already noted, **the next day** after the crucifixion was the Sabbath, for which the previous day was the day of **preparation**. Also as noted, it was not an ordinary Sabbath but was Passover Sabbath and therefore a high holy day (see John 19:31).

Two very unusual things occurred in this event. First of all, it was highly unusual for Jewish religious leaders to meet with a pagan, secular ruler on any Sabbath, and even more unusual for them to do so on a high Sabbath. More amazing still, the wording and context suggest that, contrary to their normal practice, they actually entered Pilate’s council chambers in the Praetorium. On the previous day they had been careful not to go into the Praetorium at all but rather sent Jesus inside to see Pilate. In order to speak with the leaders themselves, the governor had to come out

on the porch. Perhaps because it was a high Sabbath, the priests and Pharisees thought there would be no one around to see them enter. Or they may simply have been willing to risk being seen in order to accomplish their purpose. If they so flagrantly violated Mosaic law and rabbinic tradition by falsely condemning Jesus to death, they would surely not have winced at such a relatively minor infraction as Sabbath defilement if it became necessary for their wicked purposes.

The second unusual detail was that **the chief priests** were largely Sadducees and therefore were strong theological opponents of **the Pharisees**. The gospels record only one other instance of those two groups being together (Matt. 21:45), and in both instances their only common motivation was hatred of Jesus.

Although Jesus was now dead, these men were still concerned about His continuing influence. They therefore said to Pilate, **“Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I am to rise again.’ Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day.”** Even in His death, Christ’s enemies despised Him so vehemently that they would not utter His name, referring to Him only as **that deceiver**.

At some point during or just after the crucifixion, the Pharisees remembered that several years earlier, when they had demanded a sign from Jesus, He told them, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt. 12:38-40). Because Jonah came out alive after the three days and nights, the Pharisees rightly understood that Jesus was claiming He would be buried in the earth and arise alive after that same period of time.

The disciples had not taken Jesus literally then or when, on numerous other occasions, He had told them privately about His suffering, death, and resurrection (Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19). The religious leaders did not believe Jesus either, but they took His prediction seriously, thinking He would try to pull off a hoax to make the people think He actually died and was resurrected. Now that He was dead, they were afraid His disciples would try to perpetrate a similar hoax.

The expression “three days and three nights” that Jesus had used in the prediction of His burial (Matt. 12:40) did not refer necessarily to three full twenty-four hour days. “A day and a night” was a Jewish colloquialism that could refer to any part of a day.

When Queen Esther instructed Mordecai to tell the Jews to fast “for three days” (Esth. 4:16), it becomes obvious that she did not have in mind three full days. It was “on the third day,” at the end of the fast, that she “put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king’s palace” to intercede for her people (5:1).

The Talmud, the major Jewish commentary on Scripture and tradition, specifies that “a day and a night makes one *onah*, and a part of an *onah* is as the whole.”

In the same way, people today speak of visiting a certain place for three days, without necessarily meaning three full twenty-hour periods. To arrive on a Monday morning, for example, and leave on the following Wednesday afternoon is generally considered a three-day visit.

That Jesus had in mind only a part of the first and third days is made clear by the numerous references to His rising *on* the third day (Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19). It is also clear that the Jewish religious leaders themselves took Jesus to mean *on* the third day. Although they used the phrase **after three days** in giving Pilate the reason for their request, they asked Him to post a guard over the tomb **until the third day**, indicating that they used those two phrases synonymously.

To insist on a full three-day burial not only precludes Jesus’ rising on the third day but also requires pushing the day of crucifixion back to Wednesday, in order for Him to have been in the ground all of Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. In that case, parts of five consecutive days would have been involved—from Wednesday morning, when the crucifixion would have begun, until daybreak on Sunday, which would have been some twelve hours after that day had begun at 6:00 P. M. the previous evening. But such an extended chronology cannot be squared with the gospel accounts.

The crucifixion is specifically said to have been on Friday, “the day before the Sabbath” (Mark 15:42), and the resurrection to have been sometime before dawn on Sunday, “the first day of the week” (Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). To argue for a full three-day burial is to presume serious, and very obvious, scriptural error.

Their telling Pilate to **give orders for the grave to be made secure** reflects the religious leaders' continued control over the governor because of his fear they would report him to Caesar and cause his downfall. Ironically, their fear was that **the disciples might come and steal Him away and say to the people, "He has risen from the dead."** That fear was totally unfounded, because, despite Jesus' repeated teaching about it, the disciples still did not believe that He would literally rise from the dead.

After the transfiguration, Peter, James, and John were puzzled about what Jesus had just told them about His rising from the dead (Mark 9:10). It was not that they did not understand the meaning of resurrection, because that was a commonly held doctrine among most Jews of the day. But because they could not conceive of the Messiah's dying, they obviously could not conceive of His rising from the dead (cf. 9:32). Even when Peter and John came to Jesus' tomb and found it empty, "as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead" (John 20:9).

But whether the chief priests and Pharisees knew of that disbelief or not, they assumed the disciples would make the claim in Jesus' behalf in order to perpetuate His memory and perhaps keep some of His following for themselves.

If such a thing were to happen, they assured Pilate, **the last deception will be worse than the first.** The implication was that Jesus' claim to kingship would then be verified in the eyes of the gullible people and, though dead, He would become an even **worse** threat to Rome than before. They were saying, in effect, "If the multitudes hailed Him as their Messiah and King on His entry into Jerusalem a few days ago, think how much more they will acclaim Him as their King if they are led to believe He has conquered death and risen from the dead. Even though the idea is preposterous, if they really believe He is alive, they will also believe Rome has no power over Him and that He is invincible. Then you will really have an uprising on your hands."

Wanting to take no risks, either of offending the Jewish leaders or of facing another insurrection, **Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how."** No doubt pleased with themselves for once again making the powerful Roman governor bow to their demands, **they went and made the grave secure, and along with**

the guard they set a seal on the stone. The seal was probably furnished by Pilate and gave warning that the tomb was under Roman protection.

The purpose of the Jewish leaders and of Pilate was to prevent a hoax. But the Lord's purpose was to take even their unbelieving antagonism and use it to prove the reality of Christ's resurrection and deity. Even Jesus' enemies helped assure that, in order for His resurrection to be genuine, He would have to be supernaturally raised. Despite their later efforts to spread the rumor that the disciples did indeed steal Jesus' body (Matt. 28:11-14), they knew that they themselves had made that impossible.

Those remarkable truths about the burial of our Lord should deepen every Christian's appreciation of Paul's declaration that "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). When we cannot see why we are going through trouble and conflicts, we need to hold on to the certainty that God's sovereign, providential power enlists every circumstance and happening in the universe for His glory and for our good.

The Resurrection

of Christ

24

(28:1-10)

Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave. And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. And his appearance was like lightning, and his garment as white as snow; and the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. And the angel answered and said to the women, “Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying. And go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going before you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you.” And they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they shall see Me.” (28:1-10)

Like every piece of good literature, Matthew’s gospel is not a random collection of facts or ideas or stories but has a specific plan and purpose. Chapter 28 is not simply a closing group of anecdotes about the life of Christ but is the powerful climax of everything else he has written under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The central event of that climax, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is also the central event of God’s redemptive history. The resurrection is the cornerstone of the Christian faith, and everything that we are and have and hope to be is predicated on its reality. There would be no Christianity if there were no resurrection.

The message of Scripture has always been a message of resurrection hope, a message that death is not the end for those who belong to God. For the believer, death has never been an end but rather a doorway that leads to eternity with God. Abraham willingly obeyed God's command to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, because, in faith, "he considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead" (Heb. 11:19). The psalmists declared, "God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol; for He will receive me" (Ps. 49:15) and that "with Thy counsel Thou wilt guide me, and afterward receive me to glory" (Ps. 73:24). Isaiah proclaimed, "Your dead will live; their corpses will rise" (Isa. 26:19). Through Daniel the Lord assures His people that, although they die, one day they "will awake . . . to everlasting life" (Dan. 12:2). Hosea assures believers that the Lord will raise up all believers to live before Him (Hos. 6:2). Job asked rhetorically, "If a man dies, will he live again?" and then declared, "All the days of my struggle I will wait, until my change comes" (Job 14:14). That ancient man of God even foresaw the reality of resurrection, proclaiming to his three friends, Bildad in particular: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:25-26).

Such has been the promised hope of God's people throughout history, a hope predicated on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is His resurrection that guarantees ours. "Now Christ has been raised from the dead," Paul declares, "the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:20-22).

It is also tragically true, however, that throughout history many have denied, despised, and mocked the truth of resurrection, especially Christ's. But only a fool tries to explain away resurrection, because the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are man's only hope of salvation and eternal life.

An early Protestant missionary to the Ryukyu Islands in the western Pacific discovered a strange mass grave. The grave marker revealed that more than 11,000 heads taken from bodies of Christians were buried there. On further investigation he learned that in 1637 the Japanese government, which then controlled the Ryukyus, ordered all Christians in

the empire exterminated. Because they knew Christians believed in the resurrection, the heads of martyred believers were buried a great distance from the bodies, in the belief that their resurrection would thereby be prevented.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the single greatest event in the history of the world. It is so foundational to Christianity that no one who denies it can be a true Christian. Without resurrection there is no Christian faith, no salvation, and no hope. “If there is no resurrection of the dead,” Paul explains, “not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain” (1 Cor. 15:13-14). A person who believes in a Christ who was not raised believes in a powerless Christ, a dead Christ. If Christ did not rise from the dead, then no redemption was accomplished at the cross and “your faith is worthless,” Paul goes on to say; “you are still in your sins” (v. 17).

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the first sermon on the day the church was born focused on the resurrection of Christ. After charging his hearers with Jesus’ death, Peter declared, “And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power” (Acts 2:23-24). Peter continued to preach the resurrection to his fellow Jews (Acts 4:10) as well as to Gentiles (10:40).

Paul preached the resurrection continually. In the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia he declared that “God raised [Jesus] from the dead” and “He whom God raised did not undergo decay” (Acts 13:30, 37). He proclaimed the resurrection before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem (23:6), before the governor, Felix (24:15, 21), and before King Agrippa (26:8). The resurrection is a central and strongly emphasized theme of Paul’s epistles. He declared that Christ “was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:4), that “He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you” (2 Cor. 4:14; cf. Gal. 1:1), and that the Father “raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:20; Col. 2:12). Paul longed to know Christ “and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings” (Phil. 3:10).

Peter spoke of our “living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven” (1 Pet. 1:3-4). In his vision on Patmos, John beheld the Lord Jesus Christ, who declared, “I am

the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore” (Rev. 1:17-18).

The foundation of all our hope is expressed in Jesus’ own words: “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies” (John 11:25), and, “Because I live, you shall live also” (14:19).

Even the most irreligious person who knows anything about Christian history and doctrine knows that Christians believe Jesus Christ rose from the dead. But the unbelieving world has many reactions to that belief, most of them negative and all of them wrong.

One of the most common modern reactions is that of rationalism, which rejects the idea of resurrection and all other supernatural elements of Scripture because such things cannot be explained by scientific observation and human reason. This humanistic philosophy considers man’s mind to be the ultimate reality, and only that which his own mind can perceive and comprehend is recognized as true or significant.

Many people are simply indifferent to the resurrection, not caring whether it is true or not. Religion in general, and Christianity in particular, are of no concern to them. Other people do not believe in resurrection because of ignorance about its nature and meaning. They may never have heard of such a thing or never have heard it explained accurately and clearly.

Some people are intentionally hostile. They do not reject the resurrection because it seems unprovable to human reason or because they have honest doubt or lack proof. They denounce it simply because they hate the things of God. Some people even seem to consider it their role in life and history to try to discredit the resurrection.

The gospel writers, however, and every other leader in the early church realized that their supreme role in life and history was to proclaim the reality of the resurrection and the many other truths about Jesus Christ. Although the disciples, and most of Jesus’ other followers, were slow to believe their Lord actually rose from the dead, they soon became so overwhelmed by its reality that they could think or talk of little else.

Although they reveal the same divine truths in perfect harmony with one another, each of the gospel writers presents the resurrection from a distinctive perspective. Matthew does not approach the resurrection from a scholarly, historical, analytical, or evidential perspective but focuses

rather on the emotional reaction of a group of women who loved Jesus deeply.

COMPASSION

Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave. (28:1)

After the Sabbath translates an unusual construction in the Greek, *opse de sabbatōn*. The phrase could also be rendered, “well after the Sabbath,” indicating that a considerable amount of time had elapsed since the Sabbath ended. The actual time was from sundown the previous evening, when **the Sabbath** had ended, until **it began to dawn** the following day, which was Sunday, **the first day of the week**, totaling perhaps ten hours. John states specifically that when the women came “it was still dark” (20:1).

The first day of the week also translates an interesting Greek phrase, which literally means, “day one with reference to the Sabbath.” The Jews did not have names for days of the week, such as Monday, Tuesday, and so on, but simply numbered them in relation to the Sabbath. **Sabbath** means “seventh,” and, although it was at the end of the week, because it was the central and holy day, all other days were reckoned by it—as the first, second, third, and so forth, day after the Sabbath.

As explained in the previous chapter of this volume, because Jews considered reference to “a day” as meaning any part of that day, Sunday was the third day of Jesus’ interment, the day which He had repeatedly predicted would be the day of His resurrection (see Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 27:64; Mark 10:34; Luke 18:33).

The phrase “after the Sabbath” could also refer figuratively to the new day of rest for God’s people. As a commemoration of God’s resting after creation, the Sabbath was to be a day of rest and worship for Israel (Ex. 20:8-11). But the day before Jesus arose from the grave was the last divinely ordained Sabbath for His people, because on the following day the New Covenant in Jesus Christ was ushered in. That Sunday was the dawning not only of a new day but of a new era in redemptive history.

It is because of the resurrection that Christians worship on Sunday rather than on the Sabbath.

At that predawn hour on Sunday morning **Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave.** Although they had witnessed Joseph's and Nicodemus's wrapping Jesus' body in the linen cloths and spices (Matt. 27:61), the women had secured and prepared their own spices (probably a small amount in comparison to that brought by Nicodemus) with which they would personally anoint the Lord (Luke 24:1). Although Salome, the mother of James and John and the wife of Zebedee (Mark 16:1; cf. Matt. 27:56), and Joanna (Luke 24:10) were also there, Matthew focuses only on the two Marys.

The other Mary was the mother of James and Joseph and the wife of Clopas (see Matt. 27:56; John 19:25). The women obviously thought Jesus would still be in the grave and would remain there, or else they would not have brought the anointing spices. They had not come to see Jesus risen but **to look at the grave** where they expected His body to still be lying. They had been among the women who ministered to Jesus in Galilee and who had stood with Him at the cross (Matt. 27:55-56). Now they came to the garden hoping that somehow the great stone could be removed so they could minister to Him one last time (Mark 16:3). But despite their lack of faith in Jesus' promises to rise on the third day, they came to the tomb out of deep affection for their Lord.

Jewish tradition wrongly held that the spirit of a dead person left the body four days after death because by that time the body had become so disfigured by decay that the spirit could no longer recognize it. That tradition may be reflected in Martha's comment to Jesus about her brother, Lazarus: "Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days" (John 11:39). Perhaps the two Marys and the other women came to Jesus' grave with the intent of anointing His body one more time before His spirit departed from it.

The women did not have confidence in Jesus' resurrection, but they had great love and great devotion for Him. What they lacked in faith they compensated for in loving compassion, and what they lacked in understanding they made up for in courageous devotion.

TERROR

And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. And his appearance was like lightning, and his garment as white as snow; and the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. And the angel answered and said to the women, “Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying. And go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going before you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you.” (28:2-7)

No sooner had the women reached the tomb than they found the stone had been moved aside by a **severe earthquake**. This was the second supernaturally caused earthquake in connection with Jesus’ death and burial, the first one having occurred at the moment of His death (Matt. 27:51).

God caused an earthquake on Mount Sinai just before He revealed the law to Moses (Ex. 19:18) and on Mount Horeb when He revealed Himself to Elijah (1 Kings 19:11). In the end times He will also send numerous earthquakes (Joel 2:10; Matt. 24:7; Rev. 6:12; 8:5; 11:13-19). Now, within three days, He caused two earthquakes just outside Jerusalem.

This **earthquake had occurred** when **an angel of the Lord descended from heaven**, causing the earth around the grave to tremble violently. The angel had come to open the secured and sealed grave, and when he arrived he **rolled away the stone and sat upon it**. Although it had probably taken several strong men some time to put the stone in place, the angel removed it in an instant.

The angel did not move the stone in order to let Jesus out of the tomb, as many Easter stories and paintings suggest. If Jesus had the power to raise Himself from the dead, which He did (John 10:18), He certainly had the relatively minor power required to escape a sealed grave. As He demonstrated during several postresurrection appearances, just as He was no longer bound by death, He was no longer bound by the limitations of the physical world or of time (see Luke 24:31; John 20:26). In His glorified form He could escape a closed grave just as easily as He could enter a closed room. In comparing the gospel accounts, it becomes clear that Jesus had already left the tomb when the stone was rolled away. The

angel moved the stone not to let Jesus out but to let the women and the apostles in.

From John's gospel it seems that Mary Magdalene apparently left the garden as soon as she "saw the stone already taken away from the tomb" (20:1). Before the angel appeared, "she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him'" (v. 2). Obviously she had missed the angel's announcement of Jesus' resurrection. She was so overwrought at discovering the tomb empty that she ran frantically to the two most prominent disciples, Peter and John, to tell them what she thought was terrible news. It did not occur to her that Jesus might be risen as He had predicted, and she assumed that someone had stolen the body and hidden it. It is obvious that Peter and John did not consider the possibility of resurrection either, and they immediately ran to the tomb to find out what they could (John 20:3-4).

Meanwhile the angel had manifested himself to those who were near the tomb, and **his appearance was like lightning**. The description suggests that God transmitted some of His own Shekinah glory to the angel, just as He had transmitted a measure of it to Moses on Sinai when the covenant was renewed (Ex. 34:29). In a similar way, the angel's glistening **garment** that was **as white as snow** suggests God's purity and holiness. The angel bore the very imprimatur of the character of God in order to make clear to the observers not only that he was a supernatural messenger but that he was an agent of God and not Satan.

The **guards** were so awestruck that at first they **shook for fear of him**. **Shook** translates a Greek term that has the same root as "earthquake" in verse 2, indicating that the soldiers experienced personal earthquakes of both mind and body. But after a brief moment of shaking, they then **became like dead men**, paralyzed with fear. The idea seems to be that they not only became rigid but unconscious, completely traumatized by what they saw.

The women were also frightened, but, unlike the soldiers, they received comfort from God's messenger. Aware of their fright, **the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid."** Perhaps a better translation than **answered** would be "explained," because **the women**, too terrified to speak, had not asked a question.

The soldiers had good reason to be afraid. Not only was the angel's appearance terrifying in itself but, because they had been charged with protecting the grave, an empty tomb could spell their death. The women, however, had no reason to fear, and the angel's first words were meant to give them comfort and assurance.

They had not come expecting to find Jesus raised, but in His gracious mercy God overlooked their weak faith and their lack of understanding. Acknowledging their great love, God responded with great love. **"I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified,"** the angel said to them; **"He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said."**

Has risen translates a Greek aorist passive and can also be rendered, "has been raised." Jesus Himself had power to give up His life and to take it up again (John 10:18). But Scripture makes clear that He also was raised by the power of the Father (Rom. 6:4; Gal. 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:3) and of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:11). The entire Trinity participated in the resurrection of Jesus.

The angel gently reminded the women that Jesus' resurrection should not surprise them, because it happened **just as He said**. Luke reports that they then "remembered His words" (24:8).

Next the angel invited the women to **come, see the place where He was lying**. At this point the women went into the tomb and observed that it was indeed empty. The angel joined them in the tomb and reiterated the same basic message, saying, "Do not be amazed; you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who has been crucified. He has risen; He is not here; behold, here is the place where they laid Him" (Mark 16:6). Perhaps the message was repeated because the women found it so hard to believe, despite the fact that they now remembered Jesus' predictions that He would rise on the third day.

When Peter and John entered the tomb a short while later, they "beheld the linen wrappings lying there, and the face-cloth, which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself" (John 20:6-7). The burial clothes were just as they were when Joseph and Nicodemus laid the body to rest, except for the face-cloth, which was set to one side. Jesus did not have to be unwrapped any more than He had to have the stone removed. At one moment He was

encased in the linen, and the next He was free, leaving the wrappings unchanged.

While the women were in the tomb, another angel joined the first, “one at the head, and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying” (John 20:12). Their positions are reminiscent of the two golden cherubim who were on either side of the Mercy Seat on the Ark of the Covenant (Ex. 25:18). The two angels in the garden were posted at either end of the tomb of Jesus, who, by the sacrifice He had just made of His own life, became the true and eternal Mercy Seat for sinful mankind.

The two angels gave still another reminder to the women. “Why do you seek the living One among the dead?” they asked. “He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of the sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again” (Luke 24: 5-7). For a third time the women were told the glorious truth of Jesus’ resurrection, a truth whose fulfillment they should have been eagerly expecting.

One of the angels then said, **“Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead.”** The women’s fascination must quickly turn to proclamation. They did not have time to revel in the marvelous reality of the good news but were to go immediately and announce it to the cowering disciples, who were still hiding in Jerusalem.

It would seem more than justified for the Lord to have allowed the disciples to suffer in fear, despair, and agony for a week or so before telling them the good news. They had stubbornly refused to believe that Jesus would die and be raised, although He had told them of His death and resurrection many times. But in His gracious mercy God sent the women to tell the disciples as soon as possible, so they would not have to experience another moment of misery and grief. He did not rebuke them for their lack of faith and for their cowardice but rather sent them messengers with a gracious word of hope and comfort.

One wonders why God chose to reveal the truth of the resurrection first to those women rather than to the disciples. One commentator suggests that it was because God chooses the weak to confound the strong. Another suggests the women were rewarded for their faithful service to the Lord in Galilee. Another holds that, because death came by a woman in a garden, so new life was first announced to a woman in a garden. Others

propose that it was because the deepest sorrow deserves the deepest joy or that supreme love deserves supreme privilege.

But Scripture offers no such explanations. It seems obvious that the women were the first to hear the angelic announcement of the resurrection simply because they were there. Had the disciples been there, they, too, would have heard the good news directly from the angel rather than indirectly from the women.

This is analogous to the reality that the closer a believer stays to the Lord and to His work, the more he is going to witness and experience the Lord's power. Those who are there when the Lord's people gather for worship and prayer, who are there when His Word is being taught, who are there when the lost are being won to Christ, who are there when others are being served in His name, who are regular in their times of private prayer—those are the ones who will most often experience first-hand the work of God.

The angel's further instruction to the women was to tell Jesus' disciples that **“He is going before you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you.”** Earlier in the week Jesus had told the eleven remaining disciples, “After I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee” (Matt. 26:32). Being both Jewish and Gentile, Galilee represented the world at large. It was there that Jesus began His ministry, in “Galilee of the Gentiles,” where “the people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light” (Matt. 4:15-16). It would also be in Galilee that the disciples would receive the Great Commission from the Lord to “go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:19).

It was not that Jesus would first appear to the disciples in Galilee, because He manifested Himself to them several times before that. He appeared to Peter (Luke 24:34), to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:15; cf. Mark 16:12), to ten of the disciples as they were assembled on resurrection evening (John 20:19), to all eleven disciples eight days later (John 20:26), and to seven of the disciples as they were fishing in the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1).

But Jesus' supreme appearance to the disciples was to be in **Galilee**, where He “appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time” (1 Cor. 15:6) and where He would commission the eleven to apostolic ministry.

JOY

And they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples. (28:8)

Obediently responding to the angel's command, the women **departed quickly** from the tomb. And although they had the angel's comforting assurance, the women understandably had a remnant of **fear**. But their fear was now tempered by **great joy** at learning the good news of Jesus' resurrection.

Mary Magdalene had left the tomb before the angels appeared and on her own initiative reported her findings to Peter and John, saying, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him" (John 20:2). She then followed those two disciples back to the tomb, where they, too, found only the linen wrappings. The other women and the angels had left the garden, and, disappointed and confused, the two men "went away again to their own homes" (vv. 5-10). While Mary remained outside the tomb weeping, the two angels appeared to her and then the Lord Himself. It was not until Jesus called her by name, however, that she recognized Him and shouted, "Rabboni!" (vv. 11-16). She then reported her wonderful experience to the disciples in Jerusalem (v. 18).

When she told the other apostles about her encounter with the resurrected Christ, they did not believe her (Mark 16:11). Their disbelief (see also Mark 16:13; Luke 24:10-11) clearly proves that they had no intention of stealing Jesus' body in order to propagate a counterfeit resurrection, as the chief priests and Pharisees feared they would do (Matt. 27:62-64; 28:13).

WORSHIP

And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him. (28:9)

Meanwhile, as the other women were on their way to report the angel's message to the disciples, **Jesus met them and greeted them**. **Greeted** translates *chairete*, a common greeting that loosely rendered

means something like “hello” or “good morning.” It was the ordinary salutation of the marketplace and of travelers who passed each other on the road. In other words the greeting was casual and ordinary, seemingly too mundane to be appropriate for such a momentous occasion. Yet the glorified Christ, who had just finished conquering sin and death, deigned to greet those faithful women with warm, informal tenderness. As the writer of Hebrews assures us, “We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses” (Heb. 4:15).

Immediately recognizing their Lord, the women **came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him.** They now knew with certainty that He was the risen Messiah, the divine Son of God, and that adoration and praise were the only proper responses to His presence. They did what every person, unbeliever as well as believer, will do one day. When He comes again, “every knee [will] bow . . . and . . . every tongue [will] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10-11).

At last the full reality of the resurrection was solidifying in the minds and hearts of those women. They had heard the angel’s proclamation of the resurrection, had seen the empty tomb, had beheld the risen Lord, and had even touched His glorified body. They could now do nothing but adore and worship Him.

Sir Edward Clarke wrote:

As a lawyer I have made a prolonged study of the evidences for the events of the first Easter Day. To me the evidence is conclusive, and over and over again in the High Court I have secured the verdict on evidence not nearly so compelling. Inference follows on evidence, and a truthful witness is always artless and disdains effect. The Gospel evidence for the resurrection is of this class, and as a lawyer I accept it unreservedly as the testimony of truthful men to facts they were able to substantiate. (Cited in J. R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1971], p. 47)

In a similar statement, the noted historian and Oxford professor Thomas Arnold wrote:

The evidence for our Lord's life and death and resurrection may be, and often has been, shown to be satisfactory; it is good according to the common rules for distinguishing good evidence from bad. Thousands and tens of thousands of persons have gone through it piece by piece as carefully as every judge summing upon a most important case. I have myself done it many times over, not to persuade others but to satisfy myself. I have been used for many years to study the histories of other times and to examine and weigh the evidence of those who have written about them, and I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of a fair inquirer, than the great sign which God hath given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead. (Wilbur M. Smith, *Therefore Stand: Christian Apologetics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965], pp 425-26)

HOPE

Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they shall see Me." (28:10)

Jesus repeated the angel's message, saying, "**Do not be afraid; go take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee.**" Despite the disciples' lack of faith, their cowardice, and their defection, the Lord graciously spoke of them as His **brethren**. When they arrived in **Galilee**, they would see Him again, and there they would experience a great convocation and commissioning by the Lord.

Matthew's brief glimpse of the resurrection is artless and unadorned, completely lacking pretense or exaggeration. He does not argue or beg the issues but simply places the truths before the reader to be accepted for what they are.

The basic truth of the resurrection undergirds a number of other truths. First, it gives evidence that the Word of God is totally true and reliable. Jesus rose from the dead precisely when and in the way He had predicted (see Matt. 12:40; 16:21; 17:9, 23).

Second, the resurrection means that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, as He claimed to be, and that He has power over life and death. Third, the resurrection proves that salvation is complete, that on the cross Christ conquered sin, death, and hell and rose victorious. Fourth, the resurrection proves that the church has been established. Jesus had declared, “I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it” (Matt. 16:18). “The gates of Hades” was a Jewish colloquialism that represented death. His resurrection proved that death itself could not prevent Christ from establishing His church.

Fifth, the resurrection proves that judgment is coming. Jesus declared that the heavenly Father “has given all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22), and since the Son was now risen and alive, His judgment is certain. Sixth, the resurrection of Christ proves that heaven is waiting. Jesus promised, “In My house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). Because Christ is alive by the resurrection, believers have the assurance that He is now preparing a heavenly dwelling for them.

**The Lie That Proves
the Resurrection 25
(28:11-15)**

Now while they were on their way, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened. And when they had assembled with the elders and counseled together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, and said, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.’ And if this should come to the governor’s ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble.” And they took the money and did as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day. (28:11-15)

Some years ago the Canadian author G. B. Hardy wrote a book about life, philosophy, and destiny entitled *Countdown: A Time to Choose* (Chicago: Moody, 1971). He noted that there are really only two questions to ask with regard to destiny: (1) Has anyone ever defeated death? and (2) If so, did he make a way for us to do it also? Hardy then explains that he found the answer to both questions in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and that with that answer he also found salvation and eternal life (pp. 31-32).

But despite the fact that the resurrection is man’s only hope for eternal life, the majority of people, including many who have studied it thoroughly, have rejected it. In doing so, they not only forfeit the future life but are left without true meaning or significance in the present life. Rejecting the resurrection is spiritual suicide.

Furthermore, denying the resurrection goes against the very grain of the human heart and soul. Solomon wrote that God “has also set eternity in their heart” (Eccles. 3:11). Something within man is not satisfied with present earthly living. He instinctively reaches out for immortality, for a life that transcends his present life and that will continue after he dies. Throughout history countless religions and philosophies have proposed

means for man to achieve immortality, to find a better life beyond the grave.

Yet, strangely, there seems always to have been more religious than irreligious people who consciously deny the only hope for immortality. And through the years many theories have been propounded for the explicit purpose of explaining away the resurrection, especially the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The “swoon theory” proposes that Jesus did not actually die but went into a deep coma, or swoon, from the severe pain and trauma of the crucifixion. While in the cool atmosphere of the tomb and with the stimulating aroma of the burial spices, He revived and was somehow able to unwrap Himself and escape after the grave was opened. When He showed Himself to the disciples, they erroneously assumed He had been raised from the dead.

That theory was not dreamed up until around 1600, by a man named Venturini. But the idea flies in the face of many eyewitness reports, not only by Jesus’ followers but also by His enemies. The Roman soldiers standing guard over Jesus at the cross were the first to report His death. They were experts at execution and would stand to forfeit their own lives if they allowed a condemned man to escape death. They were so certain He was dead that they did not bother to break His legs, and when the spear thrust brought forth blood and water, they had final proof of His death. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, with many women as witnesses and perhaps as helpers, worked with Jesus’ body for an hour or so as they wrapped it in the linen and spices. They would easily have sensed any spark of life still remaining.

For that theory to be true, Jesus would have had to survive the massive loss of blood from the scourging, the nail wounds, and the spear thrust. He would also have had to survive being wrapped tightly in the linen cloths that were filled with a hundred pounds of spices. Besides all of that, in His extremely weakened condition He would have had to endure more than forty hours without food or drink, manage to unwrap Himself, singlehandedly roll the stone away from the inside of the tomb, walk out unchallenged by the guards, and then convince His followers He had actually been dead and miraculously raised. He would have had to have developed the strength to travel countless miles in that condition to make the many appearances to His disciples over a period of forty days. Finally,

He would have had to delude the apostles into thinking He entered a closed room without opening the door and ascended to heaven before their eyes. The absurdity of that theory is too obvious to be accepted by any clear-thinking person, believer or not.

The “no-burial theory” contends that there was actually no interment, that Jesus was never placed in the tomb and therefore would not have been in it on Sunday morning. His body was instead thrown into a mass grave for criminals, according to Roman custom. But neither the Jewish leaders nor the Roman guards would have bothered to secure and seal the tomb if they knew Jesus’ body was not inside. Not only that, but to disprove Jesus’ resurrection they would only have had to retrieve His body and put it on display.

The “hallucination theory” maintains that everyone who claimed to have seen the risen Jesus simply experienced a hallucination, induced by an ardent expectation of His resurrection. But Thomas was not the only believer who was slow to believe the Lord was alive again. Every gospel account makes clear that most of His followers, including the apostles, did *not* believe, either before or after the crucifixion, that He would be raised. Besides that, how could more than 500 people hallucinate in exactly the same way?

The “telepathy theory” proposes that there was no physical resurrection, but rather God sent divine telepathic messages to Christians that caused them to believe Jesus was alive. But that theory, among other things, makes the God of truth a deceiver and the apostles and gospel writers liars. And if such mental images did come from God, they were defective and slow to produce the intended result, because in a number of instances Jesus was not recognized when He first appeared to individuals and groups who knew Him intimately.

The “seance theory” suggests that a powerful spiritualist, or medium, conjured up the image of Jesus by means of occult power and that His followers were thereby deluded into thinking they saw Him. But if that were so, how did they hold onto His feet, put a hand in His wounded side, and eat a meal with Him? Seances deal strictly in the noncorporeal and ephemeral and are not made of such physical and tangible things as those.

The “mistaken identity theory” is based on the assumption that someone impersonated Jesus and was able to dupe His closest friends and

companions into thinking he was really their Lord come back to life. But the imposter would have had to have himself scourged, crowned with thorns, pierced in his hands and feet, and wounded in the side to make such an impersonation even close to convincing. He would also have had to mimic Jesus' voice, mannerisms, and other traits to an unimaginable degree of perfection. He would have had to steal Jesus' body from the tomb and hide it. He would also have had to be an insider among Jesus' followers in order to identify and talk convincingly with the many people he met during the appearances. He would also have had to know exactly where to find the people on every occasion and been able to perform such illusions as materializing through walls and appearing and vanishing at will. And he would have had to be prepared in advance even of the crucifixion to do all of those amazing things, because the first appearance was early on resurrection morning.

The noted French philosopher Renan debunked the resurrection by foolishly claiming the whole idea was based on the hysterical delusions of Mary Magdalene (*The Life of Jesus* [New York: Carleton, 1886], pp. 356-57). But Mary was but one among more than 500 witnesses, all of whom testified to the same reality. In his book *Risen Indeed*, G. D. Yarnold advances the idea that the "material of which [Christ's] earthly body had been composed ceased to exist, or was annihilated" ([New York: Oxford, 1959], p. 22).

Besides their own unique shortcomings, all of those theories fail to explain how the apostles could be transformed from cowards to heroes and how such a dynamic entity as the church could come into existence, produce thousands of followers willing to die for their beliefs, and manage to turn the world upside down if their faith was built on illusions and falsehoods.

Such unbelieving critics also fail to explain what happened to Jesus' body. If the resurrection were falsified, in whatever way, the deceit could have easily and quickly been exposed by producing the dead body. But neither the Jewish leaders nor the Romans even attempted to make such a disclosure.

The "theft theory," which contends that someone managed to steal the body and hide it, is the only one that attempts to explain the missing body. But the only ones who might have had a motive for stealing it were the disciples, in order to try to fulfill Jesus' prediction that He would rise

from the dead on the third day. That, as Matthew explains in the present passage, was the explanation promulgated by the Jewish leaders.

Yet Matthew's narrative of this strange episode reveals that even that deceitful scheme became a rich and compelling apologetic not against but for the resurrection. He first describes the plot itself and then briefly tells how the proposed lie was propagated.

THE PLOT

Now while they were on their way, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened. And when they had assembled with the elders and counseled together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, and said, "You are to say, 'His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.' And if this should come to the governor's ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble." (28:11-14)

They refers to the women to whom Jesus had just spoken and who were obediently **on their way** to give the disciples His message to meet Him in Galilee (vv. 5-10).

At this same time, **behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened.** Only **some of the guard** went **into the city** of Jerusalem **and reported to the chief priests**, probably as representatives of the whole contingent, which may have numbered as many as a dozen. For all of them to have gone together would have attracted considerable attention, and word of their mission would surely have reached Pilate's ear. Because it was still early on the third day after Jesus' crucifixion, Pilate would immediately have had them arrested and probably executed, both for leaving their post while on duty and for failing to fulfill their assignment to protect Jesus' body from theft (see 27:62-66). Presumably the rest of **the guard** remained at the tomb.

Because they were in the temporary service of the Jewish religious leaders, the soldiers wisely **reported to the chief priests all that had happened** at the tomb. They had much less to fear from the **chief priests** than from Pilate, and they probably hoped those leaders could somehow protect them from the governor.

Included in **all** the things **that had happened** were the earth-quake, the rolling away of the stone, the blazing angel sitting on the stone, and the empty tomb. The soldiers knew those happenings had a super-natural origin, and it was that knowledge that caused them first to shake violently and then freeze in catatonic fear. They did not try to explain what they saw but simply reported it as best they could. It is possible that, because of the guards' report, the chief priests learned of Jesus' resurrection even before the disciples did.

But despite that firsthand, unprejudiced testimony and their own awareness that Jesus claimed He would rise from the dead on the third day, the chief priests showed no interest in verifying the guards' story. It did not really matter to them whether or not Jesus was raised, just as it did not matter that Jesus had performed marvelous miracles before their own eyes. Some of the chief priests had stood beneath the cross, taunting Jesus and saying, "Let Him come down from the cross, and we shall believe Him" (27:42). But their duplicity was now exposed, because the resurrection was a greater miracle than coming down from the cross would have been, and yet they did not believe. As Abraham told the rich man in Jesus' parable, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:26). The heart that is hardened to God will not be persuaded by any miracle or by any amount of evidence, no matter how compelling. The **chief priests** were so evil, self-willed, and spiritually blind that they shut their eyes to every confirmation of Jesus' claims. The god of this world had totally blinded their eyes (2 Cor. 4:4).

The Jewish leaders had been trying to get rid of Jesus since the time He was an infant. Herod tried to eliminate Christ by slaughtering all the male babies in his province in order to remove Him as a supposed threat to his throne. The religious leaders had accused Him of working miracles in the power of Satan, of being an associate of sinners, of breaking God's law by healing on the Sabbath, and of blasphemy for claiming to be the Messiah and God's Son. They perverted both biblical and rabbinical justice in order to convict Him, employed blackmail to get Him crucified, used armed force to try to keep His body in the grave, and now engaged in bribery to hide the truth of His resurrection.

The soldiers' news brought alarm, fear, and confusion to the religious leaders, but it did not bring repentance or faith. They were

without excuse. They were informed about the resurrection and did not try to deny it. Their only concern was to keep that news from their fellow Jews, fearing that many would accept Him as the Messiah and that their own influence, power, and wealth would be severely diminished.

The first reaction was to quickly convene the Sanhedrin, **and when they had assembled with the elders, they counseled together** as to how they might best obstruct the spreading of the news the soldiers had brought. **Counseled together** was a formal phrase used of official decisions (see also Matt. 12:14; 22:15; 27:1, 7), and at this meeting the Sanhedrin decided on a three-point resolution: to bribe the soldiers, to spread a lie about the body, and to protect the soldiers from possible reprisal by Pilate.

The amount of the **large sum of money** is not specified, but because there were possibly a dozen guards to be bribed and the Sanhedrin was desperate, it probably was a considerable **sum**. *Argurion (money)* literally means silver, and is the same word used in Matthew 26:15 for the bribe given to Judas to betray Jesus. Because they had so much at stake, the Sanhedrin did not hesitate to pay a high price for the lie to be spread.

The second part of the resolution was a plan to disseminate the falsehood as widely as possible. Because the soldiers were at the tomb and had their own reasons for spreading the lie, they were the obvious candidates for the job. The soldiers were therefore instructed **to say, “His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.”** Both the guards and the Sanhedrin knew full well that was not true, otherwise they would not have had to devise such a false and preposterous story. The purpose of the lie was to hide the truth.

Those soldiers became the first persons to preach that antigospel falsehood. They were pagan, materialistic, self-indulgent, and hardened to every sort of evil. Telling what to them was a trivial and insignificant lie was a small price to gain the Sanhedrin’s favor and protection.

The third part of the Sanhedrin’s resolution offered protection to the soldiers. **“If this should come to the governor’s ears,”** the chief priests reassured them, **“we will win him over and keep you out of trouble.”** As already noted, the soldiers knew that if Pilate thought Jesus’ body was stolen while they slept, their lives would be forfeit.

By threatening to make an unfavorable report to Caesar, the Jewish religious leaders had usually managed to have their way with Pilate. They

knew he would not risk trouble with Caesar over the disposition of a Jewish corpse. If the Sanhedrin came to the soldiers' defense, the governor probably would give them no more than a reprimand.

By that resolution the Jewish leaders willfully rejected Christ, despite the evidence, and that spiritual obstinacy gave testimony to the apostasy of Israel's leaders.

THE PROPAGATION

And they took the money and did as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day. (28:15)

The soldiers gladly **took the money**, overjoyed that they not only would not be punished but would even be rewarded. They were therefore more than willing to do the Sanhedrin's bidding and **did as they had been instructed**.

Matthew then comments that **this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day**. Matthew wrote his gospel some thirty years later, about A.D. 63, the time to which **this day** refers. The tomb guards were the first to **spread** the falsehood, but the Sanhedrin doubtlessly began spreading it **among the Jews** by many other means as well.

The Sanhedrin's lie was still common among the Jews of the second century. The church Father Justin Martyr wrote in chapter 103 of his *Dialogue with Trypho*, "You [Jewish leaders] have sent chosen and ordained men throughout all the world to proclaim that a godless and lawless heresy had sprung from one Jesus, a Galilaean deceiver, whom we crucified, but his disciples stole him by night from the tomb . . . and now deceived men by asserting that he has risen from the dead and ascended into heaven" (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973], p. 253). That same falsehood can be heard even today.

But as wicked and self-serving as the Sanhedrin's plan was, it fit perfectly into God's much greater and sovereign plan. God did not want unbelievers to proclaim the true gospel, even had they wanted to. The Lord would not send out messengers to preach the resurrection who did not believe in the One who was raised. In His eternal wisdom, God permitted those guardians of the grave, who could have spread the factual, historic truth of the resurrection, to become victimized by the corrupt Jewish

leaders. The resurrection of the Son of God would be proclaimed only by those whose hearts were committed to the risen Savior and Lord.

Evidence for the resurrection is supplied by the very **story** that denies it. And because it came from Jesus' enemies rather than His friends, it should be all the more convincing to skeptics. Intending to conceal the truth, the Sanhedrin and the soldiers actually reinforced it.

Although the explanation that the disciples stole Jesus' body accounts for the missing corpse, in some ways it is even more absurd than the other negative theories mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

In the first place, if their story had been true, the Jewish leaders could surely have found the stolen body with little difficulty. They had the resources of hundreds of men, including military men, and even the power of Rome behind them in this instance. It would have been utterly impossible for eleven unlearned and unsophisticated men to have succeeded in eluding a search for any length of time. The simplest way to have disproved the resurrection was to locate the body and put it on display for all the world to see. Yet there is no evidence that the Sanhedrin even attempted to find the body they claimed the disciples had stolen. The failure of the Sanhedrin to make such a search is strong evidence that they themselves actually believed Jesus was raised.

Another obvious flaw in the Sanhedrin's lie was the basic idea itself. To suggest that the disciples stole the body was to show complete ignorance of those men's state of mind at the time. They had not believed Jesus' many predictions of His resurrection, and, now that He had been crucified, they were hopelessly dejected and afraid. If anything, they had even less belief in His resurrection after His death than they had had before.

When the women reported Jesus' resurrection to the eleven apostles and the other believers with them in Jerusalem, "these words appeared to [the apostles] as nonsense, and they would not believe them" (Luke 24:11). Their personal prejudices and human understanding, common to most Jews of that day, prevented them from accepting the idea of the Messiah's death, thereby making belief in His resurrection impossible. Those men did not have the least motive for stealing Jesus' body. Because He had been given an uncommonly fine burial by Joseph and Nicodemus—a much better burial than the disciples could have afforded—what better place for His body to remain than in the garden

tomb? The apostles had no reason to counterfeit a resurrection they did not even believe in themselves. How could it be that the men who fled for their lives while Jesus was still alive would, after His death, suddenly muster the courage and ingenuity to steal the body and then boldly start preaching and teaching in the name of a Jesus they knew was dead?

When the apostles finally came to believe in the reality of Jesus' resurrection, there was no stopping their proclamation of that grand and beautiful truth. Those who had shortly before been skeptical cowards became unflinching zealots in their proclamation of the risen Christ. But they had no such zeal immediately after the resurrection, because they did not even believe it, much less have a desire to proclaim it.

It was highly implausible that all of the soldiers would have gone to sleep long enough for the disciples to have moved the stone and stolen the body, and even more implausible that the noise from moving the stone would not have awakened a single soldier.

The Roman military divided the night into four watches of between two and three hours each. A certain number of the men would keep watch while the rest slept, keeping up the rotation until dawn. Three hours was not a long period of time to stay awake, especially if one were under threat of imprisonment or death for sleeping on watch.

Perhaps the most patently absurd problem with the proposed lie was that, had the soldiers all been asleep, how could they have known who stole the body? And if some onlooker had told the soldiers what happened, why did they not immediately search for the thieves and try to retrieve the body rather than run to the chief priests to report their failure?

The testimony of Jesus' enemies was in some ways even more astounding than that of His friends would be. It was because the soldiers and the Sanhedrin could not deny that the tomb had been supernaturally opened and Jesus supernaturally released that the lie was concocted. Had the resurrection been a hoax, it would have been an easy one to expose.

Some commentators have suggested that the disciples were the first to bribe the soldiers, asking them to report the empty tomb story to the Sanhedrin. But as just mentioned, the disciples had no motive for doing such a thing. Besides that, where would they have come up with enough money to make a bribe attractive to the soldiers?

Other people have suggested that the disciples cleverly distracted the soldiers and sneaked the body out while the guards were not looking.

But had they found such courage, how did they manage to draw all the soldiers far enough away to prevent their hearing the giant stone's being moved? And how did they manage to keep the grave cloths just as they had been when covering Jesus' body. Had the disciples tried such a maneuver, they would have been in the utmost hurry to get Jesus' body out as quickly as possible. They had no reason to take off the wrappings, because the body would already have started to decompose. In addition to that, the body would have been much easier to carry while wrapped.

Why, we might ask, did Matthew sound such a negative note on the climactic event in Christ's work almost at the end of his gospel account? Brief as the passage is, it is still longer than his final few words about the Great Commission.

The answer would seem to be twofold. First, the account serves to demonstrate Israel's full and final apostasy as a nation, of whom those Jewish leaders were representative. They denied Jesus' resurrection just as they had opposed everything else He said or did. Second, the efforts of those enemies is perhaps the strongest human testimony to the reality of the resurrection, causing it to have the exact opposite effect from what was intended.

Matthew's account simply but forcefully shows that any explanation but the actual bodily resurrection of Jesus contradicts the facts and offends reason. The truth of the resurrection is so absolute that even a lie against it helps prove it. Whether the testimony is from Jesus' friends or His enemies, the same conclusion is inevitable. No other historical event is so thoroughly attested by sound evidence as is the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Simon Greenleaf, famous nineteenth-century professor of law at Harvard wrote, "All that Christianity asks of men . . . is, that they would be consistent with themselves; that they would treat its evidences as they treat the evidence of other things; and that they would try and judge its actors and witnesses, as they deal with their fellow men, when testifying to human affairs and actions, in human tribunals. . . . The result. . . will be an undoubting conviction of their integrity, ability and truth" (*Testimony of the Evangelists, Examined by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965; reprint], p. 46).

Paul declared, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be

saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation” (Rom. 10:9-10). Salvation is equal to eternal life, to deliverance from sin, and to godly hope. Salvation determines a person’s destiny in the presence of God in the glories of heaven forever. And salvation belongs only to those who believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and who confess Him as Lord and Savior and thereby identify themselves with Him.

The hymnist Robert Lowry wrote the following beautiful lines that are sung in the popular Easter hymn “Christ Arose”:

Death cannot keep his prey,
 Jesus, My Savior!
He tore the bars away,
 Jesus, my Lord!

Up from the grave He arose,
 With a mighty triumph o’er His foes;
He arose a victor from the dark domain,
 And He lives forever with His saints to reign.
He arose! He arose!
 Hallelujah! Christ arose!

Making Disciples
of All Nations 26
(28:16-20)

But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. And when they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful. And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (28:16-20)

If a Christian understands all the rest of the gospel of Matthew but fails to understand this closing passage, he has missed the point of the entire book. This passage is the climax and major focal point not only of this gospel but of the entire New Testament. It is not an exaggeration to say that, in its broadest sense, it is the focal point of all Scripture, Old Testament as well as New.

This central message of Scripture pertains to the central mission of the people of God, a mission that, tragically, many Christians do not understand or are unwilling to fulfill. It seems obvious that some Christians think little about their mission in this world, except in regard to their own personal needs. They attend services and meetings when it is convenient, take what they feel like taking, and have little concern for anything else. They are involved in the church only to the extent that it serves their own desires. It escapes both their understanding and their concern that the Lord has given His church a supreme mission and that He calls every believer to be an instrument in fulfilling that mission.

If the average evangelical congregation were surveyed concerning the primary purpose of the church, it is likely that many diverse answers would be given. Several purposes, however, would probably be prominent.

A large number would rank fellowship first, the opportunity to associate and interact with fellow Christians who share similar beliefs and values. They highly value the fact that the church provides activities and programs for the whole family and is a place where relationships are nurtured and shared and where inspiration is provided through good preaching and beautiful music. A favorite verse for such church members is likely to be, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

At a level perhaps a step higher, some Christians would consider sound biblical teaching to be the church’s principal function, expounding Scripture and strengthening believers in knowledge of and obedience to God’s revealed truth. That emphasis would include helping believers discover and minister their spiritual gifts in various forms of leadership and service. Like fellowship, that too is a basic function of the church, because God “gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ” (Eph. 4:11-13).

Adding a more elevated level, some members would consider praise of God to be the supreme purpose of the church. They emphasize the church as a praising community that exalts the Lord in adoration, homage, and reverence. Praise is clearly a central purpose of God’s people, just as it has always been and will always be a central activity of heaven, where both saints and angels will eternally sing praises to God. “Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God,” sing the twenty-four elders lying prostrate before God’s throne, “to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they existed, and were created” (Rev. 4:10-11; cf. 5:8-14).

Paul declares that God has “predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace . . . to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory” (Eph. 1:5-6, 12; cf. v. 14). Later in that same epistle he exults, “To Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever” (3:21).

Jesus came into the world to manifest God's glory, the "glory as of the only begotten from the Father" (John 1:14), as "the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature" (Heb. 1:3). Just as their Lord, Jesus Christ, came into the world with the supreme purpose of glorifying His Father, so those who belong to Christ have that same purpose. We are to praise, honor, and glorify our God in every dimension of life.

All of those emphases are thoroughly biblical and should characterize every body of believers. But neither separately nor together do they represent the central purpose and mission of the church in the world. The supreme purpose and motive of every individual believer and every body of believers is to glorify God.

The mission that flows out of our loving fellowship, our spiritual growth, and our praise is that of being God's faithful and obedient instruments in His divine plan to redeem the world. That plan began in eternity past, before the foundation of the world. But it did not go into effect until Adam chose to sin, fell from fellowship with God, and was spiritually separated from Him. Since that fateful day in the Garden of Eden, fallen, natural man has been trying to hide from God, and God has been redeeming men back to Himself. From that first time of sin, it has always been God who, solely out of His own gracious love, has taken the initiative to restore men to righteousness. God has always taken the initiative for man's salvation and restoration, from His first call to Adam, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9), to His last call in Revelation: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost" (Rev. 22:17).

It was not until sinful mankind persisted in withdrawing further and further from God that He divided them into separate nations. When He needed a witnessing nation to the world, He called out Israel as His chosen people through Abraham. When Israel failed in that calling, God chose a remnant from among them to do what the nation would not. When the nation of Israel rejected her Messiah and King, Jesus Christ, God called out the church, His new chosen instrument to redeem the world.

God has been drawing, is now drawing, and, until the final judgment, will continue to draw sinful men back to Himself and to restore the world that sin has corrupted—all for the purpose of bringing glory to

Himself. When sinners are saved, God is glorified, because their salvation cost Him the death of His own Son, the immeasurable price that His magnanimous grace was willing to pay.

The supreme way in which God chose to glorify Himself was through the redemption of sinful men, and it is through participation in that redemptive plan that believers themselves most glorify God. Through Christ, God was “reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them,” Paul declares, “and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19). That is a work of such magnitude and graciousness that even the heavenly angels long to look into it (1 Pet.1:12).

Nothing so much glorifies God as His gracious redemption of damned, hell-bound sinners. It was for that ultimate purpose that God called Abraham, that in him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). It was never the Lord’s intention to isolate Israel as His sole focus of concern but rather to use that specially chosen and blessed nation to reach all other nations of the world for Himself. Israel was called to “proclaim good tidings of His salvation from day to day” and to “tell of His glory among the nations, His wonderful deeds among all the peoples” (1 Chron. 16:23-24; cf. Ps. 18:49). Like her Messiah, Israel was to be “a light to the nations so that [the Lord’s] salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa. 49:6; cf. 42:10-12; 66:19; Jonah 3:1-10).

It has never been God’s will for any person “to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). He “desires all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). God’s heart has always yearned to bring sinful, rebellious men back to Himself, to give them new, righteous, and eternal life through His Son, Jesus Christ. He so greatly “loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Paul rejoiced that God’s “grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God” (2 Cor. 4:15). The apostle admonished the Corinthian believers and all Christians: “Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Every time an unbeliever is saved by God’s grace, God is glorified, and another voice is added to the “Hallelujah Chorus,” as it were.

The great mission of the church is to so love, learn, and live as to call men and women to Jesus Christ. As sinners are forgiven and are

transformed from death to life and from darkness to light, God is glorified through that gracious miracle. The glory of God is manifest in His loving provision to redeem lost men. He Himself paid the ultimate price to fulfill His glory.

Therefore the believer who desires to glorify God, who wants to honor God's supreme will and purpose, must share God's love for the lost world and share in His mission to redeem the lost to Himself. Christ came into the world that He loved and sought to win sinners to Himself for the Father's glory. As Christ's representatives, we are likewise sent into the world that He loves to bring the lost to Him and thereby bring glory and honor to God. Our mission is the same mission as that of the Father and of the Son.

In His great high priestly prayer, Christ prayed, "This is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent. I glorified Thee on the earth, having accomplished the work which Thou hast given Me to do" (John 17:3-4). In His incarnation, Jesus glorified the Father by accomplishing His mission of providing eternal life to those who trust in Him, by reconciling lost men to the God they had forsaken. Jesus' supreme purpose on earth was "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10).

That is therefore also the supreme mission of Christ's church. The work of the church is an extension of the work of her Lord. "As Thou didst send Me into the world," Jesus said to His Father, "I also have sent them into the world" (John 17:18).

If God's primary purpose for the saved were loving fellowship, He would take believers immediately to heaven, where spiritual fellowship is perfect, unhindered by sin, disharmony, or loneliness. If His primary purpose for the saved were the learning of His Word, He would also take believers immediately to heaven, where His Word is perfectly known and understood. And if God's primary purpose for the saved were to give Him praise, He would, again, take believers immediately to heaven, where praise is perfect and unending.

There is only one reason the Lord allows His church to remain on earth: to seek and to save the lost, just as Christ's only reason for coming to earth was to seek and to save the lost. "As the Father has sent Me," He declared, "I also send you" (John 20:21). Therefore, a believer who is not

committed to winning the lost for Jesus Christ should reexamine his relationship to the Lord and certainly his divine reason for existence.

Fellowship, teaching, and praise are not the mission of the church but are rather the preparation of the church to fulfill its mission of winning the lost. And just as in athletics, training should never be confused with or substituted for actually competing in the game, which is the reason for all the training.

How tragic that so much of Christ's church is preoccupied with trivialities. Many Christians are fascinated with the process and have no thought for the goal. They are preoccupied with the spiritually insignificant and show little commitment to reaching the lost.

The resources God has provided most churches are, for the most part, barely tapped in their efforts to call men and women and boys and girls to Jesus Christ. The contemporary church is blessed with previously unheard of means of proclaiming the saving message of Christ to the world. But like the world at large, it is frequently crippled by indulgent, self-centered preoccupations. Instead of asking, for instance, how we might get by with a smaller house or car and use the saved money in the Lord's work, we are inclined to dream about getting bigger and nicer ones.

A counselor of my acquaintance has long had the practice of asking those who come to him for spiritual advice to show him their check stubs for the past year or so. His purpose is to help them recognize their true priorities, which invariably are reflected in the way they spend their money. Another helpful revealer of priorities is one's calendar or appointment book, because where and for what we spend our time is also a reliable barometer of our true interests and concerns.

Christian fellowship, biblical preaching and teaching, and times of praise to God are good and godly, and in many ways carry their own rewards and blessings. But reaching the lost for Christ is much more difficult and demanding, and the results are often slow in coming and the rewards are sometimes long delayed. The gospel is frequently resented by those to whom we witness, and sometimes faithful witnessing is ridiculed even by fellow believers. Yet above all others, that ministry can only be accomplished while we are on earth. We will have no opportunity in heaven to call the lost to the Savior.

In his devotional book *Quiet Talks with World Winners*, S. D. Gordon recounted the story of a group of amateur climbers who planned to

ascend Mont Blanc in the French Alps. On the evening before the climb, the guides stated the basic requirement for success. Because it was an exceedingly difficult climb, one could reach the top by taking only the necessary equipment for climbing, leaving all unnecessary accessories behind.

One athletic young man discounted the guides' advice, thinking it could not possibly apply to him. He showed up for the climb with a blanket, a small case of wine, a camera, a set of notebooks, and a pocketful of snacks. Although warned again by the guides, the strong-willed young man nevertheless started out ahead of the rest to prove his superior skill and endurance.

But as the other climbers proceeded up the mountainside, they began to notice various articles left by the path. First, they noticed the young's man's food and wine, a short while later the notebooks and camera, and finally the blanket. The young man managed to reach the peak, but, just as the guides had predicted, he did so only after discarding all his unnecessary paraphernalia.

Applying that illustration to the church, Mr. Gordon comments that, unlike that young climber, who eventually paid the price for success, many Christians, when they discover they cannot reach the top with their loads, simply stop climbing and settle down on the mountainside.

In the final message of Christ reported by Matthew, Jesus gives five explicit or implicit elements that are necessary for His followers to fulfill their supreme mission on earth—to reach the mountain peak of their calling, as it were. These essential elements may be summarized as availability, worship, submission, obedience, and power.

AVAILABILITY

But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. (28:16)

The first three elements for effectively fulfilling the church's mission are attitudes, the first of which is implied in the fact that **the eleven disciples** were where the Lord had told them to be.

As someone astutely observed many years ago, as far as a believer's service to God is concerned, the greatest ability is availability.

The most talented and gifted Christian is useless to God if he is not available to be used, just as God's greatest blessings are not available to those who are not present to receive them.

Faithful discipleship does not begin with knowing where you will be serving the Lord or in what capacity. It does not start with having a clear call to a certain ministry, or occupation, or place of service. It *always* begins with simply being available to God, putting all reservations and preconceptions aside.

The eleven disciples had not received the blessing of seeing the resurrected Jesus in the garden because, unlike the faithful women, they were not there. Now, however, **the eleven** were where Jesus wanted them to be, and consequently they received His Great Commission and His great promise.

Both before and after the resurrection Jesus said He would meet His disciples in Galilee (see Matt. 26:32; 28:7, 10). He had called a great conclave of His followers for the purpose of commissioning them to reach the world in His name, and now they were gathered at the appointed place.

We are not told when or how the Lord specified the exact time and place in Galilee where they were to gather, but they were now at **the particular mountain which Jesus had designated** on some previous occasion.

The last recorded appearance of Jesus in Jerusalem was eight days after the resurrection, when Thomas saw the resurrected Lord for the first time (John 20:26). The journey from Jerusalem to Galilee would have taken about a week, and after they arrived there some of the disciples went fishing, during which time the Lord appeared to them again, providing a catch too heavy to haul into the boat. Then, after having breakfast with them, Jesus asked Peter three times about his love for Him and gave the commission to feed His sheep (John 21:1-17). That event would have occurred at least fifteen days after the resurrection and probably closer to twenty. Because Jesus ascended from the Mount of Olives in the presence of the disciples, they had to take another week to travel back to Jerusalem. And because Jesus' postresurrection appearances covered a total of forty days (Acts 1:3), His giving of the Great Commission on the Galilean mountainside would have had to occur some time between twenty and thirty-five days after His resurrection.

We are not told who was present when Jesus gave the Great Commission, but it seems probable that it was the group of more than five hundred that Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 15:6. That has been the view of many biblical scholars throughout church history.

The fact that Matthew specifically mentions only **the eleven disciples** does not limit the gathering to them. The angel's message for the women to give to the disciples seems to imply that the women would also see Jesus in Galilee (see Matt. 28:7). There would have been no reason for Jesus to send the eleven to Galilee, only to have them return a few days later to the Mount of Olives for His ascension. It seems more reasonable that the Lord assembled a large group of believers and that He chose Galilee for the meeting place because most of His followers were from that region.

Because the Great Commission applies to all of His church, Jesus would surely have wanted to deliver it to the largest possible group of His faithful followers. Not only were most of Jesus' followers from Galilee, but that region was secluded and was a safe distance from Jerusalem, where most of Jesus' enemies were. And because the commission extends to all the world, Galilee, often referred to as Galilee of the Gentiles, also was appropriate for that reason.

Wherever the mountain was, it became a place of great sacredness, where more than five hundred of Jesus' disciples came with their weaknesses, confusion, doubts, misgivings, and fears. They were not the most humanly capable people in the world, nor the most intelligent or powerful or influential. But they were where the Lord wanted them to be, and that obedience gave evidence of their willingness to be used in His service. Like Isaiah after his vision in the Temple, they said, in effect, "Here am I. Send me" (Isa. 6:8).

Because they were there, they met Christ. Because they were there, they were commissioned. Because they were there, they received the Lord's promise of His continual presence and power as they ministered to the world in His name. It all started with being available.

WORSHIP

And when they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful. And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, (28:17-18a)

The second element implied here for effective fulfillment of the church's mission is the attitude of genuine worship. When God is not truly worshiped, He cannot be truly served, no matter how talented, gifted, or well-intentioned His servants may be.

The moment Jesus appeared and the disciples **saw Him, they worshiped Him**, prostrating themselves in humble adoration before their divine Lord and Savior. When they saw the risen Jesus on the hillside, their confusion disappeared and their shattered dreams were restored. Their sorrow turned into unbelievable joy and their disillusionment into unwavering hope.

The believers gathered there were not giving homage to a human dignitary or mere earthly ruler but were worshiping God's own Son, the Lord of heaven and earth. Though no spoken words are recorded, in their hearts they must have been saying with Thomas after his last doubts were assuaged, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

On but one previous occasion does Scripture say that the eleven disciples actually worshiped Jesus. After He walked to them on the water, they "worshiped Him, saying, 'You are certainly God's Son!'" (Matt. 14:33). Now their awe and their certainty of His divinity were immeasurably greater, because He was risen from the dead. It is probable that the worship of Christ on that day in Galilee has been equaled few other times in all of human history.

Yet, amazingly, **some were still doubtful**. That simple phrase inserted by Matthew is but one of countless small and indirect testimonies to the integrity of Scripture. In transparent honesty, the gospel writer sets forth the incident as it actually happened, with no attempt to make it more dramatic or convincing than it was. As he portrayed Jesus in His divine perfection, he also portrayed Jesus' followers, including himself, in their human imperfection.

Those who attempt to write history to their own liking are inclined to magnify that which is favorable and omit that which is not. Had Matthew and the other gospel writers contrived Jesus' resurrection, they would have had made every effort to exclude any fact or incident that would have tarnished their case. Nor would they have hesitated to falsify evidence and distort the truth. A person who lies about something of major importance has no scruples about telling lesser lies to support his primary

deceit. Matthew's simple honesty testifies both to his own honesty and to the integrity of God's Word.

The identity of the doubters is not given. Because the eleven disciples are the only ones specifically mentioned in this passage, some interpreters insist that those who **were doubtful** were of that group. But as already noted, it is probable that hundreds of other believers were also present.

Exactly what was doubted is also not specified. If the fact of Jesus' resurrection was in question, then the doubters could not have included any of the eleven, because all of them had already witnessed the risen Christ, some on several occasions. It seems most likely that the doubt concerned whether or not the person who appeared to them was actually the physically risen Christ or some form of imposter. Out of that large group, only the eleven disciples and some of the women who had come to the tomb had seen the risen Christ. Perhaps some of those in the back of the crowd could not see Jesus clearly and, like Thomas, were reluctant to believe such an amazing truth without firm evidence.

As if to alleviate that doubt, **Jesus** graciously **came up and spoke to them**. Whatever the doubt was and whoever the doubters were, as the Lord came nearer and as His familiar voice sounded in their ears once again, all uncertainty was erased. Now those who had doubted fell down and joined the others in worship.

Nothing else now mattered. It made no difference where they lived, what their heritage was, what their economic or social position was, or what their nationality was. They were now in the presence of the living God.

The complete focus was on Christ. That is the essence of true worship—single-minded, unhindered, and unqualified concentration on Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Not simply to the Corinthians, but to every person to whom he spoke and in every place he ministered, Paul “determined to know nothing among [them] except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). In his own life the apostle was determined to “know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Phil. 3:10). Paul's life was so totally Christ-centered that he could say with perfect sincerity, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21).

SUBMISSION

“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. (28:18b)

The third element for effective fulfillment of the church’s mission is another attitude, the implied attitude of submission. The focus of Jesus’ declaration here is on His sovereign lordship, but in context it also clearly relates to the believer’s response to His rule.

Before the Lord states the Great Commission, He establishes His divine authority to command it. It is because of His sovereign power that His followers are to have the attitude of complete, humble submission to His will.

Exousia (**authority**) refers to the freedom and right to speak and act as one pleases. In relation to God, that freedom and right are absolute and unlimited. The **all** is both reinforced and delineated by the phrase **in heaven and earth**. The sovereign authority **given** to Jesus by His heavenly Father (see Matt. 11:27; John 3:35) is absolute and universal.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus demonstrated His authority over disease and sickness (Matt. 4:23; 9:35), over demons (4:24; 8:32; 12:22), over sin (9:6), and over death (Mark 5:41-42; John 11:43-44). Except for the forgiveness of sins, Jesus even exhibited the authority to delegate such powers to certain of His followers (Matt. 10:1; Luke 10:9, 17). He has authority to bring all men before the tribunal of God and to condemn them to eternal death or bring them to eternal life (John 5:27-29; 17:2). He had the authority to lay down His own life and to take it up again (John 10:18). He has the sovereign authority to rule both heaven and earth and to subjugate Satan and his demons to eternal torment in the lake of fire (Rev 19:20; 20:10). Satan’s tempting Jesus by offering Him rulership over the world (Matt. 4:8-9) not only was wicked but foolish, because lordship of both heaven and earth was already Christ’s inheritance by divine fiat.

Even the prophet Daniel foresaw sovereign authority being given to Christ. In his night vision he beheld “One like a Son of Man . . . coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed” (Dan. 7:13-14; cf. Isa.9:6-7).

Jesus Himself described His coming dominion. “The sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky,” He said, “and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:30; cf. 26:64).

Jesus’ sovereign authority was **given to** Him by His Father, who “has given all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22), “made Him both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36), and has “highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil. 2:9-11). Then, finally, in an act of adoring love and submission, “when all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, that God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28).

Before giving the commission, Jesus first established His absolute, pervasive authority, because otherwise the command would have seemed hopelessly impossible for the disciples to fulfill, and they might have ignored it. Were it not for knowing they had the Lord’s sovereign demand as well as His resources to guide and empower them, those five hundred nondescript, powerless disciples would have been totally overwhelmed by the inconceivable task of making disciples for their Lord from among every nation on earth.

Submission to the absolute sovereignty of Jesus Christ is not a believer’s option but is his supreme obligation. It is not negotiable or adjustable to one’s own particular inclinations and plans. It is rather the attitude that says with absolute sincerity, “Whatever the Lord commands, I will do.”

OBEDIENCE

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; (28:19-20a)

The fourth element for effective fulfillment of the church’s mission is obedience to the Lord’s command, made possible only when the

attitudes of availability, worship, and submission characterize the believer's life.

It was in light of His absolute, sovereign authority that Jesus commanded, **“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations.”** The transitional word is **therefore**. “Because I am sovereign Lord of the universe,” Jesus was saying, “I have both the authority to command you to be My witnesses and the power to enable you to obey that command.”

In light of the Old Testament teaching about Israel's mission to be God's light to the Gentiles and in light of Jesus' earthly ministry, it should not be surprising that His commission was to **make disciples of all the nations**.

Mathēteuō (**make disciples**) is the main verb and the central command of verses 19-20, which form the closing sentence of Matthew's gospel. The root meaning of the term refers to believing and learning. Jesus was not referring simply to believers or simply to learners, or He would have used other words. *Mathēteuō* carries a beautiful combination of meanings. In this context it relates to those who place their trust in Jesus Christ and follow Him in lives of continual learning and obedience. “If you abide in My word,” Jesus said, “then you are truly disciples of Mine” (John 8:31). It should be noted that some disciples were not true (see John 6:66).

A person who is not Christ's true disciple does not belong to Him and is not saved. When a person genuinely confesses Christ as Lord and Savior, he is immediately saved, immediately made a disciple, and immediately filled with the Holy Spirit. Not to be Christ's disciple is therefore not to be Christ's at all.

Scripture knows nothing of receiving Christ as Savior but not as Lord, as if a person could take God piecemeal as it suits him. Every convert to Christ is a disciple of Christ, and no one who is not a disciple of Christ, no matter what his profession of faith might be, is a convert of Christ.

The very point of Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler was that this man—although highly moral, religious, generous, and admiring of Jesus—refused to give up everything for Christ and submit to Him as Lord. He sincerely wanted eternal life and had the wisdom to come to the source of that life. But he was unwilling to give up his own life and

possessions and obey Jesus' command to "come, follow Me" (Luke 18:18-23). He was willing to have Jesus as Savior but not as Lord, and Christ would not receive him on those terms. Because he refused to be Christ's disciple when the cost was made clear (like those in John 6:66), he could have no part of Christ or of the eternal life that He gives.

Some popular theologies today teach that Jesus was referring to those who are already believers when He taught such things as, "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:27; cf. v. 33). Such forms of easy believism maintain that the only requirement for salvation is to "accept Jesus as Savior." Then, at some later date, a saved person may or may not become a disciple by accepting Christ as Lord of his life. Taking up one's cross and following Christ (Matt. 10:38) is looked on as a secondary, ideal level of relationship to Christ that is commendable but not mandatory.

The Great Commission is a command to bring unbelievers throughout the world to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, and the term the Lord uses in this commissioning is **make disciples**. The true convert is a disciple, a person who has accepted and submitted himself to Jesus Christ, whatever that may mean or demand. The truly converted person is filled with the Holy Spirit and given a new nature that yearns to obey and worship the Lord who has saved him. Even when he is disobedient, he knows he is living against the grain of his new nature, which is to honor and please the Lord. He loves righteousness and hates sin, including his own.

Jesus' supreme command, therefore, is for those who *are* His disciples to become His instruments for making disciples of all nations. Jesus' own earthly ministry was to make disciples for Himself, and that is the ministry of His people. Those who truly follow Jesus Christ become "fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19). Those who become His disciples are themselves to become disciple makers. The mission of the early church was to make disciples (see Acts 2:47; 14:21), and that is still Christ's mission for His church.

Jesus' command for His followers to **make disciples** was given only once, climactically, at the very end of His earthly ministry. Some might ask, "If it was so crucial, why did Jesus mention it only once?" The reason, no doubt, is that the motivation for reaching others for Christ is innate to the redeemed life. One might as well ask why God's command

for man to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28) was given only once. In each case, reproduction in kind is natural to life. The call to make disciples is stated only once because it is natural for the new creation to be reproductive. It would beg the issue to repeat what is so basic.

The specific requirements Jesus gives for making disciples involve three participles: going (rendered here as **go**), **baptizing**, and **teaching**.

The first requirement makes clear that the church is not to wait for the world to come to its doors but that it is to go to the world. The Greek participle is best translated “having gone,” suggesting that this requirement is not so much a command as an assumption.

Jesus’ initial instruction to the disciples was for them to go only “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 10:6; cf. 15:24). God’s design was to offer salvation first to the Jews and then to use them as His missionaries to the rest of the world. The gospel is the “power of salvation to everyone who believes,” but “to the Jew first” (Rom. 1:16; cf. John 4:22). But when Israel as a nation rejected the Messiah-King who was sent to her in Jesus, the invitation for salvation went directly to the entire world.

Jesus compared Israel’s response to God’s call to a wedding feast given by a king for his son. When the favored guests refused to accept the king’s invitation and maligned and even killed some of the messengers, the king had his army destroy the ungrateful and wicked guests. He then sent his servants out to the streets and highways to invite to the feast anyone who would come (Matt. 22:1-10). The picture was of an apostate Israel who refused her Messiah and thereby forfeited the kingdom that He offered to them.

At the end of His earthly ministry, Christ had only a small remnant of believers, and it was to part of that remnant that He gave His commission to evangelize the world. The first sermon of the Spirit-filled church was preached by Peter and directed to Jews and Jewish proselytes who had come to worship in Jerusalem (Acts 2:22). But God later had to dramatically convince Peter that the gospel was also for Gentiles (10:1-48).

As he traveled throughout Syria, Asia Minor, and Greece, even the apostle Paul, “the apostle to the Gentiles,” normally began his ministry in a given city at the Jewish synagogue (see Acts 9:20; 13:5; 18:4). But his

message was always for Gentiles as well as Jews. At his conversion on the Damascus Road, the Lord said to him,

Arise, and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness, . . . delivering you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to life and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me. (Acts 26:16-18)

The second requirement for making disciples is that of **baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit**. To baptize literally means to immerse in water, and certain forms of baptism had long been practiced by various Jewish groups as a symbol of spiritual cleansing. The baptism of John the Baptist symbolized repentance of sin and turning to God (Matt. 3:6). As instituted by Christ, however, baptism became an outward act of identification with Him through faith, a visible, public testimony that henceforth one belonged to Him.

The initial act of obedience to Christ after salvation is to submit to baptism as a testimony to union with Him in His death, burial, and resurrection. “Do you not know,” Paul asked the Roman believers, “that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3-4).

Immersion is the most appropriate mode of baptism, not only because the Greek word behind it connotes immersion but even more importantly because that is the only mode that symbolizes burial and resurrection.

Although the act of baptism has absolutely no saving or sacramental benefit or power, it is commanded by Christ of His followers. The only exception might be physical inability, as in the case of the repentant thief on the cross, a prisoner who is forbidden the ordinance, or a similar circumstance beyond the believer’s control. The person who is unwilling to be baptized is at best a disobedient believer, and if he persists

in his unwillingness there is reason to doubt the genuineness of his faith (see Matt. 10:32-33). If he is unwilling to comply with that simple act of obedience in the presence of fellow believers, he will hardly be willing to stand for Christ before the unbelieving world.

Baptism has no part in the work of salvation, but it is a God-ordained and God-commanded accompaniment of salvation. Jesus said, "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned" (Mark 16:16). Jesus made clear that it is disbelief, not failure to be baptized, that precludes salvation; but He could not possibly have made the divine association of salvation and baptism more obvious than He does in that statement.

The association was indisputably clear in Peter's mind as he exhorted his unbelieving hearers at Pentecost: "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 2:38). The association was just as close in Paul's mind, as witnessed in his great manifesto of Christian unity: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6).

A person is saved by God's grace alone working through his faith as a gift of God (Eph. 2:8). But by God's own declaration, the act of baptism is His divinely designated sign of the believer's identification with His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Baptism is a divinely commanded act of faith and obedience.

New converts need to be taught that they should be baptized as soon as possible, not to seal or confirm their salvation but to make public testimony to it in obedience to their newfound Lord. The call to Christ not only is the call to salvation but also the call to obedience, the first public act of which should be baptism in His name.

Throughout the book of Acts, baptism is shown in the closest possible association with conversion. The three thousand souls converted at Pentecost were immediately baptized (Acts 2:41). As soon as the Ethiopian believed in Christ, he stopped his chariot so that he could be baptized (8:38). As soon as Paul received back his sight after his conversion, he was baptized (9:18). When Cornelius and his household were saved, Peter "ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (10:48). As unbelievers in Corinth were being won to Jesus Christ,

they were also being baptized (18:8). When Paul found some disciples of John in Ephesus who had only been baptized for repentance, he told them about Jesus, the one for whom John was merely preparing the way, and when they believed “they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (19:1-5).

In the context of the Great Commission, baptism is synonymous with salvation, which is synonymous with becoming a disciple. As already emphasized, discipleship *is* Christian life, not an optional, second level of it.

Baptism is to be made **in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit**. Jesus was not giving a ritual formula, although that beautiful phrase from the lips of our Lord has been commonly and appropriately used in baptismal services throughout the history of the church. **In the name of** is not a sacramental formula, as seen in the fact that the book of Acts reports no converts being baptized with those precise words. Those words are rather a rich and comprehensive statement of the wonderful union that believers have with the whole Godhead.

In His statement here about baptism, Jesus again clearly placed Himself on an equal level with God **the Father** and with **the Holy Spirit**. He also emphasizes the unity of the Trinity by declaring that baptism should be done in Their one **name** (singular), not in Their separate names. As it does in many parts of Scripture, the phrase **the name** here embodies the fullness of a person, encompassing all that he is, has, and represents. When he is baptized, the believer is identified with everything that God is, has, and represents.

The pronoun Jesus uses here (*eis*, **in**) can also be rendered “into” or “unto.” Those who teach baptismal regeneration—the belief that water baptism is essential for salvation—insist that it must here be translated “into.” But that is a completely arbitrary translation and, in any case, cannot stand up against the many other passages that prove baptism has no part in regeneration but is rather an outward act, subsequent to regeneration, that testifies to its having taken place.

Baptism does not place a believer into oneness with the Trinity but signifies that, by God’s grace working through his faith in Jesus Christ, the believer already has been made one with **the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit**.

The third requirement for making disciples of all nations is that of **teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.** The church's mission is not simply to convert but to teach. The convert is called to a life of obedience to the Lord, and in order to obey Him it is obviously necessary to know what He requires. As already noted, a disciple is by definition a learner and follower. Therefore, studying, understanding, and obeying "the whole purpose of God" (Acts 20:27) is the lifelong task of every true disciple.

In Jesus' parting discourse to the disciples in the upper room, He said,

If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me. These things I have spoken to you, while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. (John 14:23-26)

Jesus did not spend time teaching in order to entertain the crowds or to reveal interesting but inconsequential truths about God or to set forth ideal but optional standards that God requires. His first mission was to provide salvation for those who would come to Him in faith, that is, to make disciples. His second mission was to teach God's truth to those disciples. That is the same twofold mission He gives the church.

No one is a true disciple apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ, and there is no true disciple apart from an obedient heart that desires to please the Lord in all things. The writer of Hebrews makes that attitude of obedience synonymous with saving faith, declaring that Christ "became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation" (Heb. 5:9). Thanking God for the salvation of believers in Rome, Paul said to them, "Though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed" (Rom. 6:17).

Every Christian is not gifted as a teacher, but every faithful Christian is committed to promoting the ministry of teaching God's Word both to make and to edify disciples of Christ.

POWER

“and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (28:20b)

As crucial as are the first four elements for effective fulfillment of the church’s mission, they would be useless without the last, namely, the power that the Lord Jesus Christ offers through His continuing presence with those who belong to Him. Neither the attitudes of availability, worship, and submission, nor faithful obedience to God’s Word would be possible apart from Christ’s own power working in and through us.

Idou (lo) is an interjection frequently used in the New Testament to call attention to something of special importance. *Egō eimi (I am)* is an emphatic form that might be rendered, “I Myself am,” calling special attention to the fact of Christ’s own presence. Jesus was saying, in effect, “Now pay special attention to what I am about to say, because it is the most important of all. I Myself, your divine, resurrected, living, eternal Lord, **am with you always, even to the end of the age.**”

A helpful way to keep one’s spiritual life and work in the right perspective and to continually rely on the Lord’s power rather than one’s own is to pray in ways such as these: “Lord, You care more about this matter I am facing than I do, so do what You know is best. Lord, You love this person more than I do and only You can reach into his heart and save him, so help me to witness only as You lead and empower. Lord, You are more concerned about the truth and integrity of Your holy Word than I am, so please energize my heart and mind to be true to the text I am teaching.”

Always literally means “all the days.” For the individual believer that means all the days of his life. But in its fullest meaning for the church at large it means **even to the end of the age**, that is, until the Lord returns bodily to judge the world and to rule His earthly kingdom. (See Matt. 13:37-50, where Christ uses the phrase “end of the age” three times to designate His second coming.)

Jesus will not visibly return to earth and display Himself before the whole world in His majestic glory and power until **the end of the age**. But until that time, throughout this present age, He will **always** be with those who belong to Him, leading them and empowering them to fulfill His Great Commission.

Some years ago, a missionary went to a primitive, pagan society. She became especially burdened for a young wife and eventually was used to win the woman to Christ. Almost as soon as she was saved the woman told the missionary with great sorrow, "I wish you could have come sooner, so my little boy could have been saved." When the missionary asked why it was too late, the mother replied, "Because just a few weeks before you came to us, I offered him as a sacrifice to the gods of our tribe."

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