

BRETHREN NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY

GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Harold S. Martin

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GENERAL PREFACE

This commentary is part of a new series of studies that will feature a number of volumes covering all of the New Testament books. There will be reliable expositions of the Bible text, a careful analysis of key words, easy outlines to follow, and helpful material to aid serious Bible students. The explanations are written from a conservative evangelical Brethren and Anabaptist point of view. The goal is to expound the Bible text accurately, and to produce a readable explanation of God's truth.

Each volume can be especially useful for pastors, Sunday School teachers, and lay persons. The writers aim for thoroughness, clarity, and loyalty to the Anabaptist/Pietist values. The meaning of the Greek text (both for those who know Greek and those who don't), will be part of the exposition when necessary.

The *Brethren New Testament Commentary* sponsored by Brethren Revival Fellowship, will simply take the biblical text as it is, and give the exposition along with applications for everyday life. All who have been asked to write the commentaries in this series agree that the message of God's Word in its original documents was given without error, and that nothing more is necessary for spiritual growth, holy living, and upright conduct.

Brethren Revival Fellowship is a renewal movement within the *Church of the Brethren* which aims to proclaim and preserve biblical values for living today. We believe the Bible is the infallible Word of God, the final authority for belief and practice, and that to personally accept Jesus Christ as Savior is the only means of salvation.

The Brethren Revival Fellowship Committee

DEDICATION

This book is

dedicated to my wife, Priscilla;
 she has been
 graceful as a wife,
 gifted as a cook,
 gracious as a hostess,
meticulous as a proof-reader,
 and glowing as a Christian.

FOREWORD

The Gospel of Matthew

The Brethren New Testament Commentary series aims to give a reliable and readable explanation of the New Testament text, with loyalty to Anabaptist and Pietist values. The Anabaptists and Pietists in Europe took the matter of biblical inspiration and authority for granted. They searched the Word of God carefully, and sought to avoid the error of "selective obedience." They tried earnestly to obey the instructions of Christ and His apostles—not to gain favor with God, but to please the Lord in all of life.

About thirty years after Jesus ascended into heaven, a Jewish disciple named Matthew, wrote an account of the words and works of our Lord Jesus.

The Gospel according to Matthew is a bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament. If one would go from Malachi into Mark, there would be a sense of bewilderment, because Mark does not give an account of the ancestry and birth of Jesus.

The Old Testament is a book of promise; the New Testament is a book of fulfillment. The word "fulfilled" is one of the key words used in Matthew. Matthew makes 129 references to the Old Testament in his Gospel account. The Old Testament assured readers that the Messiah would come. The New Testament says over and over again, "He has come; He has come; He has come; Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah."

Each of the four Gospel accounts has its own emphasis: *Matthew* is addressed primarily to the Jews, and presents Jesus Christ as King. *Mark* was written primarily for the Romans, and presents Jesus Christ as Servant. *Luke* appealed primarily to the Greeks, and presents Jesus Christ as Perfect Man. *John* emphasized a message for all persons, and presents Jesus Christ as God. On the other hand, in the final analysis, all the Gospels are for all persons. All present Jesus Christ as the same unique Person (mankind's Redeemer), but the emphasis in each does differ. Matthew emphasizes what Jesus *said*, Mark what He *did*, Luke what He *felt*, and John who He *was*.

Matthew's book is often called "The Gospel of the King." It was written especially for those who were looking for the Messiah. They expected him to be a King who would lead a revolt against Rome, and make Israel a free nation again. *Matthew aims to show his readers that the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament were indeed fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth.* Jesus is the King for whom they have been looking. Matthew clearly links the coming of Jesus with the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. The Gospels are important. The books before them are anticipatory. The books after them are explanatory. The Gospels tell us a bit of history that we must know—for God's plan of redemption and our soul's eternal salvation depend upon what happened in the earthly life of Jesus Christ.

The emphasis in each of the four Gospel accounts is weighted toward the death of Christ. Two-sevenths of Matthew, three-eighths of Mark, one-fourth of Luke, and about one-half of John are devoted to the Passion Week. Important as *the life of Christ* is, it is through *His death on the Cross* that He wrought redemption for lost sinners such as you and me. Jesus

did not die as a martyr for a noble cause. He died as a Redeemer for sinful human beings.

It is my hope that the expositions and applications of the Bible text found in this commentary will be a great blessing to preachers, Christian workers, young people, and parents in the home—in fact, to all who set out to study the New Testament Scriptures. It is appropriate here to express appreciation to my wife, Priscilla, and to Martha Hess, for the work they did in helping to proof-read the manuscript for this book, and for the suggestions they made.

I suggest that readers keep their Bibles open while reading these pages—perhaps reading only a small section of the commentary each day. Read the Bible text, and then the comments on that text, and think about what the Lord is saying as you go about daily duties. To study the Bible is our highest privilege. To obey it is our greatest responsibility. To share its message with others is to participate in bringing joy to many hearts.

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March, 2005

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Matthew

The last word in the Old Testament is the word "curse." One of the purposes of the Old Covenant was to prove to human beings that apart from the Lord's help we are incapable of keeping God's law. The last sentence in the New Testament is a benediction, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all." In Old Testament times God's people were assured again and again that a Messiah would come. The New Testament opens with the message, "He is here; the Promised One has come."

The Gospel of Matthew was written by a tax collector named Matthew (also called Levi). Of the four Gospels, Matthew is the most systematic in presenting *the teachings* of Jesus. The book of Matthew was used almost universally by the early church as a source book for instructing new converts in the faith. The book of Matthew easily divides into five main sections which should help readers capture the broad message of the book.

- 1. The Lineage, Birth, and Credentials of Jesus are spelled out in chapter 1 through 4. The birth of Jesus is described in chapters 1 and 2. Care is taken to safeguard the moral character of Joseph and Mary. Popular accounts of the visit of the wise men often contain factual errors. Chapters 3 and 4 describe Jesus' baptism and temptation in the desert. The three-fold temptation of Jesus proved His worthiness and ability to redeem sinners.
- 2. The Ministry of Jesus in Galilee is the long major section in Matthew (chapters 5 through 18). These chapters center on the works of Jesus and on the messages which Jesus taught. One of the distinctive characteristics of Matthew's account is that he records five of the most important discourses of Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5 through 7 does not so much show the way of salvation, as it does how the saved should live. The physical miracles recorded in chapters 8 and 9 are typical of spiritual cures. The disciples whom Jesus called (chapter 10) were of humble origin and not highly trained men. Strong opposition to Jesus is mentioned in Matthew 11 and 12. The parable teachings of Jesus are given in chapter 13. Jesus reassured and instructed His disciples in chapter 14 through 18.
- 3. The Journey of Jesus to Jerusalem is the focus of chapters 19 and 20. Jesus left Galilee for the last time and headed toward His crucifixion in Jerusalem. The events described in these chapters occurred only a few months before Jesus went to the cross. During this time Jesus explained some of the great questions of life. He spoke about divorce and taught about the dangers of setting one's heart on material goods. Jesus portrayed rewards for faithful service and set forth the pathway to greatness. In chapter 20:28 He spoke of His death as "a ransom for many."
- 4. The Ministry of Jesus in Jerusalem is depicted in chapters 21 through 25. The multitudes welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem, but the Jewish leaders were envious and argued with Him. He explained that the greatest commandment is to love God. In the last part of chapter 22, Jesus responds to a number of quarrelsome questions—a political question about paying taxes, a doctrinal question about the resurrection, an ethical

question about the Law of Moses, and a personal question about the Messiah. In chapter 23 Jesus denounces the false attitudes of the Pharisees, and in chapters 24 and 25 He announces that He will soon leave the disciples, and that those remaining should constantly be looking for His return.

5. The Crucifixion and Exaltation of Jesus is the focus of chapters 26 through 28. The final days of Jesus' time on earth are told. Familiar events include the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, the betrayal by Judas, the Last Supper, the trials before the Crucifixion—all of which are then followed by the crucifixion, the burial, and the resurrection of Jesus. But the story does not end with His death and burial! Jesus arose from the dead and then He encouraged His disciples to continue His work by making disciples of all nations.

Some of the distinctive characteristics of Matthew are these: 1) Matthew frequently quotes the Old Testament (65 times). 2) Matthew uses the phrase "kingdom of heaven" more often than "kingdom of God." 3) Matthew is the only one of the four Gospels in which the word "church" is found. 4) Matthew emphasizes the teachings of Jesus. 5) There are a number of events mentioned only in Matthew—including the journey of the Magi, the flight into Egypt, Herod's decree to slay the male infants, the dream of Pilate's wife, and the bribery of the Roman guard to spread the rumor that Christ's body was stolen by Jesus' disciples. 6) There are a number of parables mentioned only in Matthew—the wheat and tares, the net and the fish, and the wise and foolish virgins. 7) There are some miracles named only in Matthew—the healing of two blind men and the coin found by Peter in the fish's mouth.

Matthew was one of the Twelve. After his firm choice to become a disciple of Jesus, he walked with the Lord. In the book of Acts, after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension he is still numbered with the apostles, waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:13).

THE LINEAGE AND BIRTH OF JESUS

Matthew 1:1-2:23

The primary purpose of chapters 1 and 2 in the book of Matthew is to establish the right of Jesus to be Israel's King. The first two chapters of Matthew support the answer Jesus gave to Pilate when he said, "Are You a king then?" Jesus responded to Pilate: "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world" (John 18:37).

Matthew reveals Jesus to be the Christ (the Messiah) and the King of the Jews. The Gospel according to Matthew shows Jesus' lineage from the royal (kingly) line of Israel. If Jesus is to be proclaimed King, then there must be proof that He comes from the royal family.

Many Jewish people in New Testament times were expecting that a Messiah would come. They expected that He would be a king leading a revolt against Rome and making Israel a free nation again. Matthew says, in essence, that Jesus of Nazareth is the very King for whom you have been looking! The wise men asked, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" (Matthew 2:2). The inscription on the Cross said "This is Jesus the King of the Jews" (Matthew 27:37). Matthew emphasizes Jesus as the King of the Jews.

1. The Ancestry and Birth of Jesus (1:1-25)

The Jews put a great deal of emphasis on proper genealogies. The book of Nehemiah tells how some Levites were dismissed from the priesthood because they could not find their genealogical records (Nehemiah 7:63-65). Matthew gives a record of the genealogy of Jesus. God had promised that in Abraham's seed all nations should be blessed.

a) The Human Ancestry of Jesus (1:1-17)

If a man suddenly appears and claims to be a king, some people will ask for proof of the claim. What is his family background? Where did he grow up? What previous experience does he have?

Matthew began his account by presenting the genealogy of Jesus—and he goes all the way back to Abraham, tracing the line through David—to show that Jesus was the lawful heir to the throne. Matthew wanted his Jewish readers to know that Jesus was the perfect King who fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies about Messiah's ancestry. Obviously, Jesus would not be received as the Jewish Messiah unless it could be proved (from the genealogical records) that He was the son of David, for the Jews rightly believed that their Messiah would come from the family tree of Israel's most famous king—King David.

(1:1-15) The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham: Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot Judah and his brothers. Judah begot Perez and Zerah by Tamar, Perez begot Hezron, and Hezron begot Ram. Ram begot Amminadab, Amminadab begot Nahshon, and Nahshon begot Salmon. Salmon begot Boaz

by Rahab, Boaz begot Obed by Ruth, Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David the king. David the king begot Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah. Solomon begot Rehoboam, Rehoboam begot Abijah, and Abijah begot Asa. Asa begot Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat begot Joram, and Joram begot Uzziah. Uzziah begot Jotham, Jotham begot Ahaz, and Ahaz begot Hezekiah. Hezekiah begot Manasseh, Manasseh begot Amon, and Amon begot Josiah. Josiah begot Jeconiah and his brothers about the time they were carried away to Babylon. And after they were brought to Babylon, Jeconiah begot Shealtiel, and Shealtiel begot Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel begot Abiud, Abiud begot Eliakim, and Eliakim begot Azor. Azor begot Zadok, Zadok begot Achim, and Achim begot Eliud. Eliud begot Eleazar, Eleazar begot Matthan, and Matthan begot Jacob.

Whenever we come across a genealogy in Scripture (a long list of unfamiliar names), we are tempted to pass over them quickly. Yet these passages are included in the Bible for a purpose. There are some important lessons here.

Many Bible students agree that Matthew gave our Lord's family tree through His foster father Joseph (1:16), while Luke gave the lineage through His mother Mary. Matthew traces the lineage from Abraham; Luke traces the lineage back to Adam.

We can tell from the account in Matthew that Jesus was descended from Abraham through the *royal* house of David (verses 2, 6). This helps to identify Jesus as the true Messiah, and *makes Him eligible to be King* over Israel.

The genealogy in Matthew is divided according to three crucial periods in Israel's history: Abraham to David (verses 2-6); David to the Babylonian Exile (verses 6-11); and the Exile to Christ (verses 12-17). Several important lessons can be learned from the list of almost unpronounceable names in Matthew 1:

- (1) Jesus appeared on earth as a historical person. When we talk about Jesus, we are not talking about an imaginary hero, like the gods of the Hindus and the Buddhists.
- (2) Jesus is from a line of kings of mixed moral character. Some of the kings were as bad as bad could be—for example, Manasseh (verse 10) and Jeconiah (verse 11). It is heartrending to read their history, yet they were in the ancestral line of Jesus.
- (3) Some in the ancestral line were women noted for loose living. Tamar (verse 3) was involved in incest; Rahab (verse 5) was a notorious harlot; Bathsheba (verse 6) was a partner in adultery. All three women were associated with some kind of moral misconduct, and yet they are listed in the family tree leading up to the birth of Jesus.
- (4) A few persons in the family-tree were Gentile foreigners. Ruth (verse 5) was a Moabite. Deuteronomy 23:3 says that "an Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the Lord"—although a female Moabite could marry a male Israelite and in this way, be considered part of the congregation.

The point is that Jesus had a mixture of blood flowing through His veins. Among His ancestors were men and women noted for their piety; but also, there were foreign Gentiles and some persons who were noted for their loose living. And while Jesus did not inherit their sinful tendencies, He became forever identified with the entire human race, including sinful men and women for whom He would someday die on the Cross. Jesus died not only for Jews, but also for Gentiles; not only for people with pleasing personalities, but

also for very wicked persons.

Jesus was not ashamed to be born of a woman, and to have ancestors that included harlots and idolaters. Surely, He is not going to be ashamed to save us and give us eternal life—if we are willing to meet the conditions of salvation. The conditions include sincere faith, genuine repentance, and a life committed to following Jesus in obedience, beginning with water baptism and uniting with a body of believers.

The last part of Matthew 1 gives more information about the divine heredity of Jesus, and this further confirms Jesus as the true Anointed One who was promised in Old Testament times.

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

Matthew makes it clear that the conception and birth of Jesus was different from that of any other Jewish boy named in the genealogy. Matthew says that Joseph was "the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus" (verse 16). And in verse 18, Mary was "found with child" before they came together. Jesus was born of Mary but was not "begotten" of Joseph. By a miracle of the Holy Spirit, Jesus was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary, as described in Luke 1:26-38. In some miraculous way, the Holy Spirit ushered the life of the eternal Christ into the body of Mary, and from her womb was born a person who is the true expression of God—our Lord Jesus Christ. That little baby in the manger was God's answer for sin—the eternal Christ in human form.

The little boy expressed it well when he said, "Dad, I don't believe all this stuff about miracles (like the whale swallowing Jonah)." His dad was kind of disappointed and said, "But son, if God can make a whale, and if God can make a man—why couldn't He make the whale swallow Jonah and keep him alive for three days?" The immature little fellow said, "Oh well, if you put God in it, I can believe it too!" That is the secret of the Virgin Birth. A great God is behind it all.

(1:17) So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations, from David until the captivity in Babylon are fourteen generations, and from the captivity in Babylon until the Christ are fourteen generations.

Matthew calls attention to the fact that there are three sections of fourteen generations listed. We know that certain names from the Old Testament are missing from the list. For example, between Joram and Uzziah (verse 8) there were some additional kings.² And

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¹ J. Knox Chamblin says, "Matthew's inclusion of women's names in a Hebrew genealogy is unusual; his choice of names is surprising. He passes over some very distinguished women (e.g. Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel) and refers instead to Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. Of these four, at least three were involved in sexual immorality, and certainly three, perhaps four were Gentiles" (*Evangelical Commentary of the Bible*, page 725).

Ahaziah, Joash, and Amaziah were reigning kings and their names are not listed. See 2 Kings 8:24 and 2 Chronicles 22:1-9; 24:1-2; 25:1-4. There are answers for many of the supposed problems in the genealogical list, but the discussion of those answers is beyond the scope of this book.

so it is true that there are some problems in reconciling the genealogies in Matthew and Luke with the Old Testament accounts, but *problems* are not the same as *errors*.

b) The Divine Heredity of Jesus (1:18-25)

When Joseph discovered that Mary was expecting a child, he faced a moral dilemma. He had a great love for Mary and did not want to disgrace her. It was not until the angel explained the cause and purpose for the pregnancy that he was able to resolve the difficulty.

(1:18-21) Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

Matthew tells the story of the birth of Jesus from the standpoint of Joseph. Luke relates the account from Mary's point of view. Matthew's account is altogether independent of Luke's account, yet both equally emphasize the Virgin Birth of Jesus.

We do not know how the Holy Spirit could usher the life of the eternal Christ into the body of Mary. That is a mystery to us. But with chaste language, Matthew explains the events that took place.

When Joseph discovered that Mary (the girl to whom he was engaged) was expecting a child, he did not know how to respond. He didn't know the explanation for her condition. He knew they had not had any sexual relationships. His heart must have been filled with some strange feelings. Could she possibly have been unfaithful to him during those three months in the hill country of Judea, when she had gone to visit Elizabeth?

Joseph felt that the engagement should be broken, but Joseph was a tender-hearted man, and in order to avoid starting an open scandal against Mary, he thought about giving her a private divorce. (Only he and two witnesses would need to know about it.)

In Jewish practice, betrothal (engagement) was a very serious matter. It was almost as binding as marriage, except that the man and woman did not live together during the betrothal period. After the engagement, the young man and his prospective bride were called "husband" and "wife." A betrothal could be broken only by death or by writing a bill of divorcement. If Mary had been espoused to a cruel, merciless man, she would have died in disgrace. But Joseph was a man of godly wisdom. He pondered these things (1:20); he thought before he acted; he dealt with Mary thoughtfully and courteously. Charles Spurgeon says, "When we have to do a severe thing, let's always choose to do it in the most tender manner possible."

One of the most beautiful sentences in Scripture is the passage in verse 21: "He will save His people from their sins." Jesus, by His work on the cross, became the agent of God's salvation. Jesus came to rescue people from spiritual oppression rather than from the political domination of Rome, as the people had come to expect. He is the only Savior;

there is no other (Acts 4:12).

In the passage which follows, Matthew gives the first of many quotes from the Old Testament. The Isaiah 7:14 pas-sage is one of the first prophecies from Old Testament times which was fulfilled by the coming of Jesus. All this helps us to understand how God was preparing the way for the coming of Jesus the Messiah already in Old Testament times.

(1:22-25) So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us." Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus.

Before Joseph could carry out his intention of breaking their engagement, he was guided to another course of action (verse 20b). He was not told all the facts, but he was instructed to proceed with the marriage. And so Joseph married Mary as he was told to do, and in this way he gave Jesus the legal status of a foster son. Often, like Joseph, we too are perplexed as we go about our daily duties. We do not always know what is the best step to take. The paramount thing to do on such occasions is to ponder carefully, and then quietly act according to the light we have, following any principles spelled out in the Word of God, and pray that God will close the doors on us if we have carelessly gone in the wrong way.

It is profitable to note the names assigned to Him who was born "King of the Jews." The name *Christ* (verse 17) means "anointed;" the Greek word is "Messiah." The name *Jesus* (verse 21) means "Savior." He shall *save* his people from their sins. The name *Immanuel* (verse 23) means "God with us." Jesus is *God* with us.

The birth of Jesus was not the beginning of another *human* life. It was the coming of *God* to earth in the form of an infant child. Jesus did not begin to exist when He was born of Mary. Before the beginning began, Jesus was.

And so, the first chapter of Matthew, is an account of the ancestry of Jesus. His *divine* nature was from God the Holy Spirit. His earthly sustenance was from the Virgin Mary. His royal lineage (His right to the throne) was from His foster father, Joseph.

2. The Homage Paid to Jesus (2:1-12)

The second chapter of Matthew gives the account of the magi from the East. Very little is known about the wise men. Many legendary stories have been built around these men,

³ In the midst of all the silliness of the world's celebration of Christmas—Santas, Rudolphs, little drummer boys, frosty snowmen—we should remember that for the Christian, Immanuel (God with us), is the key to a meaningful experience at Christmas-time. True joy comes from the awareness that the living God *is in our midst* in the person of Jesus. It is exciting to know that God is "with us" when driving a truck, when standing at the kitchen sink, when we worship with brothers and sisters in the assembly of God's people.

but most of the stories are not reliable.

(2:1-2) Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

The Persian word for *wise men* was "magi." These men were scholars, not kings. They were expert astronomers, scientists to whom God gave a special sign—a miraculous star that announced the birth of the King. Any speculation about the nature of that star is simply a useless waste of time; the star was a supernatural provision for the occasion, and that is all we need to say about it.

The caravan of "wise men" arrived from a place far to the east of the land of Israel and they inquired further about the place where the King was born.⁴ The Jewish priests and scribes knew the answer (2:4-5), and soon the wise men were on their way to Bethlehem.

(2:3-8) When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.'" Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

Verses 3-8 (in Matthew 2) describe the malice of Herod.⁵ Herod was a good king in many ways. He was a good manager; one time he supplied material aid from his own reserves to help some starving Jews during a famine. He was a great builder; it was Herod who initiated and supervised the rebuilding of the Temple at Jerusalem. But Herod was also a man of great suspicion. For example, Herod murdered his wife Marianne, his mother Alexandria, and he slaughtered his sons Antipater, Alexander, and Aristobolus—because he suspected they were trying to unseat him from power. The Roman Emperor Augustus one time said that "it is safer to be one of Herod's pigs than to be one of Herod's sons."

It is no surprise that Herod tried to kill Jesus, because Herod alone wanted to be king of the Jews. It is not hard to understand Matthew's statement that Herod was troubled "and all Jerusalem with him"—for the people feared that still more ugly and gory crimes would be committed by Herod to eliminate this new rival that had apparently arrived on the scene in Jerusalem. Herod said, "When you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may

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⁴ Note the unusual expression in verse 2. Jesus was "born King," not "born to be King." The One sought by the Magi was King at His birth, and not merely One who was to grow up to be King.

⁵ The Herod in this passage is one of many Herods. Herod the Great ordered the murder of infants (Matthew 2). Herod Antipas ordered the murder of John the Baptist (Matthew 14). Herod Agrippa I was eaten of worms (Acts 12). Herod Agrippa II is named in Paul's defense (Acts 26). These are four generations of Herods.

come and worship Him also" (verse 8). Of course, Herod had no such idea. His only thought was to kill the newborn King because he feared that Jesus would grow up and unseat him from the throne.

(2:9-12) When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

Verse 9 indicates a further miracle: The star which the wise men had seen in the East (and had not seen since), re-appeared and kept going before them to a specific house in Bethlehem, where they found the Child Jesus. Joseph and Mary had moved into a nearby house, away from the temporary place where Jesus was born. Jesus was no longer an infant; now, He was a "young Child."

We are told in this passage that the wise men found Jesus. The wise men paid *homage*—that is, they showed reverence, honor, and respect; they "worshiped Him." It is significant that Matthew says (in verse 11) that when the wise men arrived in Bethlehem, "They saw the young Child with Mary His mother," not, "They saw Mary with the young Child." The word-order is such that Jesus receives the pre-eminence. The wise men worshiped Jesus, not His mother!

It was customary to approach a king with a gift, and the wise men were prepared. "They presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh" (verse 11). The word "presented" is used only seven times in the New Testament, and is always used in connection with offerings to God. In other words, the wise men recognized that the young Child was really God in the flesh.

"Gold" has been called *the king of metals*—it was an acknowledgment of His deity and majesty.

"Frankincense" was a sweet perfume used by the priests—it represents the fragrance of Christ's life.

"Myrrh" was a spice used along with embalming the dead—it recognized Christ's sacrifice and coming death.

Gold is a type of the deity of Christ; frankincense is a symbol of the beauty of Christ's life; and myrrh is a token picturing Christ's death at Calvary. Thus, when He was only a young child, the very gifts that the wise men gave, recognized Jesus not only as a King and Priest, but also as a suffering Savior. The wise men apparently sensed the truth of Isaiah 53:5, how the Jewish Messiah would be "wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities." It is very likely that the wise men from a thousand miles east of Palestine had come in contact with Jewish people who had migrated into Mesopotamia, and brought with them copies of the Old Testament Scriptures.

Matthew 2:12 says that the wise men were "divinely warned in a dream" that they should not return to Herod, and so they departed "for their own country another way." After

people have met Jesus, they often go another way. They no longer choose to walk in the low ways of sin. They follow Jesus on pathways that lead to a higher, better, and more noble kind of life.

3. The Hostility against Jesus (2:13-18)

Herod pretended that he wanted to worship the newborn King (2:8), but in reality he wanted to destroy Him. Therefore, an angel of God warned Joseph in a dream to take the Child and Mary and flee to Egypt.

(2:13-15) Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him." When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."

Under the cover of darkness (verse 14), they departed "by night." Perhaps the moon was bright and thus helped to make the travel easier. The important point is that Joseph obeyed the Lord, and took his family and left Bethlehem, and journeyed south into Egypt.

Colonies of Jews lived in most cities of Egypt, and thus Joseph and Mary could find associations among their own people when once down in Egypt—but it is helpful to try and picture what this trip from Bethlehem to Egypt really involved.

The journey involved traveling 200 miles across a desert. It was blistering hot by day and chilling cold at night. The area was infested with robbers and bandits. Joseph and Mary traveled mostly by foot. At times Mary likely rode a donkey. There were no sanitation facilities and the land-surface was marked by high hills and deep valleys and steep cliffs. It was a dangerous journey.

Suppose the donkey would have stumbled on a rocky path at the crest of a ridge, and spilled Mary and the Child on to the rocks below; or suppose sickness would have engulfed the Child, and the extremes of temperature would have brought Him to the point of death; or suppose Herod's executioners would have overtaken Joseph and Mary, and extinguished the Child's life. No church would ever have been built; no sins would ever have been forgiven; no souls would ever have been saved—not if Jesus had been killed on that journey. Christians believe that a miracle of God protected Joseph and Mary and Jesus from unseen harm and from a variety of dangers.

Perhaps we should also note that providentially, the expensive gifts given by the wise men (verse 11), were surely the means by which Joseph was able to take his family to Egypt and sustain them there. The gold was a blessing to the family because it helped provide living expenses during this difficult time.

This event in the early life of Jesus led to the fulfillment of a prophecy (verse 15b), for in Hosea 11:1, the Lord had said, "Out of Egypt I called My son."

(2:16-18) Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had

determined from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying: "A voice was heard in Ramah, Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, Refusing to be comforted, Because they are no more."

As soon as Herod learned that the wise men had not complied with his orders to give him the exact location of the newborn King, he put into action a plan to kill all the male children in the Bethlehem region who were two years old and under (verse 16).

As we indicated earlier, assassination was nothing new for Herod. We can imagine the horror of the slaughter. Here is a young couple in a little home. They have a new baby boy. All boys under two-years of age are to be killed! They lean over the cradle and play with their growing little boy. They hear a loud knock, look at each other in fear, and are met at the door by two tough burly soldiers. The mother picks up the baby and holds him against her body, but the soldiers tear the child from his mother's arms, throw him against the wall, and dash him to death. That must have happened many times during the early childhood of Jesus. The Christmas account is not all beautiful!

The slaughter of baby boys tells something of the grief experienced by the families around Bethlehem. Verses 17-18 tell us that the wailing was similar to the grief experienced by the Jews who were carried away from Jerusalem and forced into exile back in the days of Jeremiah. In fact, Jeremiah 31:15 pictures Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, weeping because her sons were carried away. The weeping of Rachel also prefigured the mothers of Bethlehem weeping bitterly over the massacre of their sons by Herod in his attempt to kill the Messiah.

4. The Humility of Jesus (2:19-23)

This section of Matthew's account tells us that an angel appeared to Joseph down in Egypt, informed him that Herod had died, and told him to return to the land of Israel.

(2:19-23) Now when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead." Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee. And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, "He shall be called a Nazarene."

The historian Josephus gives details about Herod's death: It was a revolting illness that included ulcers of the intestines, terrible convulsions, and a literal rotting away of parts of his body (something like leprosy).

When the angel of the Lord assured Joseph that it was now safe to return (verse 20-22), the little family went back to the land of Israel, and was likely planning to return to Bethlehem. But Joseph was not sure about Archelaus (and this was confirmed by the Lord "in a dream")—and so he traveled north into Galilee and settled in his native town of Nazareth (verse 23).

Nazareth was a small town. It is not even mentioned in the Old Testament nor in the

writings of Josephus nor in the Jewish Talmud. The term "Nazarene" was a term of reproach (about like the word "Dunkard" or "holy roller" or "nigger" in our day). In John 1:46, we read the epithet, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nazareth was a town viewed with contempt by many people.

Jesus was born in the humble village of Bethlehem, and grew up in the despised city of Nazareth. But keep in mind that while others may call Him "the Nazarene" or "the carpenter's Son" or "the Man from Galilee," we call Him "Jesus"—the King of kings and the Lord of lords! He is the Savior of human beings! Jesus Christ is "the Lord of glory"—and every Christian should be able to sing with enthusiasm, the words of praise, "O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord."

Our Lord's humility is noted by His birth in a humble village, His boyhood days spent in a despised city, and by the fact that He (who is the King of glory) would come to the earth at all—to save sinful human beings.

In Matthew 1 and 2, the right of Jesus to the throne of David has been established by Jesus' genealogy, His virgin birth, the testimony of the wise men, the hatred of Herod for the infants, and the fulfillment of a number of Old Testament Scriptures quoted in connection with Jesus' infancy.

Matthew's Gospel begins with a genuine promise: "Immanuel—God with us" (Matthew 1:23), and it ends with the same promise: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

One of the great promises found in the book of Matthew, is the truth that our Lord Jesus is always by our side. When He ascended into heaven, it is true He was received "out of their sight" (Acts 1:9), but He was not taken out of our reach, for He says He will never leave us.

Jesus is with us when we meet for fellowship (to sing hymns and to proclaim His Word). He is with us when a family gathers to read the Bible (and to pray together). He is with us during long hours of loneliness (which we all sometimes experience). He is with us in the midst of the tragedies of life. He will be with us in the valley of the shadow of death. The Psalmist says, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me." Thank God for the life and the ministry and the continuing work of Jesus!

Throughout life we want to show gratitude for Jesus—the One of whom Matthew says, "He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21b). To know Him is to have eternal life. To believe in Him is the greatest of all decisions. To follow Him is the noblest of all pursuits.

Each of us must ask the question, "What is my response to Jesus Christ?" We can be like Herod who *opposed* Him, or like the religious leaders who *ignored* Him, or like the magi who *sought* Him out and *worshiped* Him.

THE PROPER CREDENTIALS OF JESUS

Matthew 3:1-4:25

In chapters one and two of Matthew Jesus is presented as the King of the Jews, and in chapters three and four, Matthew assembles several testimonies to assure Israel that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and the Promised King.

The word "credential" refers to a letter or certificate or other evidence⁶ given to a person to show that he has the right to exercise certain authority.

Some thirty years had passed between the events described in Matthew two and the events that follow. During those years Jesus undoubtedly lived in Nazareth and worked as a carpenter. Luke is the one who tells us that about thirty years had passed since the events surrounding His birth had taken place (Luke 3:23), and now the time came for Jesus to begin His public ministry.

1. The Message of John the Baptist (3:1-12)

For over 400 years the nation Israel had not heard the voice of a prophet. Then John appeared. All four gospel accounts mention the ministry of John the Baptist, and speak of his preaching of repentance as a means of preparing the nation for the coming Messiah.

(3:1-4) In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand! For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.'" Now John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.

The angel told Zacharias (in Luke 1:17) that his son, John the Baptist, would come in "the spirit and power of Elijah." John dressed much like Elijah did (2 Kings 1:8). He ate the food of a common man (locusts and wild honey),⁷ and preached a stern message of judgment.

When I was a senior in high school, it was my task to secure advertisements for our class yearbook, and thus help reduce the cost of the book for those who bought a copy. I was given a certificate with the school name, my name, and the *seal of the school* pressed into the certificate. That certificate was a credential. It gave credence to my solicitation. Just so some events described in Matthew 3 and 4 give credence to the person and work of Jesus.

⁷ Concerning the food, "locusts" were considered clean under Jewish law (Leviticus 11:22). Dried locusts (dipped in salt) continue to be eaten by Arab people today, and in fact, they can be bought in supermarkets in America. That kind of food may not sound appetizing to us, but people in some parts of the world really like dried insects of various kinds. Those who eat shrimp, crabs, oysters, and frog legs have no reason to shudder too much at the thought of eating roasted grasshoppers.

John preached in the rocky, rugged desert area between Jerusalem and the Jordan River (verse 1), and a measure of revival began to take place. The people all over southern Palestine were affected by John's preaching. The words "make His paths straight" (verse 3) refer to making the road level and eliminating unnecessary bends. Spiritually, those who responded to John's call for repentance—humbled themselves, confessed their sins, gave up their selfish ways of living—and by this means opened the way for the Messiah to take hold of their lives.

John the Baptist started his public ministry with a clarion call to repentance. The word "repent" (verse 2) speaks of such a sorrow for sin and such a hatred for sin that the sinner will seek to turn away from sin with all his heart. Repentance is turning away from sin, and breaking off from evil—because of a clear change of mind.⁸

The term "kingdom of heaven" is sometimes used in the broad sense which includes everyone who professes to acknowledge God as the supreme ruler. In its more narrow sense, the term includes only those who have experienced a genuine conversion. The *kingdom of heaven* exists wherever people submit to the rule of God.

(3:5-11) Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

According to Luke 16:16, John was *the last* of the Old Testament prophets, and according to Matthew 11:11, John was *the greatest* of them. And in Matthew 17:9-13, we read that John the Baptist was indeed the New Testament counterpart to the Old Testament prophet Elijah. John's boldness was like that of Elijah's. John addressed the religious leaders who came to the place where he was baptizing, by calling them a "brood of vipers" (verse 7), and warning them to "flee from the wrath to come."

John was not only preaching; he was also baptizing. The "baptism of John" was approved from heaven. Matthew 21:23-27 tells about the chief priests and elders who challenged

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⁸ William M. Beahm says, "Repentance has a distinct 'turning point' of change, and thus it may be regarded as a specific act. It is accompanied, however, by the abhorrence of sins and of sinful desires, and it involves a turning toward the good, and toward complete amendment of life" (*Studies in Christian Belief*, The Brethren Press, 1958, page 180).

The picture is that of people fleeing God's judgment like a bunch of snakes crawling away from a field that is on fire. When some of the interstate highways were built in the USA, there were places where bridges and pillars were constructed over swampy land areas. The biggest problem was to know how to deal with the snakes, and so during the dry season, acres of brush were set on fire, and the reptiles crept out of their holes rushing to get away from the heat of the oncoming fire. John declared that the hypocrites in the church will someday flee God's wrath like those snakes fled from the raging fires.

the authority of Jesus—and in 21:25, Jesus asked, "The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?" Jesus clearly implied heaven's approval.

Baptism is a form of identification:

John's baptism in water (verse 6)—identified people as those who looked forward to the Messiah's coming. Acts 19:4 refers to John's baptism. John's baptism helped prepare the nation for acknowledging the Christ.

Baptism of the Spirit (verse 11b)—identifies those who believe, by uniting them with the body of which Christ is the head. The Holy Spirit comes to dwell in the life of one who receives Christ as Lord (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Baptism of fire (verse 11b)—identifies followers of Christ with the purging work of the Spirit, who cleanses and more and more consumes the carnal nature. It also points forward to future judgment when Christ returns to cleanse the earth (2 Peter 3:7).

Christian baptism identifies the believer with the Christian message, and with God's people. Christian baptism indicates that the person has decided to transfer allegiance from the world, the flesh, and the devil—to the realm of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

When final analysis is made, John's baptism was a baptism of *expectation* (looking forward to the coming of the Messiah); Christian baptism is a baptism of *fulfillment* (counting upon the work of Christ on Calvary as sufficient to save from the penalty incurred by sin).

John was a fearless, rugged, pioneer preacher. John was no "reed shaken by the wind" (Luke 7:24). He did not go around to the people and say, "I approve what you are doing; I affirm your actions; I endorse your policies." John preached about sin. He didn't beat around the bush. He called the religious leaders of the day a "brood of vipers" (verse 7). He looked beneath their ecclesiastical robes and sensed that their hearts were black with sin, and he told them in no uncertain terms to repent. Like John the Baptist, preachers today need to strike out fearlessly against sin.

John also preached about judgment. He warned people to flee that wrath to come. We must remember that the wrath of God and the fires of Hell are very real even though we may not hear as many sermons on these themes as some earlier generations did. In verse 10 we read that "the ax is laid to the root of the trees." God's judgment is poised to chop down and burn every unproductive tree. The idea is that unless there is repentance and a changed way of living, God's judgment is going to come.

(3:12) His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

The phrase "winnowing fan is in His hand" refers to a kind of wooden fork used by the farmer to throw wheat into the air. The chaff was blown away by the breezes that came in over the Mediterranean; the good grain collected on the ground below. John the Baptist said that "His wheat" (God's faithful ones) will be gathered into the barn, but "the chaff" (those who reject Christ) will burn with "unquenchable fire" (a fire that will never stop

burning).

2. The Baptism of Jesus by John (3:13-17)

The last five verses of Matthew 3 tell about the baptism of Jesus. One day, as John was baptizing, he looked up, and there was Jesus standing beside him and requesting John to baptize Him.

(3:13-15) Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. And John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?" But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed Him.

John objected to the request on the basis that it would be more fitting for Jesus to baptize John, than for John to baptize Jesus. John did not know Jesus yet as the real Messiah (see the Apostle John's account of the baptism in John 1:32-33), but John knew that Jesus possessed a godly character superior to his own. The question is, Why should Jesus be baptized? Why should He who did no sin (1 Peter 2:22) offer Himself for baptism? There are at least three reasons why Jesus requested baptism:

a) It gave approval to John's ministry.

Jesus, by being baptized by John, was identifying with the message John was preaching, and with the kingdom John was announcing.

b) It identified Jesus with the human family.

Jesus consciously submitted Himself to be reckoned among sinners, as if He were one Himself.

c) It was a public example for His followers.

Since Jesus Himself submitted to baptism, shall we refuse to follow the Lord? If Jesus was baptized, surely none of us should ever say that baptism is not important.

(3:16-17) When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

On the occasion of Christ's baptism, all three persons of the Holy Trinity manifested themselves. Not only was Jesus present, coming up out of the water and on to the banks of the Jordan River (verse 16a), but the Holy Spirit was also present (verse 16b), and then there was the voice of God the Father (verse 17). The Father's words confirmed God's acceptance and approval of Jesus.

These have been proper credentials of Jesus. John the Baptist declared Him as the Messiah who is coming (3:1-12). At His baptism He was anointed by the Spirit and confirmed by the Father (3:13-17). Jesus had now fulfilled all the righteous requirements to be Israel's Messiah (verse 15).

3. The Victorious Defeat of Satan (4:1-11)

Immediately after Jesus was baptized, and a voice from heaven said, "This is My Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased"—Satan came on the scene and tempted Jesus. Often our greatest hours of triumph are followed by our strongest times of trial. So it was with Jesus, and so it may very well be with us.

Jesus was led into the desert (the "wilderness") for testing. Just as God permitted the devil to test Job, so the Spirit allowed Satan to test Jesus, and thus prove the strength of His character. Jesus was tempted so that every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth would know that He is the victorious Conqueror.

Satan attacked Jesus with suggestions of alternate ways by which He might achieve His goal. And since Jesus was alone on the desert, the account we have here is His own story as He told it to His disciples. Whether Satan appeared in bodily form and spoke with actual words, or whether he came to Jesus like he comes to us (with subtle suggestions to the mind), we cannot tell. What we do know with certainty is that the devil is real, and that he tempts with great skill.

(4:1-4) Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, "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 by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"

Satan tempted Jesus on three levels:

To make religion material by putting priority on bodily needs—with an appeal to physical appetites (4:1-4). Satan waited until Jesus was faint with hunger, and then said, "Turn these stones into bread; feed yourself; feed other hungry people; use your powers to meet the material needs of people, and they will serve you." The fact is that Jesus could have issued one single word and the hard stones of the desert would have turned into tasty biscuits of bread. But out flashed the sword of the Spirit, and Jesus said to the devil, "It is written"—and He quoted from the book of Deuteronomy. We may not be able to explain it, but there is power in the Word of God which even the devil cannot deny. Because man is more than a physical being, it is as necessary to feed the immortal spirit as it is to feed the mortal body.

(4:5-7) Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him 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 shall give His angels charge over you,' and, 'In their hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.' Jesus said to him, "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"

Another level of the temptation of Jesus was an attempt to *make religion social by giving attention to a spectacular show—appeal to personal glory (4:5-7).* Satan took Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple (500 feet above the Kidron Valley) and in essence said, "God promised to take care of you" (Psalm 91:11-12). Satan was saying, "If you really believe the Scriptures, then jump!" Jesus could have dazzled the people's senses by descending

through the air unharmed, and the people would have raved over Him. Satan was saying, "Use your divine powers to become a wonder worker, and in that way you can attract people to you." Notice carefully the Lord's reply (verse 7). He said, "It is written again (in another place)." We must never isolate one part of the Bible from the rest of the Scriptures that deal with any given subject. It is important to read *all* that the Scripture has to say on any given subject. Jesus replied by quoting from Deuteronomy 6:16, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." It is our duty to trust God, not to tempt Him.

(4:8-11) Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.'" Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him.

The final temptation was designed to get Him to *make religion political by seeking an easy path to power—appeal to political influence (4:8-11)*. If Jesus would bow down and worship Satan, He could enjoy glory without enduring suffering. Satan does hold a limited sway over the kingdoms of this world. He is "the god of this age" (2 Corinthians 4:4). He is the "prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2). But he knows that some day Christ will rule supremely over "the kingdoms of this world" (Revelation 11:15), and Satan was attempting to offer Christ that glory without having to suffer the agony of the Cross. The devil was saying, "Use your divine powers by worshiping me, and win the world by a method other than suffering on the Cross." But Jesus said, "It is written, you shall worship the Lord your God and Him only you shall serve." There are no short-cuts to accomplishing the will of God, and we should never attempt to detour around the instructions given in God's Word.

The Lord Jesus was victorious over the snares of the devil. He did not fall into the traps of Satan. ¹⁰ Luke's account of the temptation says that the devil departed "for a season" (Luke 4:13/KJV). In other words, in spite of our Lord's victory in these temptations, Satan did not cease to tempt Jesus. In fact, not too many months later, through the disciple Peter, Satan again tempted Jesus to consider abandoning the Cross (Matthew 16:21-23).

One victory over the devil never guarantees freedom from further temptation. In fact, it seems that each victory we experience makes Satan try harder to bring defeat into our lives. Satan has our name on his list, and he is going to do his level best to drag our souls down to Hell.

In summary, there are some lessons which we can learn from this account in Matthew 4:1-11.

intensity of the storm" (The Communicator's Commentary: Matthew, page 51).

Myron Augsburger illustrates the fact that Jesus is the only person who knows the full weight of temptation, for the moment we yield to a temptation, the intensity of it terminates. He says, "If a storm should sweep through a woods leaving in its trail many broken trees, we might ask, which trees know the full brunt of that storm? Obviously *only the ones still standing* know the full intensity of what passed over them. Those that broke under the onslaught of the storm, from that point on did not experience further the

- a) Satan often takes advantage of our circumstances to tempt us. He waited until Jesus was hungry to issue the temptation regarding food. For example, he will tempt a man to get involved with a woman who works where he does.
- b) Satan's temptations often seem to be the strongest *immediately after* we have experienced remarkable blessings from God. It was right after His baptism that Jesus was tempted. Some of our sorest trials may come right after a time of spiritual renewal in our lives.
- c) We are to meet the temptations of Satan like Jesus did. Jesus always had an appropriate Scripture to use in reply to Satan. We should have many Scriptures memorized, to use as darts to throw at the devil when he comes with temptations. May God give every reader the discipline and the willing desire to study and to know the Bible, so that we will be well-armed against the enemy.

4. The Early Ministry in Galilee (4:12-25)

After Jesus defeated Satan, He was ready to begin His ministry. No person has a right to preach to others unless he himself has resisted the devil and has purposed to live in obedience to the Lord Jesus. Matthew 4:12 says that Jesus went up into Galilee, and 4:23 says that He was teaching, preaching, and healing.

We should remember, however, that *between* the end of Jesus' temptation (Matthew 4:11), and the statement given in Matthew 4:12, comes the ministry of Jesus which is described in John's Gospel (John 1:19—3:36). In other words, most of the early months of our Lord's public ministry were spent in Jerusalem, and these events are described in the first chapters of *John*. Thus, a number of months elapsed between verses 11 and 12 of Matthew 4. *Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not tell about the early public ministry of Jesus in the region around Jerusalem*—which included the encounter with Nicodemus, the early choosing of disciples, and the first cleansing of the Temple.

(4:12-17) Now when Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, He departed to Galilee. And leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by 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 sat in darkness have seen a great light, And upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned." From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

When Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been put into prison, He left Judea in the south, where He had conversation with Philip and Nathanael, and where He counseled with Nicodemus—and went north to His home region of Galilee.

Jesus chose to make Capernaum (verse 13) His headquarters while in Galilee. Capernaum was a busy, bustling town, full of commercial activities, located on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, and along the main highway from Damascus (in the north) to Egypt (in the south). This was a good place to reach people with the gospel. The "way of the sea" (verse 15) refers to the main highway which stretched across the region of Galilee, once occupied by the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. It was called the "Galilee of

the Gentiles," because when Assyria had conquered Israel in 722 B.C., the region was populated with many non-Jewish people from Mesopotamia. But Isaiah had predicted that into this region there would come "a great light" (verse 16). Thus the Galilean Ministry of Jesus was a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, and verse 23 says that Jesus brought *light* through His teaching, preaching, and healing.

Jesus preached the good news that "the kingdom of heaven" was at hand (verse 17).¹¹ The phrase "kingdom of heaven" refers to the rule of God. Matthew used the word "heaven" most often *because Jews* (out of reverence for the holy name of the Lord) *did not often mention the name "God," but instead, substituted the word "heaven."* For example, the Prodigal in Luke 15 confessed that he had sinned against "heaven" (Luke 15:21), which of course meant that he had sinned against God. The "kingdom of heaven" was the reverential expression for the "rule of God."

The message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (verse 17), was a call to turn from their own ways to God's ways, because the kingly rule of God (which the Jews were expecting) was just about to begin. It did begin at Pentecost about two years later. The Jewish leaders were looking for a political kingdom, and a leader who would deliver them from the power of Rome, but Jesus came to bring a spiritual rule into the hearts of people.

(4:18-22) And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." They immediately left their nets and followed Him. 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. He called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him.

In this section we read about the call of the first disciples—Peter, Andrew, James, and John—men who had already met Jesus (as recorded in John 1:29-42), but they had gone back to their fishing business. Now Jesus came to them and asked them to give up their business, and to follow Him. These were ordinary, average, homespun men. They were not men of great scholarship, or influence, or wealth. They were simple working people, but these are the kinds of people that God most often uses.

As Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee (verse 18), He saw two brothers doing commercial fishing; one was Simon; the other was Andrew. Simon was a common Jewish name; there are nine "Simons" in the New Testament. Jesus gave *this Simon* the surname "Peter"—which means "stone." Andrew came to be known as "the brother of Peter." Andrew was a quiet man, yet it was he who first brought Peter to Jesus (some months earlier), and it was he who reported that a boy had a lunch of five loaves and two fish.

flexible term—sometimes referring to a general reign of righteousness.

The phrase "kingdom of heaven" is found 32 times in Matthew's Gospel. The "kingdom of God" is found only five times in Matthew's account. There may be times in the New Testament when there is a shade of difference between "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God"—but in the gospels, the two expressions often refer to the same thing. Suffice it to say here, that parallel passages in Mark and Luke, use "kingdom of God" in describing the same event which Matthew describes with "kingdom of heaven." The word "kingdom" is a

Jesus spoke to these two fishermen, and stated that He had a greater task for them. He was planning to make them "fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed Jesus. A little farther along, Jesus saw James and John mending their nets; they too followed Jesus.

It is kind of striking that Jesus called four hard-working commercial fishermen to be His first disciples. John 21:1-3 indicates that seven of the twelve disciples may have been fishermen. Is there a reason why Jesus would call so many fishermen?

- 1) Fishermen were *busy* people; they did not sit around doing nothing; they sorted their catch, mended their nets, and got ready for the next day.
- 2) Fishermen have to be *patient* people; one who is restless and quick to move, never makes a good fisherman.
- 3) Fishermen *must have faith*; they generally cannot see the fish and are not sure that their nets are being filled.
- 4) Fishermen *must have courage and perseverance*; the Greek fishermen used to pray to their gods—"My boat is so small and the sea is so large" (courage); if there is no catch, they must try again (perseverance).

And just so, in God's service—it takes patience, skill, and faith—and we must learn not to be unduly discouraged when nothing seems to happen. Jesus knew what He was doing when He called fishermen to be His disciples.

(4:23-25) And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people. Then His fame went throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all sick people who were afflicted with various diseases and torments, and those who were demonpossessed, epileptics, and paralytics; and He healed them. Great multitudes followed Him—from Galilee, and from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan.

These verses describe the early crowds that followed Jesus. He was ever on the move (verse 23). The miracles which Jesus performed (verse 24) brought tremendous fame for Jesus. The crowds followed Him. They brought afflicted friends and family members for healing (verse 24). The word "torments" speaks of the agony which many people were enduring. The phrase "demon-possessed" describes people in whom demons were dwelling. The word "lunatic" (KJV) speaks of epilepsy (not insanity). The word "palsy" (KJV) was used to describe one who was paralyzed (translated "paralytic" in most newer translations).

Multitudes followed Jesus (verse 25), yet His army of true spiritual followers was small compared to the masses who were outwardly attracted to His ministry. He even had to say to His own intimate disciples one time, "Do you also want to go away?" (John 6:67).

Matthew has presented to us the credentials of the King. Jesus is the Son of God; He is the true Messiah; there have been a number of witnesses to His true kingship:

John the Baptist baptized Him.

The voice of God approved Him.

The Holy Spirit hovered over Him.

The disciples followed Him.

The crowds sought after Him.

May all of us reaffirm our loyalty to Him so that none of us ever needs to hear those words of concern, "Do you also want to go away?"

3. THE NATURE OF TRUE RIGHTEOUSNESS

(The Sermon on the Mount—Part 1)

Matthew 5:1-48

The Sermon on the Mount was given by Jesus on a hillside near Capernaum. The clear message teaches that God wants heartfelt obedience, not mere outward ritual.

In Matthew 4, Jesus had just called His first disciples. Now, in chapters 5-7, He is showing them what kind of life a true disciple lives. 12 A first reading of the chapters might indicate that He delivered this sermon to the disciples alone, but the conclusion of the sermon (in the last verses of Matthew 7) shows that a crowd of people must have gathered around the inner circle of disciples, and listened to the discourse which Jesus gave.

The key to understanding the Sermon on the Mount lies in Matthew 5:20, where Jesus says, "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." The sermon deals with three major facts: The nature of true righteousness (chapter 5); the nature of true worship (chapter 6); the nature of true discernment (chapter 7).

We look first at the nature of true righteousness. We will observe what true righteousness is (5:1-20), and then look at how true righteousness works (5:21-48).

1. What True Righteousness Is (5:1-20)

In the early verses of Matthew 5, Jesus describes eight qualities which are designed to bring blessing into our lives and glory to our Creator. These attitudes of the heart (meekness, mercy, peacemaking, poverty of spirit, etc.) are the marks of true righteousness.

a) True righteousness involves right attitudes in the heart (5:1-12).

(5:1-2) And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying:

Some translations use the word "happy" to describe the blessing in verses 3-12, but the word "blessed" is better. Happiness means "favored by circumstances," or "pleased because good fortune has come our way." The Greek word *markarios* is much deeper. The word describes a condition of inner satisfaction, an untouchable joy that comes from

Warren S. Kissinger says, "While the Brethren have 'no creed but the New Testament,' many Brethren have singled out one segment of the New Testament, the Sermon on the Mount, for special attention. This discourse sets forth a way of life marked by humility, purity, peacemaking, mercy, piety, nonconformity, nonresistance, refusal to swear oaths, integrity, simple living, and unostentatious prayer and worship. The commitment to follow Christ in radical discipleship has been a central tenet in much of Brethren tradition." (*The Brethren Encyclopedia*, page 1169).

knowing Christ and from walking with Him. In our English language, the word "blessed" is a better translation.

The world tries to picture "happiness" in a multitude of ways. Happiness is a warm puppy. Happiness is a new Honda Civic. Happiness is sixteen candles on a birthday cake. Happiness (on a bumper sticker in a big city) is five green lights in a row. Worldly happiness depends on outward circumstances. Christian blessedness is an inner joy that comes from walking with Christ. It is an untouchable joy that comes from knowing Christ and walking with Him.

Each of the eight beatitudes speaks of a "blessedness" which comes from some of the most unlikely places:

The world says, "Happy are the proud, for theirs is the praise of men." Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

The world says, "Happy are the carefree, for they are seldom serious." Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

The world says, "Happy are those who assert themselves, demanding their rights." Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

The world says, "Happy are those who thirst after pleasure, they shall never be bored." Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled."

The world says, "Happy are the fighters, for theirs shall be called the land of the free and the home of the brave." Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."

The world's view of happiness is to show an assertive spirit, to display a clever mind, and to get all the material things one can possibly afford. Jesus says that deep joy comes from other sources, and then He named the eight beatitudes. The beatitudes stand in stark contrast to the attitudes of the worldly person.

(5:3) "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

The "poor in spirit" are those who sense their utter helplessness without God. To be poor in spirit is the opposite of being haughty and proud. They see themselves as poor sinners in God's sight, and not even worthy of salvation. The people in the church at Laodicea were haughty and satisfied, and said, "I am rich...and have need of nothing" (Revelation 3:17). This is the opposite of being poor in spirit.

Those who are poor in spirit are not helpless creatures, with no backbone or stuffing. They are not floundering around and confused. They are energetic people, but they simply acknowledge that in themselves they have no spiritual assets, and are constantly in need of God's grace.

William Carey was the founder of the modern missionary movement. He was the first missionary to India in the late 1700s. He had accomplished a great deal of work. Many were brought to Christ through his ministry. He translated portions of the Bible into more than forty dialects of India. But on his tombstone in England, there is a simple inscription.

His name is carved on the stone, and the dates of his birth and his death, but *there is no listing* of honors and achievements—even though many accomplishments could have been named. And then, there are the words from a hymn penned by Isaac Watts: "A wretched, poor, and helpless worm; on Thy kind arm I fall."

Blessed are those who recognize their spiritual poverty apart from the intercessory work of Christ.

(5:4) "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

To "mourn" means "to *sorrow* over our own sins" and also "to *grieve* over the pain of others." Mourning includes grieving over the sad condition of the world in which we live.

Jesus says the Christian life is not all joy and laughter. It is not necessary to be always bubbling and smiling in order to be a good Christian. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn"—those who are intensely sorry for their sins; those who grieve over their lack of devotion to Christ; those who grieve over the hurt of others and the sad condition of the world about us.

John Wesley used to preach to miners during their lunch break. They were in their work clothes. Their faces were covered with black coal dust. But when they heard the gospel message, many were moved to tears. They were grief-stricken because of their sins. They wept, and Wesley said he could see the places where tears had washed down over their grimy, dirty, dusty faces. There were clean white lines down over their cheeks—paths where the tears had dropped from their eyes.

To mourn is to see sin the way God sees it. To mourn is to weep over sin, and to grieve over our sometimes feeble response to God's love. To mourn is to realize the awfulness of sin, and to be intensely sorry for it.

(5:5) "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

The word "meek" is a many-faceted word, but primarily speaks of an attitude that does not insist on its own rights, but gladly submits to God's laws and accepts God's dealings with us as good. Meek persons do not dispute or resist God's will. Meek persons acknowledge that God is the sovereign Ruler of the universe, and that God works out in our lives that which will prove a blessing in the end—and so they accept difficulties and hard places without bitterness or complaint against God.

Ross Stull and his wife were pioneer missionaries in the Amazon Valley of South America. One year a young couple came to join them in the work, but within a few months the young man took sick of a fever—and within a few days he died. The young wife, thousands of miles from home and in a strange land, after weeping and sobbing for a while—was able to accept the great sorrow as coming from the hand of God. They laid his body in a coffin, put a lid on it, and lowered the body into the newly dug grave. With a wide felt pen, the young wife had written on top of that crude box, in large letters, *His way is best*.

Meekness is not weakness; meekness is submission to the will of God. It takes a strong person to do what that wife did. Meekness is quiet submission to the will of God, through the joys as well as through the sorrows of life—and this is another step on the road to true

character building.

(5:6) "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled."

The fourth beatitude is a description of those who yearn for holiness, those who long to become more like Jesus. Christians who are spiritually healthy will hunger for a life of purity. They will be thirsty for fellowship with God in prayer. They will look forward to the Lord's Day when they can fellowship with God's people. They will be restless and unhappy unless they are making progress in developing Christian character.

Those who long for righteousness like a starving person longs for food, "shall be filled." That is, from time to time, they will experience satisfaction. (*Righteousness*, as used by Jesus in the Gospels, speaks of right living, good conduct, and upright character.) God does not promise those who seek after holiness to be filled with wealth and fame, but He does promise that those who sincerely seek after righteousness shall be filled with goodness and joy.

(5:7) "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

The word "merciful" refers to "compassion" and "sympathy" and "feeling with" another person. Mercy is much more than a brief emotional wave of pity. Mercy is a deliberate effort to identify with other persons, to try and feel things as they feel them, and then to help meet their needs.

Taking a meal for the family of someone who is sick; doing the chores for someone who met with an accident—these are ways of showing mercy. Jesus said, "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me" (Matthew 25:40). Showing sympathy for others, to the point of helping the individual—that is true mercy.

(5:8) "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

The Greek word translated "pure" means "unmixed in motive" and "free from contamination." It is easy to try and serve God with mixed motives. For example, we can give generously to a good cause—in order to gloat with self-approval. We can do a good deed for another—hoping that others will see something heroic in us. That is a mixed motive. We can attend church services, not because we are thirsting after holiness, but to enhance our own prestige in the community. That is a mixed motive. We can engage in careful study of the Scriptures in order to get a pleasant feeling of superiority over other Christians. That is a mixed motive. We can dabble with sexual relationships outside of marriage, and think that happiness comes in that way. But if we saturate our minds with passionate, lustful thoughts, we contaminate what God really intends for us.

The "pure in heart" are those who seek to serve God with unmixed motives, and with activities that are not contaminated by the passions of the flesh. The "pure in heart" are not *partly* dedicated to God and *partly* dedicated to the world. The "pure in heart" are those who seek to please God above all else.

(5:9) "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."

A "peacemaker" is one who seeks to bring harmony and reconciliation between persons who are estranged. God hates the actions of those who sow discord and stir up trouble and pit one group against another. And yet every community and every church has some

people who thrive on divisions and conflict and unrest. Peacemakers are needed in our churches because holding grudges and evil speaking are common sources of conflict among believers. Peacemakers are needed in our homes because quarreling often leads people to treat the worst, those who really love them the most.

Those who have peace with God should cultivate the art of peacemaking. We should strive to bridge gaps and to heal breaches whenever we have an opportunity to bring opposing parties together. A peacemaker must be careful not to hold grudges, not to take sides, and not to become disagreeable in disposition. Instead, we must answer a critic with gentle words, for "a soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1). We must try and see the other person's point of view. We must practice forbearance and forgiveness. We must be quick to apologize when we have wronged another, and quick to forgive when another person has wronged us. Sometimes we have to agree to disagree agreeably.

A peacemaker is one in whose presence spite and bitterness cannot long survive. Peacemaking is promoting peace and harmony with others; it is seeking to bridge gaps when conflicts arise and tensions are high.

(5:10-12) "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Verses 10-12 describe those who suffer for Jesus' sake—those who are mocked and laughed at because they seek to live by the principles taught in the Bible. Persecution refers to being harassed to the point of ridicule and distress—and sometimes even to the point of injury to the body.

Some think of persecution primarily in terms of martyrdom, but there are mild forms of persecution (such as ridicule and distress), and there are more severe forms of persecution (including injury and even martyrdom).

Persecution is bound to happen because nearly every action of the godly Christian life is a silent condemnation of the ungodly lives of others around us. And their troubled consciences build up in them a feeling of hatred, which often manifests itself in sarcasm, ridicule, or just plain meanness. The same world that slandered and rejected and crucified the Son of God, will likewise persecute His followers. Jesus says so in John 15:18-19.

Becoming a Christian is not a means of escaping trouble; stepping out for Christ is a sure means of getting into trouble. The primary reason some are not persecuted is because they have softened their convictions, accepted the standards of society, until there is hardly a difference between them and the unbelieving world. The point of the eighth beatitude is that when we are sneered at and persecuted, we are not to resent it, but rather to rejoice in it.

The beatitudes are sources of true blessing in life. True righteousness will manifest itself in these right attitudes in the heart.

b) True righteousness is intended to impact the com-munity (5:13-16).

(5:13-16) "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

Two symbols are used to describe the impact our lives can have on a non-Christian society. One of the symbols is "salt" (verse 13). The other symbol is "light" (5:14). *Salt* is valuable for many reasons, ¹³ but primarily because *it slows decay*. Salt is a preservative. In earlier times, fish and other foods were "salted down." Today, canning and freezing have replaced the use of salt. *Light* is valuable because *it dispels darkness*. Light illuminates and shows the way. We Christians are in the world not only to help preserve it from corruption, but also to show the way to God, and to shed light on the kind of life that brings joy and blessing.

Jesus is saying "I want you to shine for me" (verse 16). We are instructed in Philippians 2:15 to be "blameless and harmless" in the midst of a crooked and perverse society, "among whom you shine as lights in the world." Our testimony *becomes visible* by the way we treat a store clerk when making a purchase; by the way we do our work for the person who employs us; by the way we drive an automobile; and by the kind of daily language we use. We *hide* our light by being quiet when we should speak, by going along with the crowd, and by letting sin dim our light.

c) True righteousness is not an external code of conduct (5:17-20).

(5:17-19) "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus states clearly (verse 17) that in no way is He attempting to contradict the Mosaic law, though He was opposed to the way the scribes emphasized strict legal correctness outwardly, without stressing inward holiness.

Jesus was not attempting to do away with any part of the Bible (verse 18). His purpose was to bring out the full meaning of Scripture (verse 17b). In His life and teaching He would bring the Scriptures to their completion. ¹⁴ He came to fulfill the Law and the

cnaracteristic Jesus emphasizes is that salt preserves.

The Mennonite theologian, J. C. Wenger, says tha

Salt is white and symbolizes purity. Salt enhances taste. Salt creates thirst. But the primary characteristic Jesus emphasizes is that salt preserves.

The Mennonite theologian, J. C. Wenger, says that one of the principal Anabaptist/Pietist distinctives has been the fact that they "emphasized the superiority of the new covenant and its implications for Christian theology and Christian ethics...They believed that all Scripture was given by inspiration of God, and is inerrantly true in all its statements and doctrinal teachings. Nevertheless they recognized the fact that the relation of the Old to the New Testament Scriptures is that of promise to fulfillment...and of the

Prophets—that is, to reveal the full depth of meaning that the law was intended to hold.

The words "till heaven and earth pass away," point to the physical universe and all of creation—which in due time will pass away (2 Peter 3:10). By way of contrast, what God has revealed in Scripture is permanent. And since the Scripture is revealed truth from God, it is a serious matter to make light of Bible commandments. And it is even worse to teach others to take lightly the breaking of God's commands (verse 19). Apparently there are lower and higher positions in the eternal kingdom (verse 19b).

(5:20) "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus explains in verse 20 that true righteousness is not a mere outward code of conduct. In the epistles, *righteousness* means "a right standing with God"—the right standing which Christ obtained for us when He died on the cross. In the Gospels, the word *righteousness* most often speaks of conduct that is fitting to those who are right with God. Jesus says that our righteousness must exceed (or surpass) the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

We may say, "But the Pharisees were scrupulous in their attempts to follow the Mosaic Law, so how could Jesus call us to a greater righteousness than theirs?" The answer is this: They were content to obey the law outwardly. For the Pharisees, righteousness was only an external show—a dead ritual, an outward form. It was not really felt in the heart.

The scribes laid down fine-pointed regulations. For example, concerning the Sabbath day, they spent many hours discussing whether or not a person could lift a lamp from one place to another, or write a letter, or put a bandage on a wound—all on the Sabbath. Jesus says that we must be concerned about *inward goodness* as well as *outward rightness*. Outward rightness is proper, but there needs to be an inward goodness to match it! We should not think lightly about outward standards, but outward rightness must grow out of genuine inward concern about pleasing God.

2. How True Righteousness Works (5:21-48)

Jesus had just said that our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (verse 20). For the Pharisees, righteousness was a dead ritual and an outward form. It was not really felt in the heart. Jesus says that we must be concerned not only about words, but also about attitudes. We must be concerned not only about doing right, but about being right. We must be concerned not only about our actions, but also about our motives. And so, beginning at verse 21 of chapter 5, Jesus gives four examples to show how true righteousness works.

a) Jesus forbids murder and contempt (5:21-26).

ground work of a building to the building itself." Wenger quotes John Horsch, who explained that our duty toward keeping Old Testament regulations can be summarized with the following sentence: "Whatever is obligatory for the Christian is repeated and taught in the New Testament Scriptures" (*God's Word Written*, pages 68-69).

(5:21-26) "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny."

Murder includes much more than the outward act of taking a human life. Murder includes harsh anger and bitter speech. We can be perfectly innocent of taking a human life with a gun or a sword or a bomb, and yet be guilty of breaking the sixth Commandment.

Jesus says that *merely to be angry with* a brother or sister is a form of murder, and can lead to judgment—judgment before the Jewish Council, as well as God's eternal judgment. We can be as angry as we want at the devil, and at sin—but to be angry with other people because they insulted us, is a sinful and selfish and hurtful thing. Jesus says that anger is really murder in the heart.

Then Jesus speaks out against name-calling (verse 22b). The word *raca* means "brainless," "senseless," or "empty-headed." The word is an expression of contempt. The word *fool* speaks of one who has no regard for God or for holy things. Jesus clearly forbids calling a fellow human-being a "dope" or "jerk" or "nerd" or "stupid" or whatever else is the current fad. The 1 Corinthians 13 kind of love will not speak of people as "empty-headed idiots." Jesus condemns fierce name-calling and sinful anger—the kind of anger that leads to bitter words. Such actions constitute murder—the kind of murder which is in the heart.

In verses 23-24 we are told about the person who comes to the church service (the synagogue) to worship God, but on the way, he remembers that a friend has a grievance against him. Jesus says, "Forget the worship; go to your friend and apologize, and become reconciled to him—and then come and offer your sacrifices to God." We cannot be right with God if we are not right with our brothers and sisters. Verses 25-26 say that matters between brothers and sisters in Christ are to be settled as quickly and quietly as possible. There is no need to sue at the law and to go to court. God's people are to turn the other cheek, go the second mile, and be quick to become reconciled—rather than to hate, and curse, and resist, and resent, and grumble, and attack. We cannot have a clear channel of fellowship with God if the channel of fellowship with other human beings is clogged and broken.

The scribes taught that murder meant to kill a person physically. Jesus says that to hold contempt in the heart for another person is murder. True righteousness is not only concerned with actions, but also with attitudes.

b) Jesus forbids adultery and divorce (5:27-32)

(5:27-32) "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed

adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery."

Jesus upheld God's law of purity, and explained that sexual activity outside the marriage bond is adultery. In fact, to look upon a woman with a lustful gaze is adultery. Verse 28 refers not to a mere casual glance, but to a constant stare with the deliberate intent of lusting. The tense of the word *looks* indicates a "repeated looking, a longing for, and a hankering after." Jesus says that "to keep on looking with desire" really embraces the sin of adultery.

The scribes and Pharisees said that adultery was the physical act of sexual intercourse. Jesus says that sexual impurity really begins with wrong desires in the heart. We must deal immediately and decisively with the tendencies to lust. We must deliberately avoid situations that make it easy to sin. We must learn to count ourselves dead indeed unto sin. We must pray that the Lord will change our desires. We are to think of a woman (or a man) as a soul for whom Christ died, rather than as an object of lust. And it is very important to dress modestly with clothing that properly covers the body. Christians should be diligent about avoiding the form-fitted and semi-nude appearance.

In verses 29-30 Jesus is speaking figuratively. Some early church fathers took this passage literally, and had an eye gouged out, or had themselves castrated—but it was not really helpful, because lust was not removed. To physically mutilate the body does not solve the problem. If one plucked out the right eye, the left eye would still remain, and the temptation would continue to be very real. What is required is severe self-discipline. Anything which makes it easier for us to sin must be ruthlessly cut off. It may mean quitting a debatable job; or cutting off association with a friend who is becoming a snare to us; or lopping off undue zeal for wrong kinds of music, sports, or television. This more restricted manner of life may seem rather confining, but it is better to live a disciplined life here than to be a free wheeler, and end up in hell fire (verse 30).

In verses 31-32 Jesus speaks about divorce and remarriage. Divorce is one of the great social problems of our society.¹⁵ Very few families are unaffected by this great evil. More and more people are softening their stand on divorce and remarriage.¹⁶ Jesus deals with

Brethren writer, Eugene Roop, says, "In the history of the Church of the Brethren, we have correctly understood the seriousness of the marriage covenant. During the nineteenth century there virtually were no circumstances that the church understood to justify divorce and remarriage" (*Brethren Life and Thought*, Summer, 1976, page 137).

The Mennonite writer, Daniel Kauffman, says, "The Scriptures clearly teach that the remarriage of either party, even though legally divorced, while the other is living, is a violation of the marriage vow, and (the Scriptures) denominate both parties to such marriages as adulterers or adulteresses" (*Doctrines of the Bible*, Mennonite Publishing House, page 434).

divorce in more detail in Matthew 19:1-12, and it is appropriate to consider it more carefully there. Suffice it to say here that John the Baptist plainly told Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's (Philip's) wife" (Mark 6:18). In God's law, marriage vows unite a man and woman for life, and only death can separate that union. The remarriage of divorced persons who have a living partner constitutes a state of adultery.

There is only one possible loophole for divorce, and that is the "exception clause" in verse 32—"except [for] sexual immorality." There are three primary views about those four words: *The "patristic view"* says that a married person may divorce if there is sexual unfaithfulness, but may not remarry unless the original partner dies. The grammar of the sentence is such that the exception applies only to the divorcing, not to the remarriage. There is *no exception clause* in the last part of verse 32.¹⁷

The "betrothal view" stresses the word "fornication" (see the KJV) in the exception clause. Fornication is sexual unfaithfulness before the marriage is consummated. In this view, the exception refers to an espousal divorce, not to a marriage divorce. If the girl is unfaithful before the marriage ceremony (if she commits fornication), she may be returned to her father with a paper of divorcement. In that case the marriage would never be consummated.

The "Erasmian view" says that a married person may divorce for various kinds of unfaithfulness, and the divorce frees one to re-marry. This liberal view was first promoted by Erasmus, the humanist, who lived in the sixteenth century, and thus it is called "the Erasmian view."

Faithful Christians see the *Erasmian view* as pure heresy. The *betrothal view* carries with it a special problem, because the word translated "fornication" (porneia) carries more than one meaning. The *patristic view* is grammatically correct. The phrase "any reason except sexual immorality" cannot grammatically modify both verbs—"divorces" and "marries." The exception clause must never be used as an excuse for remarriage while a divorced partner is still living. It is not wise to cut off communication with people who divorce and remarry, but preachers of the gospel should not perform marriage ceremonies for divorced persons who have living partners.

c) Jesus forbids civil oaths and perjury (5:33-37)

(5:33-37) "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.' But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by

The Brethren passed a major paper on divorce and remarriage at Annual Conference in 1933. The Report mentioned the exception clause in Matthew 5 and in Matthew 19, and then said, "But does this exception permit remarriage, or only provide for *legal separation*? The sacredness and permanence of the home, as ordained by God, would not be in harmony with *remarriage*. Neither would the teaching of Paul (1 Cor. 7:10-11). The only interpretation that would seem to harmonize these scriptures is that, while fornication would be a sufficient cause for *divorce*, it would not be a legitimate reason for *remarriage*" (*Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Church of the Brethren, 1923-1944*, Brethren Publishing House, page 96).

heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one."

A "civil oath" is a promise, based on an appeal to God, that the person taking the oath will speak the truth. The "swearing" mentioned in verses 33-36 may include the sin of cursing, but it primarily has to do with using an oath when giving testimony in court. It is a serious matter to promise in God's name to tell the truth, and then tell a lie. The crime is called "perjury."

The Pharisees often took oaths, but sometimes they deliberately avoided using the name of God in their oaths, and *then* they claimed the oath was not binding. Frequently ordinary people did not understand all the policies practiced by the Pharisees, and so if they swore by the city of Jerusalem, or by some part of the human body—instead of by the name of God—the people were unaware that the oath was not binding in the minds of the Jewish religious leaders. It was because of this rather secret policy that the Pharisees were able to "devour widows' houses" (Matthew 23:14). To swear by the name of God, they said, means that one must keep the oath; but to swear by Heaven or Jerusalem or the Temple, left one feel free to break the oath.

Jesus says that our speech should always be so honest, and our character should be so true, that we will not need the crutch of an oath to get people to believe in us. We must guard even against such practices as gossiping and excessive teasing—lest our words are not meticulously true. Our life and testimony should be such that others will trust us in all that we say. Jesus demands truthfulness at all times, whether we are under oath or not.¹⁹

If we are called to give testimony in court because we saw an automobile accident, or because we were in the center of a disagreement over who owns a certain piece of land—sincere Christians will choose not to lay their hand on a Bible and swear to tell the truth. If we "swear" to tell the truth (with an appeal to God)—that implies that we are not always truthful, but now that we have placed our hands on a Bible (or raised our right hand and taken an oath)—now in these moments we are telling the truth. Jesus says that our "yes" should always mean "yes" and our "no" should always mean "no." Our word should be our bond. Therefore we are not to swear at all (verse 34).

The laws of our land recognize the convictions of those who cannot swear a civil oath in

A good summary of the early Brethren view is found in the book *Texts in Transit II*, "From their beginnings the Brethren have objected to the practice of swearing an oath as proof that one is telling the truth or as assurance that one will abide by an agreement. Alexander Mack (1679-1735) writes...that a government can depend more upon citizens who affirm with yes, and deny with no, than upon citizens who insist upon swearing oaths" (Kenneth M. Shaffer, Jr. and Graydon F. Snyder, page 17).

Peter Nead (1796-1877) quotes Matthew 5:33-37 and James 5:12, and says, "This is so plain that it needs no comment. But it is astonishing that so many who profess to be subjects of Christ's kingdom, do overlook, or willfully transgress this plain commandment...The followers of Christ ought to be men of truth so that their word may be received without oath" (*Nead's Theological Works*, 1866, pages 121-122).

good conscience, and so the law permits us to simply "affirm" instead.²⁰ When we "affirm"—we merely say that we mean to tell the truth as far as we understand it.

d) Jesus forbids retaliation toward adversaries (5:38-48).

(5:38-48) "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away. You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."

None of us likes to be wronged by others, but when we are wronged, we are not to retaliate; instead, we are to turn the other cheek (verse 39). People sometimes slap us, not with their hands, but in other harmful ways. If co-workers at our place of employment want us to engage in some activity (and we believe it is wrong)—and we refuse to join them—they make derogatory remarks, and so slapping on the cheek sometimes comes in the form of slander, ridicule, and reproach. But we must show love even to those who are enemies (verses 43-44).²¹

The law "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (verse 38), was not an encouragement to strike back. It was not saying, "If someone knocks out your tooth, you knock out his in return." That law was given simply to forbid a court from leveling a penalty greater than the original crime deserved. The intent was to legislate justice. For example, Genesis 34:2 tells how a man named Shechem (a Hivite) stole Dinah and sexually defiled her. Genesis 34:25 tells how her brothers, Simeon and Levi, went in among the Hivites and massacred every male in the tribe. Surely killing all the males in a tribe was not justified merely because one person committed a crime. The law described in verse 38 was in essence saying, "Let the punishment fit the crime." The intent of the "eye for an eye"

Myron Augsburger says, "Jesus calls for honesty without the oath. This is the background for the stance of the Mennonites, Quakers, and others who have refused the oath in business or a court, and who choose instead to "affirm" (see James 5:12). Jesus taught that swearing is unnecessary, irreverent, and ineffective in that it does not really change anything. The critical issue is truthful speech" (*The Communicator's Commentary: Matthew*, page 78).

The Brethren responded to a question related to the subject of retaliation at the Annual Meeting in 1845. Article 5 of the decisions made at that Annual Meeting says, "In regard to our being altogether defenseless, [we are] not to withstand the evil, but overcome evil with good: Considered, that the nearer we follow the bright example of the Lamb of God, who willingly suffered the cross, and prayed for his enemies...the more we shall fulfill our high calling and obtain grace to deny ourselves for Christ's and the gospel's sake, even to the loss of our liberty and our lives" (*Minutes of the Annual Meetings of the Brethren, 1778-1909*, page 85).

passage was not to hurt others at least as badly as they hurt us.

The instruction in verse 40, "If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also"—refers to the outer tunic and the interior vest that most Jewish males wore. In other words, instead of hiring a lawyer and trying to get justice, Jesus says we are to take a trifling injury like the loss of a coat, and yield to our enemy, and go to bed and sleep in peace! Don't try and figure out ways to get even. It is always much better to take a wrong, than to do a wrong.

The words of verse 41 are a reference to the Roman soldier. If he wanted someone to carry his baggage, the law in Israel was that the person had to carry it, but only for one mile. Jesus in essence says, "Surprise the soldier and offer to carry his gear for two miles!"

God's people are to be characterized by courtesy, kindness, and consideration—instead of rudeness, bluntness, and roughness. We are to turn the other cheek (verse 39); we are to let the greedy person take our coat (verse 40); we are to go the second mile when the soldier demands our help (verse 41); we are to give to one who asks, and to the person who wants to borrow (verse 42).

Verse 42 is not a requirement to give money indiscriminately to beggars, drunkards, and deadbeats—but it is a clear call to help all who genuinely stand in need. Deuteronomy 15:8 says that we should give only what is sufficient for the need of those who lack the necessities of life. Albert Barnes says, "If someone is genuinely hungry, give him food; but if he wants anything further, try to help him find employment." What many desperate persons need is not money, but someone to show them how to discipline their spending. When Jesus says "give to him who asks you," He is simply commanding us to show a generous and compassionate spirit toward those who are needy.

In Matthew 5:45 we are told that God is good and kind to all persons, sending rain on the just and on the unjust alike. The final verses of Matthew chapter 5 are a reminder that to love only those who love us, is a selfish love. Unsaved people will do that much. The words "greet" (or "salute") in verse 47 mean that we should treat all persons with the common marks of friendship. There is nothing that will move an enemy like love in return for an insult.

In verse 48, the word "perfect" (Greek, *teleios*) speaks of completeness, maturity, and being well rounded in character.²² No matter how far we have come along in the journey of the Christian life, there are still higher goals toward which we are to reach. One who returns "good for evil" (verse 44), for example, is becoming mature in faith, and is moving toward perfection. By such actions the believer is becoming more and more like Jesus Christ.

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Albert Barnes cites the fact that Job is said to have been "'perfect'—that is, not holy as God, or sinless, for fault is afterward found in him (Job 9:20; 42:6), [but] he exhibited his religion as a prince, a father, an individual, a benefactor of the poor. He was not merely a pious man in one place, but uniformly" (*Barnes' Notes on the New Testament: Matthew*, page 62).

On a very cold night in a large city some years ago, a friendly sort of man saw a newspaper boy along the street— attempting to sell his remaining newspapers—so that he could go home and get out of the bitter cold. The man in the car rolled the window down, and said to the boy, "I'll buy all the papers you have tonight, son." And then the gentleman added, "It's really a cold night, isn't it?" The surprised boy said, "Yes sir, but it's much warmer since you came along, mister!" Those of us who profess to be disciples of Christ should be experts at spreading the warmth, the hospitality, and the glory of God's love.

The instructions given in Matthew 5 spell out for us the nature of true righteousness—the kinds of right conduct which Jesus expects to see displayed in our lives. *True* upright living (*true* righteousness) is not a mere external code of conduct, but includes right attitudes in the heart—avoiding hatred as well as murder, rejecting a hankering lust as well as physical adultery, and returning love for an insult.

4. THE NATURE OF TRUE WORSHIP

(The Sermon on the Mount—Part 2)

Matthew 6:1-34

An additional portion of the Sermon on the Mount is recorded in Matthew 6. The emphasis here is on checking for proper motives. Jesus looks for inward goodness as well as for outward rightness.

Jesus calls for the worship of God without using religion to cover up an uncommitted life. A hypocrite *is not* a person who in an unguarded moment occasionally falls short of God's highest standard. A hypocrite instead *is one who* deliberately uses religion to cover up sin and to promote his own selfish gains. The word *hypocrite* comes from a word which means "an actor who wears a mask." It is easy for anyone to do good things from the wrong motives. In Matthew 6, Jesus talks about the true worship of God in several areas.

1. Worshiping God in Our Giving (6:1-4)

Doing a charitable deed ²³ is an important part of our worshiping God. The word *alms* (KJV) is a synonym for "charitable deeds."

(6:1-4) "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly."

Jesus admonishes us not to do alms "before men, to be seen by them" (verse 1). If we do a charitable deed in order to get the praise of others, then we rob ourselves of blessing, and we rob God of glory—even though the money we give might be used to help needy persons. It is wrong to practice any good deed, simply to win praise from other human beings, or to increase our own prestige, or to show the world how good we are. If we do our giving quietly, we shall be rewarded, not by the applause of other human beings but by our heavenly Father.

Jesus says we are not to "sound a trumpet" (verse 2) when we do a charitable deed. Sounding a trumpet means "to publicize" or "to boast to others about what we are doing." Jesus assumes that we will do charitable deeds. He says when we do a deed, not if we bless others by doing a good deed. We are to give, but we are not to make a show of it. In light of the tremendous need for spreading the gospel and for helping the unfortunate,

The phrase "charitable deeds" ("alms" in the KJV) is the translation of the Greek word *dikaiosyne*, which literally means "acts of righteousness," and therefore includes more than merely giving to the poor.

it is our obligation to give and to give generously—but it is to be done without putting on a display. Jesus says that if we give alms for show, we will get the admiration of men as a reward, but that is all the reward we will ever get.

The clause, "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing," ²⁴ is a symbolic way of saying that our deeds should be done without display. It is not necessary that all giving must be done anonymously, and that one should not even keep a record. Everyone in the early church knew that Barnabas had given the income from the sale of his land (Acts 4:34-37), and Jesus commended the widow who gave two mites in public. Others saw the widow and Mark 12:42 implies that they even knew the amount of her contribution. The real issue in Jesus' teaching is the manner and the motive by which our giving is done. We glorify God and we worship Him properly when we give to worthy causes quietly and simply, without seeking to draw attention to ourselves.

2. Worshiping God in Our Praying (6:5-15)

Jesus gives four basic instructions to guide us in our praying. Again, Jesus assumes that His disciples will pray; Jesus says *when* you pray, not *if* you pray.

a) Pray without calling attention to ourselves (6:5-6)

(6:5-6) "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."

When we pray, we are not to be as the hypocrites, for "they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men" (verse 5). Jesus insists that our praying must not be a show-off thing. It must not be a performance for the applause of the crowd, but a simple conversation with God.

The Pharisees stood in public places—hands stretched out, palms lifted upwards, and heads bowed. These men were not seekers of God; they were seekers of human applause. There was nothing wrong with praying publicly. Jesus prayed publicly at the feeding of the 5,000 in John 6:11. Paul prayed publicly on the storm-tossed ship in Acts 27:35. Public prayer is not wrong, but vain display is always wrong. The word "room" (verse 6) is sometimes used for a store room, an inner room, or even a bedroom. Jesus says it is better to go into a small room to pray, than to make a big show of pious praying.

b) Pray without using vain repetition (6:7-8)

(6:7-8) "And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him."

Jesus says that we are not to use "vain repetitions." There is a place for repetition in

D. A. Carson says, "The way to avoid hypocrisy is not to cease giving, but to do so with such secrecy that we scarcely know what we have given" (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 8*, page 164).

prayer, but not for *vain* repetition. Our Lord wants us to be persistent in prayer, to keep on praying, as described in Luke 18:1. We are not to be like the man who was in deep distress and finally decided to pray. He said, "Lord, you know that I haven't bothered you for fifteen years, and if you help me out of this mess, I won't bother you for another fifteen." Jesus Himself prayed, *using repetition*. Matthew 26:44 describes the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane. When Jesus had gone back to the sleeping disciples, and after He had rebuked them, He "went away again, and prayed the third time, *saying the same words*."

Vain repetition is the meaningless mouthing of the same words repeatedly. One prayer was offered like this: "Lord, we thank thee, Lord, for this day, Lord, because, Lord, you have been good to us, Lord; now Lord, as we study your Word, dear Lord, give us insight to understand." We would never hold a conversation with a friend in that manner: "Joe, I want you to know, Joe, that you, Joe, are one of my best friends; and I consider, Joe, that I have much to thank you for." God is ready to answer our prayers, and He does not need to be pestered into responding to our requests by vainly repeating lots of words.

c) Pray according to the pattern described (6:9-13)

(6:9-13) "In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."

Jesus, in this passage, gives a model after which we can pattern our praying. This pattern for prayer is designed to help us avoid using vain repetition. We are to pray after the pattern described in verses 9b-13.

The prayer includes six petitions. The first three *focus on God and His glory*: First, there is a concern for God's name—"Hallowed be Your name." Then there is a concern for God's kingdom—"Your kingdom²⁵ come." And then, there is a concern for God's will—"Your will be done."

The last three petitions *focus on man and his needs*: First, our physical needs—"Give us this day our daily bread;" Then on our mental needs—"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;" And then, our spiritual needs—"Do not lead us into temptation."²⁶ The final words of the prayer are a doxology of praise to God.

We should keep in mind that the pronoun "I" is not mentioned even one time in the entire prayer. We cannot pray the Lord's Prayer alone. The prayer includes others.

d) Pray with a forgiving spirit toward others (6:14-15)

(6:14-15) "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your

²⁵ The prayer for the coming kingdom is not merely for the Second Coming of Christ, but that there might be subjection to His will now in individual lives.

Since God does not tempt anyone to sin (James 1:13), the phrase "do not lead us into temptation" (Greek, *peirasmos*) must mean, "Let us not be brought into temptation [that is, by the devil—the evil one]."

trespasses."

Every one of us needs to be forgiven. Who of us would dare to say that he has never sinned, and that he has always done all that he might have done? All of us at some time or another have been swept away by some unholy passion or impulse. None of us has always been as courteous as we might have been in every situation. *Therefore we need to be forgiven*. The lesson is that we will be forgiven *only in proportion to* how freely we are willing to forgive those who have sinned against us. One of the important things then about prayer, is not simply seeking to get an answer, but being the kind of person whom God can trust with an answer—a forgiving person.

We are to pray without calling attention to ourselves, and without using vain repetition. We are to follow the pattern of the Lord's Prayer, and we are to come before the heavenly Father as one who is quick to forgive those who may have hurt us.

3. Worshiping God in Our Fasting (6:16-18)

The only *fast* which God actually required of the Jewish people was a fast on the annual Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:27). However, personal fasting was often practiced by devout Jews at least two times each week (Luke 18:12). The Pharisees enjoyed putting on outward displays of righteousness. They fasted in such a way that people knew they were fasting. They smeared white stuff on their faces so that they would look pale and others would think that they were really pious souls.

(6:16-18) "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."

Jesus says that we are not to be as the hypocrites, putting on "a sad countenance" (verse 16). Fasting is a proper activity, but if our fasting requires spectators, it is mere acting, and not a genuine form of worship. All through Matthew 6, Jesus teaches against any kind of worship *that is done for a show*. It would seem that activities such as drama and clowning, show-off kinds of music, and even dramatic displays of preaching in the pulpit—border on entertaining an audience instead of feeding listeners with the Word of God. In Bible times, some devout people (like Anna) "served God with fastings and prayers night and day" (Luke 2:37), but those activities were done in a very proper way.

Fasting refers to doing without a normal amount of food or drink, and it can include abstaining from other natural practices in order to be more sensitive to spiritual things. Fasting is a personal sacrifice that results from a genuine concern for the well-being of another person, or from an inner yearning for a closer walk with God in our own lives. In a sense, *anything we abstain from for spiritual reasons*, is fasting.

Fasting is not something that fanatics do. Fasting is not for the super-religious. Fasting is a part of the Christian life. It shows God how earnest we are about a genuine concern. An occasional fast gives us more time to pray. It teaches self-discipline. It reminds us that we can live with a lot less. It helps us appreciate God's good gifts—especially when we

go back to eating food again.

True fasting is to be an act of worship between the believer and God. The solution to the hypocrisy which Jesus condemns in this passage—is not to abolish fasting, but to observe fasting in a quiet, unassuming way.

4. Worshiping God in Our Investing (6:19-24)

Jesus is concerned that we hold right attitudes toward wealth. Everything on earth really belongs to God (Psalm 24:1), and so there is nothing on earth about which we can technically say, "This is mine." All we can say is, "This belongs to God, and He has given me the use of it for a period of time." The little girl who lived in the city, was taken for a walk out into the countryside. For the first time in her life she saw a little patch of blue flowers growing in the underbrush. She said to her teacher, "Do you think God would mind if I picked one of His flowers?" That's the proper attitude toward the material things of this world.

(6:19-24) "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures 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 and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, 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 that darkness! No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

Using money properly should be a major concern for every one of us. It is our duty to provide for our families (1 Timothy 5:8), and to give to others in need (2 Corinthians 8:4), and to support the spread of the gospel (Philippians 4:15-17). Jesus cautions against greed and covetousness and a careless investing of that which we have earned.

One who uses money wisely will purchase treasures that have lasting value. Treasures on earth (verse 19) include grain, clothing, gold, silver, etc. These were forms of riches in Bible times. To "lay up" treasures upon the earth, means to be burdened and anxious about them. Treasures in heaven (verse 20) include those things done on earth which have an eternal significance. Treasures in heaven include doing simple deeds of love for others; suffering ridicule for Christ's sake, going the second mile toward one who abuses us; and giving financially to help support the Lord's work. These activities are laying up treasures in heaven.

Another key statement in this section is found in verse 24, where Jesus says "no one can serve two masters." He is talking about whether we are serving God, or money and material things. He says that we cannot "serve God and mammon." We live in a society where many people serve money. They spend their lives collecting and storing it, and then die and let it all behind. In essence Jesus says, "You show me where you put your money and your time and your energies, and I'll tell you where your heart is."

Jesus says that "the lamp of the body is the eye" (verse 22). If the eye is good, the whole body will be full of light, but if the eye is bad, the whole body is full of darkness. The "eye"

is used here to symbolize spiritual understanding. A "good" eye (*single* eye in KJV) speaks of generosity. The same Greek word (*aplous*) is translated "liberally" in James 1:5. A "bad" eye (*evil* eye in KJV) speaks of being stingy or grudging. It is a sin to be tight-fisted and stingy, and not to give liberally. Hoarding and selfishness lead to spiritual darkness. Very seldom will you find a person who is stingy with money that has great spiritual gifts.

Using money wisely is of great concern to our Lord Jesus. He warns against worshiping the material things of this world. We are to focus our energies on laying up treasures in heaven, and that includes giving financially to support those in need. We are told in Proverbs 19:17, "He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, and He will pay back what he has given."

5. Worshiping God in Our Trusting (6:25-34)

In the final verses of Matthew 6, Jesus cautions against a worried fear which takes the joy out of life. The phrase "do not worry" (throughout this section) means "don't be anxious." To worry about life and its needs is really a distrust of God. To provide for the future is not wrong, but to have a tormenting anxiety about it is sinful. Beginning at verse 25, Jesus describes the nature of simple trust in the heavenly Father. Jesus says three things about simple trust.

a) Simple trust observes God's care in nature (6:25-32)

(6:25-32) "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things."

Jesus tells us to live simply, and not to worry about our lives—what we will eat or drink (verse 25).²⁷ He says we should "look at the birds of the air" (verse 26). He says they are cared for, and the flowers of the field are clothed (verses 28-29). Even the blades of grass are not forgotten (verse 30). Since God cares for these elements in nature, surely He will care for us, for we are made in the image of God, and thus we are special objects of His

S. S. Blough quotes Matthew 6:25 in his chapter on "The Simple Life and Christian Adornment." He says our "whole being" should focus on living a life which demonstrates simplicity and trust *(Studies in Doctrine and Devotion,* page 175). Myron Augsburger says that worry is *irrelevant*, for it does not change things; and it is *irresponsible*, for it burns up energy without applying constructive action to help solve the problem *(Communicator's,* page 94).

love.

In verses 31-32, Jesus says that pagan Gentiles will be over-anxious about their food and clothing, and will offer sacrifices to their gods, and will try to appease evil spirits—but we Christians can sense that our God knows all about our needs, and that He will not forsake us. We can be assured that Jehovah God knows our needs and will supply them. Simple trust observes God's care in nature.

b) Simple trust puts God's concerns in first place (6:33)

(6:33) "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

The promise is that if we "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness," then all the necessities of life shall be added to us. How do we put God's kingdom first? We can put God first in several ways:

- —by placing spiritual things before material things
- —by elevating God's Word above man's opinions
- —by striving to be good rather than to be great
- —by seeking to give rather than to get

These have been ways to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness"—and Jesus says that putting God's kingdom first will assure us of God's care, and of His provision for the necessities of life.

c) Simple trust determines to live a day at a time (6:34)

(6:34) "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."

Jesus concludes the section on "the nature of true worship" by saying, "Do not worry about tomorrow."

We must all try and learn to live one day at a time. Worrying about tomorrow doesn't help tomorrow, nor does it help today. If anything, it robs us of real effectiveness today and will make us even less effective tomorrow. Perhaps tomorrow, we won't be alive—and if we are not alive, we will have worried about things we will never need to face. Why spoil today by worrying about an unknown future?

When Jesus says that we are not to worry about tomorrow, He is not implying that we should not take life seriously. Rather, Jesus is saying that troubles can best be met by dealing with them a day at a time. And He is saying further, that God will grant the strength required for the troubles of tomorrow (when they come), just as He provides strength for today. We are to let tomorrow with God, while seeking to please Him today. When tomorrow comes (if it comes at all), our heavenly Father will provide all the needed grace for whatever problems we have to face.

Mark Twain once said, "I'm an old man and I have known many troubles, but most of them never happened." We are living in an almost insane age of human history. Our generation gulps down its breakfast, bolts off to the office or shop, races home though heavy traffic,

does a few chores around the house, watches some programs on television—and then takes a sleeping pill and calls it a day. One person said, "I have so many worries that if anything happens to me today, it will be two weeks before I'll have time to get around to worrying about it."

Martin Luther at one time became discouraged when burdened with the cares of life. One morning, his wife dressed in black, in the clothes of mourning.

Luther said to his wife, "Who died?"

She replied, "Why, don't you know, God in Heaven is dead?"

That answer surprised Martin Luther, and he said, "Katie, how can you talk such nonsense. How can God die? He is immortal and will live through all eternity."

She replied, "If God cannot die, then why are you so hopeless and discouraged here of late?"

Luther later wrote and explained that it was only then that he discovered how wise his wife had acted, and he set out to master his sadness. We know that it is asinine to presume that God is dead—and yet from a practical point of view, have we not at times acted as if God had died?

The Parks Commission in a Canadian town was planning to widen a street. As the men were removing trees, they came to a certain tree in which they noticed a robin's nest, and the mother robin sitting on the nest. The foreman ordered the men to let the tree stand until later. A few weeks after that, they found the nest empty. The little robin family had grown and the tiny birds had flown away. But something at the bottom of the nest caught the eye of one of the workmen. It was a soiled little white card, which was part of the nest. When he separated it from the mud and the sticks, he found that it was a small Sunday School card, and on it, the words of 2 Kings 18:22, "We trust in the Lord our God."

The greatest goal in life for each of us, according to Matthew 6, should be to worship God by consistent living. And consistent living calls for faithfulness in giving, loyalty in praying, occasional fasting, carefulness in investing, and consistency in trusting.

5. THE NATURE OF TRUE DISCERNMENT

(The Sermon on the Mount—Part 3)

Matthew 7:1-29

In the last section of the Sermon on the Mount we learn about the nature of discernment. Discernment means the ability to distinguish the difference between the true and the false, the right and the wrong, the godly and the ungodly. Jesus says that we must learn to distinguish between that which is pleasing to God and that which grieves Him. Jesus mentions four areas of life which need discernment.

1. Judging with Discernment (7:1-6)

The early verses of Matthew 7 are sometimes quoted even by those who know very little about the Bible.

(7:1-5) "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

Jesus says, "Judge not, that you be not judged." The "judging" that is condemned is the unkind, critical, holier-than-thou attitude which is sometimes evident among people professing faith. To condemn with a harsh, fault-finding spirit is a *destructive* kind of judging.

The words "judge not" are an admonition warning us not to go around looking for the bad, and nit-picking about insignificant things. We can seldom help others by engaging in sharp, unbrotherly criticism. One of the reasons why we must refrain from such judging is because we (as limited human beings) never fully understand all the issues nor the motives of the person being judged.

Then Jesus tells a little parable (in verses 3-5), a parable about obstructions in the human eye. He compares little specks of dust with large beams of lumber. The person with a major fault (with a large piece of lumber in his eye), is in no position to try and correct an offender with some trifling defect (a tiny speck of dust in his eye). Jesus is not forbidding us to cast out the mote from our brother's eye. In fact, we are to see the mote in our brother's eye, and we are to help pull it out—but not until we have first cast the beam out of our own eye (verse 5).

We may rebuke sin; we may protest evil; we may denounce immoral conduct—but not if we ourselves indulge in it! The phrase "judge not" does not mean that we are to become easy and tolerant and overlook evil conduct. Some say, "You don't dare to speak out against the young couple shacking up together without the commitment of marriage;

you're judging if you do that." Others say, "You must not rebuke two men who are living together in a homosexual relationship; you're judging if you do that." The person who makes such moral judgments is not necessarily criticizing with a harsh and carping tone, but is merely discerning between what is pleasing to God and what grieves Him. Such attempts to rightly discern can be a proper kind of judging.

Often people remember that somewhere the Bible says "judge not," but forget that the same Bible also says something in other places about judging. For example, in John 7:24 we are told to "judge with righteous judgment." In Luke 7:43 Jesus told a man, "You have rightly judged." And in 1 Corinthians 2:15, Paul says, "He who is spiritual judges all things." Also, the Bible says that we are to beware of false prophets. We cannot tell who the false prophets are if we don't use our critical powers of judgment to decide who is true and who is false. We must judge! So the admonition to "judge not" is not intended to stifle a clear stand against sin. It is not intended to encourage us to abandon the use of discernment. We are to evaluate situations; we are to discern between the false and the true; but we must never condemn with a harsh, bitter, fault-finding spirit.

The command against judging does not mean that we should never judge. It does mean that we should first judge ourselves (verses 3-5); that we should not infer the worst regarding another person's actions; that we should not judge another person on the basis of a single act; and that we should never try and judge the hearts of others, because only God knows the heart (1 Corinthians 4:3-5).

(7:6) "Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces."

In verse 6 we are exhorted to use discernment when presenting the gospel to those who oppose God's truth. We are not to carelessly dispense the gospel message. God's truth is like a string of pearls; it is a beautiful and wonderful message; dogs and swine were considered unclean animals, and here depict wicked people.

The command is not a directive against soul winning, but is a caution against spending lots of time with a person who rejects the gospel and responds with vicious scorn. Jesus instructed His disciples not to stay long in those places that rejected the Christian faith (Matthew 10:14-15, 23).

Staying on and on in the company of those who ridicule the Christian faith is not fair to other fields that are still waiting. We must use discernment even in soul winning. ²⁸ The people of Judah (before the Babylonian Captivity) became so hardened and so set in their sinful ways, that God several times told the prophet Jeremiah to quit praying for them. The Lord said to Jeremiah, "It is no use; their minds are made up." Spiritual discernment is required to decide when to give up and when to move on to other fields.

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L. W. Teeter has an interesting comment: "There seems to be an allusion [here] to casting remnants of consecrated offerings to dogs. The figurative meaning is that the sacred teachings of the Gospel should not be given to the class of men who will not accept them with sacredness, but will devour them inconsiderately and profanely" (*The New Testament Commentary*, page 39).

2. Praying with Discernment (7:7-12)

Jesus had just talked about some who stubbornly refuse the pearls of God's truth, and admonished His servants not to spend an undue amount of time with those who flatly reject the gospel message. Sometimes we cannot talk to people about God; on the other hand, nothing can stop us from talking to God about them—and thus there is a call to prayer in verses 7-11.

(7:7-11) "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!"

The discerning Christian will pray much because he knows the value and power of prayer. The Bible is full of promises such as the one found in Jeremiah 33:3, where God says, "Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know." We are told also in James 5:16 that the prayer of a righteous person "avails much," that is, it is powerful and does bring results.

Jesus urges us (verses 7-8) to keep on asking and seeking and knocking, no matter what our problems are—because we have a heavenly Father who cares and hears and answers. The emphasis in the passage is on persistence and frequency in prayer.

"Asking" is *sincere* praying—ordinary conversation with God. "Seeking" is *earnest* praying—speaking to God with urgency. "Knocking" is *desperate* praying—crying out to God when we just don't know which way to turn.

To walk with God is a walk of prayer—but what may seem like an unqualified promise to have our prayers answered (verses 7-8), is restricted by other passages that deal with the subject of prayer. For example, we must pray in faith (James 1:6-8); we must not harbor unconfessed sin (Psalm 66:18); and we must pray in keeping with the Lord's will (Matthew 26:39).

Jesus gives further information about prayer in verses 9-11. Very few parents would deceive a child who asks for bread, by giving him a rounded stone that looks like a small Palestinian loaf of bread, or if he asks for a fish, by giving him a dangerous serpent. And surely, if a child asks for a serpent (or for anything harmful), parents would not give it.

We try to give our children nourishing food; and if children ask for something harmful—even though our human natures are corrupted—we would not give them what is harmful. Just so, God does not always say "yes" to our prayers. God answers "yes," "no," and "wait a while." We can be grateful that God does not always say "yes" to our requests. God knows that we are sometimes asking for snakes, and so He does not give us what we ask for, even if we are persistent in our prayers. If we will ask, seek, and knock—God will give the good things that we need—and He knows better than we do what those good things are.

(7:12) "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." The word "therefore" links the Golden Rule principle with the

preceding sentences, and implies that because God gives good gifts to those who ask Him, we are to treat others in the same way.

The principle expressed in this "Golden Rule" is that what we ordinarily want others to do for us should be what we practice toward other people. The rule in essence says, "Put yourself in another person's place, and then act toward that person as you would wish him to act toward you." The world's version of the Golden Rule is: "Do to others as they do to you—only worse!" The worldly attitude is: "If you are mean to me, I'm going to be mean to you; if you are nice to me, I'll be nice to you." I saw a tee-shirt one time which read, "I don't get mad, I just get even."

Christians are not to treat others as they treat us; rather, we are to treat others like we would wish them to treat us. God gives good gifts to us, and we are to treat others like God treats us—that is with goodness and kindness.

3. Believing with Discernment (7:13-23)

The kind of life we live will be determined largely by what we believe, and so it is of utmost importance that we distinguish between the false and the true—regarding the doctrines to which we listen, and the things that we believe.

(7:13-14) "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it."

Jesus says there are only two ways—the broad and the narrow. The wide gate and the broad way (verse 13) lead to destruction. The narrow gate (verse 14)²⁹ and the difficult way lead to Heaven. The *broad road* has many attractive appeals to lure people into its way. The *narrow gate* has only a few who will enter it. The difficult way requires discipline and dedication and self-denial, and often involves hardship and ridicule—characteristics which are repulsive to most people in the world about us.

The general picture is clear. Access to God comes not through the wide gate and the broad way,³⁰ but through the narrow gate and the difficult road. A *broad road* does not have any restrictions and rules. You can weave back and forth, any way you want, and you are still on the road. The *narrow road* has restrictions and limitations. There are boundaries beyond which one dare not go, and people do not like that—but that is the road which leads home to Heaven.

Persons who travel on *the difficult way* are not over at the side, separated by a great distance from *the broad way*; they are right in the middle of the broad way, but headed in the opposite direction! We are in the world but not of it.

The flesh nature in us tends to follow the crowd. Most people assume that "the majority

The word "strait" (verse 13 in the KJV) refers (in geography) to a narrow [small] stretch of water that leads into a larger body of water—such as the Strait of Gibraltar. Here the word "strait" (gate) refers to a small gate.

The "broad way" and the broad road are synonyms, as are the "difficult way" and the narrow road.

must be right," and "if everybody does it, it must be okay." Multitudes think that nothing could be wrong with ideas and activities which are approved by the masses. But God's people have always been a remnant (a misfit in society)—a small minority in this world. Wisdom is not always with the majority.

Those persons who have made the greatest impact on society were people different from the crowd. Most of the great discoveries in life came from people who were willing to disagree, to stand out, and to be different. In 1492, the majority believed the earth was flat; Columbus believed it was round; the majority was wrong. In 1903, the majority was wrong when they laughed at the Wright Brothers and their "flying machine." Today, the 747 jet plane is itself longer than the entire flight was in 1903. The majority was wrong when they joked about McCormick's grain harvester. They said it looked like a combination of an oxcart, a wheel-barrow, and a flying machine.

We should never become discouraged and downcast if our Christian faith is not popular with the multitudes, and if only a relatively few people agree with the message of the gospel and its expectations for the Christian life. I do not know all the implications of 7:14, but it is a solemn thought that Jesus declares that only a few will find the way to life.

The broad road seems attractive at the beginning. It is the easy way, the popular way—but it grows more dim as the days go by. The narrow road is more difficult, but the beauty of it all is that it grows brighter and brighter as one travels on—until the perfect day arrives.

The broad way is like a funnel. It begins with a large opening, but narrows down toward the end. It starts with the pleasures of sin, but only for a season, and then comes a harvest of heartache. Many an unsaved person starts out merrily on the broad road, only to discover that "the way of transgressors is hard" (Proverbs 13:15/KJV).

The difficult way is also like a funnel. It begins at the small end, but becomes larger and more rewarding as the journey progresses along the highway, which is lined on each side with the goodness and mercy of God (Psalm 23:6).

We need discernment to find the small gate (verses 13-14). Now the message in verses 15-23 indicates that we need discernment to detect false teachers. The word "beware" (verse 15) means that we should be alert to danger.

(7:15-23) "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them. Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!"

More harm is often done to the church by false teaching from within, than is done by persecution from without. Jesus says in verses 16-20 that the way to find the real identity of a person (especially of one who claims to be teaching the truth), is to examine the fruit.

A good tree bears good fruit; a bad tree bears bad fruit. "You will know them by their fruit."

A teacher's fruit can refer to the life that he lives. Is he greedy for money? How does his family behave? Does he carefully guard his words? Check his life, and the lives of those closest to him. His life should be honest and clean.

A teacher's fruit can refer to the message he brings: Does he fail to emphasize the person and work of Jesus Christ? Does he harp on one aspect of truth and tend to neglect others? What is his attitude toward the authority of the Bible? Not only should the teacher's life be *clean*; also, his message should be *clear*.

Finding good fruit in the message, and good conduct in the life of a professed spokesman for God, is the real test of whether or not he is a true or false prophet. But Jesus talks not only about teachers. In verses 21-23 He talks about followers. The real test of genuine belief is obedience. Even preaching and performing miracles is no proof that a person has true faith and is right with God.

In verse 21 *the test is not in words*; it is not in saying, "Lord, Lord." It is easy to learn a religious vocabulary and memorize Bible verses and sing gospel songs—and at the same time not really obey God's will.

In verse 22 *the test is not in works*; it is not preaching, casting out demons, or performing miracles. It is not in being able to say, "I cooked for church suppers and sang in the choir and taught a Sunday School class."

In verse 21b *the test is in compliance*; Jesus says, "he who does the will of my Father."³¹ Those who have trusted in Christ and have proved their faith by seeking to comply with the teachings of the Scriptures, will have nothing to fear.

Believing with discernment means that we will take the New Testament "as it reads," and set out to live by it—to comply with the instructions given in God's Word.

4. Building with Discernment (7:24-29)

Jesus closes the Sermon on the Mount by picturing two builders and their houses. The conclusion of the Sermon is a parable that drives home the importance of obedience.

(7:24-27) "Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall."

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Protestant, page 21).

Menno Simons, in his essay on *The New Birth* says, "Some may answer: Our belief is that Christ is the Son of God, that His word is truth, and that He purchased us with His blood and truth... We reply: If your faith is as you say, why do you not do the things which He has commanded you in His Word? Since you do not do as He commands, but as you please, it is sufficiently proved that you do not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, although you say so" (quoted by Walter Klaassen in *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor*

The climate in most parts of Israel is much like the climate in southern California in the USA. The river beds are dry most of the time, but when there are heavy rains, torrents of water pour down the river channels. During the dry season (and that is most of the year), there are lots of places in the valleys, along the streams, which look like favorable places to build a house. But during the rainy season, those locations are within the path of raging floods. Jesus says that the person who builds a house on the sand (near the edge of a dry river bed)—will find that during storms the place will be flooded out.

The "house" in verse 24 (and again in verse 26) represents our lives. Our lives will withstand the storms and struggles of each day—only if we live for God and seek to practice what our Lord Jesus commanded. We are building every day, all the time, by the things we do, by the thoughts we think, by the words we speak, and even by the pictures we hang on the walls of our imagination. The aim of each believer should center on being careful not to put any shoddy materials into our buildings.

It should be our aim to build like Daniel (in Old Testament times), when he "purposed in his heart" that he would not defile himself with the king's food. And it should be our aim to build like Joseph, who when he was tempted, ran away from the woman who was seducing him, and said, "How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9). Joseph was building his life upon the principles God had given in Exodus 20:1-17.

Each of us is building a life. The wise person builds his life upon the Rock, Jesus Christ. Every genuine Christian loves to sing the song, "On Christ the solid Rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand."

When Philips Brooks (the Boston preacher and hymn writer) lay on his death bed, he was usually unable to receive visitors—but one day Robert Ingersoll (an outspoken atheist) stopped by to see him—and Brooks told the nurse to let him come in. After a brief visit, Ingersoll was about to go. Before he left, Ingersoll said to the aging and sick preacher, "I appreciate the fact that you received my visit, but I don't understand why you received me and not others." Philips Brooks answered, "I have the assurance that I will see my Christian friends again, but I have the feeling that this is the last time I will ever see you."

One of those men had built his house upon the Rock. The other had built his structure on the sand.

(7:28-29) And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

The Sermon on the Mount is concluded with the observation that Jesus spoke "with authority." Jesus did not speak *like the scribes did* in their lectures. The scribes were the teachers of the law who taught the sentiments of the rabbis. They spent much of their time in vain disputes and in quoting various authorities.

Jesus never used words like, "I suppose this is the way it should be," or, "It is probably this way," or, "Consult the experts on the subject." Jesus Christ is the authority on every subject. Jesus said over and over again, "But I say to you"—not "So and so said."

Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount with the words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," and

then, "For theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). There is no doubt about it; there is no question about it; it is not a mere supposition. Theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven!

Jesus can claim such unique authority because He is the Son of God. His wisdom is from above. Jesus was not the product of the educational centers of His time. He never spent long weary hours at the feet of some learned master. People never had to lug a dictionary with them to find out what He meant when He spoke—and yet His teachings are so profound that they have never been fully comprehended.

The crowd that heard Jesus speak was astonished by the power of what He said. They had never heard such words of wisdom and spiritual insight. They had never heard such fearless denunciation of the religious leaders. They never heard such a fearful warning about the consequences of turning away from God. But what Jesus wanted was not astonishment, but the response of faith in accepting what He was saying.

Jesus was looking for those who would consider and decide. He was hoping for many to enter the narrow gate and follow in the difficult way. But most of the people seem only to have watched and listened. Most heard and perhaps considered—but decided to stay on the broad road. The same thing happens when the gospel is preached today.

When we hear Jesus speak, we are listening to the voice of God. The Sermon on the Mount is the greatest sermon ever preached. We should read it often, and seek to apply it constantly in our lives.

The gate to eternal life is small and the way is difficult. This does not mean that it is hard to become a Christian. It does mean that there are many ways to live your life, *but only one way leads to eternity with God*. Believing in Jesus is the only way to Heaven, because He alone died for our sins, in order to make us right with God. He is the only Mediator between sinful human beings and an absolutely holy God (1 Timothy 2:5).

6. THE MIRACULOUS POWER OF JESUS

Matthew 8:1-9:38

Near the close of Matthew 4, Jesus was teaching in synagogues and healing a variety of sicknesses in Galilee. The news about Him had spread abroad into Syria, and many people were following Him (Matthew 4:23-25). Then Jesus "went up on a mountain" and preached the Sermon on the Mount, in which He described how a true disciple of Jesus should live.

When Jesus came down from the mountain He was again followed by great multitudes. Jesus faced masses of people. Many were burdened with guilt and sin and needs of various kinds, but Jesus was the Master of every situation. Jesus proved that He was God the Son by displaying His miraculous power.

1. Power over Disease (8:1-22)

Lepers and Gentiles and women were considered outcasts by many religious Jews. *Lepers* were held to be unclean. *Gentiles* were looked upon as being outside the people of God, and *women* were considered second-class citizens. We are told here about the healing which Jesus provided for a member of each of these groups.

a) Cleansing the leper (8:1-4)

(8:1-4) When He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. And behold, a leper came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." Then Jesus put out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

The leper had somehow learned about Jesus and trusted His ability to heal. Perhaps he heard others talk about the teaching Jesus had given in the Sermon on the Mount. Leprosy has always been a dreadful disease. It infects the entire body. Its roots lie deep in the blood system. As the disease progresses—fingers fall off, eyelashes drop out, the nose begins to disappear, and hands and feet slowly rot away—leaving only festering stumps. The leper emits an unpleasant odor; the ulcerated skin can often be smelled by people who are several feet away.

According to the Mosaic Law (Leviticus 13:45), the leper had to go about with rent clothes and disheveled hair, and as he went, he was to cry "Unclean! Unclean!" The Jewish rabbis required that no one was to come closer to a leper than six feet, and if the wind was blowing toward a person (from a leper), he had to stay still farther away.

This particular leper recognized his helpless condition, and seemed to sense that turning to Jesus was his only hope—and that is what he did. Jesus could have healed the man by merely speaking the word, but instead, He reached out His hand—and touched the man's detestable skin (verse 3). It takes divine grace to put an arm around a filthy, bad-smelling

victim of disease and sin—but that's all part of the task of reaching the outcasts of society for Christ. Leprosy then was about like AIDS today. There was no known cure. Jesus touched him! No one else would come near him! The leper had forgotten what the touch of a human hand was like—but Jesus, in all His compassion, touched him—and immediately the leprosy was gone.

A man who only minutes before was walking around crying "Unclean! Unclean!" was now completely cleansed. Leprosy is typical of sin; the point is that no case is too hard for Jesus. No person has fallen so low but what Jesus can reach him and make him a new person with new goals and new ambitions in life.

b) The centurion's servant (8:5-13)

(8:5-13) Now when Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, pleading with Him, saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, dreadfully tormented." And Jesus said to him, "I will come and heal him." The centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel! And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you." And his servant was healed that same hour.

As Jesus was going into Capernaum, He met a Roman centurion—an army officer who was in charge of one hundred men. The officer had a servant boy who was sick, and this soldier from the Roman army, the centurion, appealed to Jesus for help.

The "paralysis" (verse 6) had affected the muscles and organs of the human frame, and paralyzed the body. But the centurion (even though most soldiers were noted for being cruel and proud), was a kindly sort of man. Luke's account says that the centurion had built a synagogue for the Jews (Luke 7:5); Luke also says that the servant boy "was dear to him" (Luke 7:2).

The centurion came to Jesus and appealed in behalf of the servant who was paralyzed and suffered greatly from the illness. And Jesus was ready to go to the soldier's home and heal the servant (verse 7), but the centurion pointed out that really it was not necessary for the Lord to come to the house and lay His hand on the sick boy in order to banish the disease. The centurion, in essence said, "All you have to do is speak the word (right here), and my servant will be healed—even though he is some distance away." The centurion had a calm belief. There was no need for a sign. He was a man of simple faith. Jesus was delighted by the faith of this Gentile army officer (verse 10). It was an amazing declaration of faith for a man who was a Gentile army officer.

The servant boy was healed (verse 13), and Jesus saw in this a foregleam of a vast host of other Gentile believers who would later come into a right relationship with God. People from the east and west, from all parts of the earth, would someday enter the Lord's kingdom (verses 11-12).

c) Peter's mother-in-law (8:14-17)

(8:14-17) Now when Jesus had come into Peter's house, He saw his wife's mother lying sick with a fever. So He touched her hand, and the fever left her. And she arose and served them. 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 sick, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: "He Himself took our infirmities And bore our sicknesses."

Jesus knew that Peter's wife's mother was sick. And Jesus quickly healed her. And without any need for time to recover from her wasting fever, she arose and she ministered to them—likely serving a meal. The Greek word for "served" (*diekonei*) means "to wait on" (as in the NIV). Here was a woman lying on her bed, tossing with a common fever. Jesus touched her hand (verse 15) and at once she was healed, and had strength to go to work immediately.³²

Surely Jesus has power over disease. In fact, that same evening, people came from all the regions round about, and Jesus "healed all who were sick" (verse 16b). No matter what the disease was—Jesus healed them all. No one was disappointed; no one had come in vain.

In verse 17b Matthew says that Jesus "took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses" (loosely quoted from Isaiah 53:5). Some insist that a person who embraces the Cross should never be sick. They say that Christ's death on the Cross was carried out for the healing of our sicknesses, as well as for the forgiveness of our sins. But the setting of Matthew 8:17 indicates that the part about healing "our sicknesses" was fulfilled *not when* Jesus was on the Cross, *but during* His earthly ministry when He went from place to place healing the sick.

Verses 18-22 tell about two potential disciples of Jesus. One (verse 19) was too eager to follow Him; he failed to count the cost. The other (verse 21) was not eager enough to follow Jesus; he wanted to wait until his father died.

(8:18-22) And when Jesus saw great multitudes about Him, He gave a command to depart to the other side. Then a certain scribe came and said to Him, "Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." Then another of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

The first man said, "Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go." His words sounded like an offer of complete consecration, but Jesus replied that to follow Him involved a high cost—even to the point of giving up home and family, and setting out on an itinerant ministry.

The second man said, "Lord, let me first to go and bury my father." Jesus refused the request, and said that his brothers and sisters back home could take care of the burial arrangements, if his father's death should occur. Jesus said in essence, "You follow Me, let

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Mark's account says that the healing of Peter's mother-in-law took place on the Sabbath Day (Mark 1:21, 29-31).

the (spiritually) dead bury the (physically) dead" (verse 22).

Many want to follow Jesus, but most want to follow their personal preferences as well. Most people, who come to Christ, fail to fully estimate the rigors of true discipleship. Following Jesus is not always easy or comfortable. It may cost us popularity and friendships and leisure time. There is no *thrill* greater than that of following Jesus, and there is no *glory* greater than the reward that comes from following Him—but Jesus never said that it is an easy way.

2. Power over Nature (8:23-27)

Jesus had clearly proved His power over disease; but lest people view Him merely as a kind of traveling medical clinic, He demonstrated His power over the wind and the waves, as well as over disease.

(8:23-27) Now when He got into a boat, His disciples followed Him. And suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves. But He was asleep. Then His disciples came to Him and awoke Him, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" But He said to them, "Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?" Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. So the men marveled, saying, "Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?"

The Sea of Galilee is 13 miles long and 8 miles wide; it is below sea level, and is surrounded on three sides by steep hills. It is not unusual for violent storms to suddenly sweep across the water. In this case, Jesus undoubtedly knew that the storm was coming, and certainly could have prevented it—but He permitted the storm to come as it did, in order to teach the disciples some needful lessons.

Jesus entered the boat with His disciples (verse 23), and while they were crossing the huge lake, the storm bore down upon them (verse 24). There may have been a supernatural element in this storm, because even the hearty fishermen (accustomed to sudden storms) were frightened when the boat began to sink (verse 25).

Jesus was asleep, but the terrified disciples awakened Him and said, "Lord save us! We are perishing!" Jesus spoke to the wind and the sea, and immediately these elements of nature obeyed His voice. The wild rage of the wind and the huge waves of the sea suddenly ground to a halt, and "there was a great calm." Jesus not only has power over disease; He has complete control over the forces of nature as well.

This account is a picture of all of us. Every one of us is journeying across the sea of life. On one side of the huge sea is the cradle; on the other side is the grave. We are all moving from the cradle to the grave. The journey is short—but during that journey, storms come to all of us. There are storms of affliction and temptation and misfortune; there are storms of sickness and family problems and disappointments and financial difficulties.

Who can help us when the storms come? The answer is: The same Jesus who calmed the sea! He says, in essence, to those who serve Him, "Fear not, for I am with you; I will never let the waves overcome you" (Isaiah 43:2). It is wonderful to know that all circumstances in life, including the difficult places, are subject to the control of our powerful Savior—and we must learn to trust Him.

"God moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform; He plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm. Ye fearful saints—fresh courage take; The clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy—and shall break in blessings on your head."

3. Power over Demons (8:28-34)

When Jesus and the disciples reached the east side of the Sea of Galilee (the land of the Gadarenes), Jesus encountered two³³ unusually fierce demoniacs. They lived among the tombs. They had broken, according to Mark's account, every chain used to bind them. They cried out to Jesus as if in torment. This shows what the devil can do to human beings. He fills the individual with fear. Satan can rob people of a home and respectable friends.

(8:28-34) When He had come to the other side, to the country of the Gergesenes, there met Him two demon-possessed men, coming out of the tombs, exceedingly fierce, so that no one could pass that way. And suddenly they cried out, saying, "What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?" Now a good way off from them there was a herd of many swine feeding. So the demons begged Him, saying, "If You cast us out, permit us to go away into the herd of swine." And He said to them, "Go." So when they had come out, they went into the herd of swine. And suddenly the whole herd of swine ran violently down the steep place into the sea, and perished in the water. Then those who kept them fled; and they went away into the city and told everything, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men. And behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus. And when they saw Him, they begged Him to depart from their region.

Demons are fallen angels who joined Satan in his rebellion against God, and they are now evil spirits under Satan's control. Jesus commanded the demons to leave the men, but fearing that Jesus would send them into the pit "before the time" (verse 29), they sought permission to enter into a herd of pigs. Jesus granted permission, and the pigs plunged headlong into the Sea of Galilee (verse 32). Jesus delivered the men of Gadara from the bondage of demon possession. The point is this: Jesus is much more powerful than the devil.

When the people in the nearby village learned that the pigs had perished, they were upset. Instead of rejoicing in the marvelous deed of mercy done in behalf of two hopeless men, the people begged Jesus to get out of their country. To the degraded Gadarenes, the swine were of far greater value than the souls of people.³⁴ And that is how it has always been. Unregenerate people are more concerned about getting material possessions than they are about faithfully serving Christ. This is true for many church members as well. Gripped by the lure of material things, energy is put into grasping, buying, and exchanging goods

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Mark's account (5:1-20) and Luke's account (8:26-39) make reference to just one demoniac. The most satisfactory explanation is that there were two men, but one was more prominent than the other in the encounter.

Myron Augsburger speaks of their loss of business, and says, "This is human selfishness in its most blatant expression. But it is not foreign to our times, for the needs of the Third World [and] the plight of the hungry and starving, do not appear as high on our agenda as safeguarding our own economic privileges" (*Communicator's Commentary: Matthew*, page 119).

that will someday be burned up (2 Peter 3:10-13).

4. Power over Sin (9:1-17)

Jesus passed back over the Sea of Galilee (verse 1), and returned to the town of Capernaum. Immediately a helpless case was brought to His attention.

(9:1-8) So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to His own city. Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you." And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, "This Man blasphemes!" But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Arise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins"—then He said to the paralytic, "Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house." And he arose and departed to his house. Now when the multitudes saw it, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men.

A paralytic was brought to Jesus. Four men arrived carrying the paralyzed man on a stretcher. Because the crowd was so great (Mark 2:4), they climbed to the top of the house and broke open part of the roof. The four lowered the man, lying on his cot, in front of Jesus. Jesus was moved by their faith—but instead of saying to the man, "Be healed," He said instead, "Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven you."

Jesus used the occasion to stress the significance of the more important and eternal kind of healing He had come to do. People are prone to consider physical ills of greater concern than the sinfulness of the heart—and so, frequently people stress the preservation of bodily health more than the matter of being absolutely right with God. Jesus knew that it was more important for the sick man to have his sins forgiven than it was to have his body healed.

Sickness is not always directly related to some specific sin in an individual's life. For example, the man who was born blind, recorded in John 9, was afflicted so that Jesus could get glory. But in the case described in Matthew 9, as with many physical ailments, it seems the paralysis was due to sin in the man's life—and Jesus forgave him. Surely the young man's face grew brighter, as he sensed the comfort that came with God's gracious forgiveness.

To forgive sins is a right which God alone has—and because the religious leaders were not at all convinced that Jesus was God, they accused Him of blasphemy (verse 3). Jesus knew their thoughts (verse 4), and went on further to prove His deity by healing the man's physical ailment as well (verse 6). Jesus heals bodies and souls.

The "scribes" supposed that no one knew what was going on in their heads, but Jesus can read hearts and discern spirits. He knows our words before they are even spoken. We learn in Hebrews 4:13 that "all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account." What we think of in private when no one sees us; what we think of while in church services when our expressions are sober and serious—our Lord Jesus knows. This thought should cause us to cry out with the Psalmist, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight" (Psalm 19:14).

(9:9-13) As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax

office. And He said to him, "Follow Me." So he arose and followed Him. Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard that, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

Matthew 9 continues by telling about the call of Levi to be a disciple of Jesus. Matthew had invited some of his friends to a dinner at his house³⁵ so that they too might become acquainted with Jesus. Mark and Luke fill in some additional details about the experience described here.

Matthew was a Jew who worked for the Roman governor as the area tax collector. In Mark and Luke, he is called Levi. It is interesting to note that Matthew dismisses his own call to discipleship with a single verse (verse 9), but Mark and Luke fill in a few additional details about the dinner meeting to which his friends were invited.

The fact that Jesus ate with sinners disturbed the religious leaders of the day, and it was because of this time of intermingling with Levi's³⁶ associates that Jesus became known as a friend of "tax collectors and sinners" (verse 11).

"Sinners"³⁷ was a broad term that referred usually to common people who did not obey all the rigid rules of the Pharisees. Included were harlots, tax collectors, and other disreputable people. The sinners with whom Jesus ate were not necessarily people from the lowest stratum of society—prostitutes and alcoholics and sodomites. While Jesus spoke with anyone, and *met the needs of all who welcomed Him*, He did not choose as His closest associates the vile and immoral dregs of society.

Jesus explains that the purpose of a doctor is to heal the sick (verse 12). The sentence in the first part of verse 13, "Learn what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice"—was an idiom meaning that God prefers right attitudes, not empty ritual. The last part of verse 13 means that our Lord's purpose was to heal the spiritually sick.

(9:14-17) Then the disciples of John came to Him, saying, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but Your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when

Matthew's account does not specifically say that the dinner was at his house, but Mark 2:15 says that Jesus "was dining in Levi's house" when the scribes and Pharisees came and asked why Jesus was eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. Luke 5:29 confirms Mark's statement.

By comparing Matthew 9:9-13 with Mark 2:14 and Luke 5:27, it becomes clear that Matthew and Levi are the same person. Matthew was a customs official in the service of Herod Antipas (Walter Wessel, Vol. 8, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Mark*, page 634.)

Matthew was a tax collector sitting at the booth collecting money to support the pagan government at Rome. Tax rates were not clearly fixed, and so tax collectors often charged more than the government required, and kept the extra money as more profit for themselves. Many tax collectors were dishonest—but even if tax collectors served honestly, the religious Jews still despised them for defiling themselves by working for Gentiles, and looked upon such tax collectors as "sinners."

the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and the tear is made worse. Nor do they put new wine into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."

Verse 14 tells how the disciples of John the Baptist questioned Jesus about the fact that His disciples did not "fast." Jesus did not criticize fasting, but pointed out that while He was with the disciples, *joy* was more in order than *mourning*. Later, Jesus would leave them, and then fasting would be more proper (verse 15).

The illustration of the "cloth" (verse 16) reminds us that Jesus came to bring spiritual wholeness. Jesus did not come to "patch us up" and then let us fall apart. The illustration of the "wineskins" (verse 17) teaches that He gives us spiritual fullness. The Jewish religion was like a worn-out wineskin that was brittle and breaking, and would burst if filled with the new wine of the gospel.³⁸

5. Power over Death (9:18-26)

When Jairus appealed for help in behalf of his daughter, Jesus confronted the last enemy—death.

(9:18-26) While He spoke these things to them, behold, a ruler came and worshiped Him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay Your hand on her and she will live." So Jesus arose and followed him, and so did His disciples. And suddenly, a woman who had a flow of blood for twelve years came from behind and touched the hem of His garment. For she said to herself, "If only I may touch His garment, I shall be made well." But Jesus turned around, and when He saw her He said, "Be of good cheer, daughter; your faith has made you well." And the woman was made well from that hour. When Jesus came into the ruler's house, and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd wailing, He said to them, "Make room, for the girl is not dead, but sleeping." And they ridiculed Him. But when the crowd was put outside, He went in and took her by the hand, and the girl arose. And the report of this went out into all that land.

We learn from the other Gospel accounts that "the ruler" who came to Jesus (verse 18) was a man named "Jairus." It must have been difficult for Jairus to come to Jesus, since he was a devout Jew, and a leader in the synagogue. Jairus' love for his dying daughter³⁹ compelled him to seek help from Jesus, even though most Jews questioned the validity of what Jesus was doing.

And even though Jairus seemed to believe that Jesus would heal his daughter,

Wineskins were bags made from goat skins and sewn together so that they were watertight. New wine expanded as it fermented, stretching any wineskin into which it may have been placed. After the new wine

expanded as it fermented, stretching any wineskin into which it may have been placed. After the new wine had aged, any old and brittle wineskins would have burst if fresh wine had been poured into them. Therefore new wine should always be put into newly made wineskins. The point is that Jesus was not simply bringing in a revised Judaism, but was bringing a new gospel of freedom through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Mark's account says the daughter was just 12 years old (Mark 5:42); Luke's account says that she was his *only* daughter (Luke 8:42).

preparations for the funeral were already in motion (verse 23). Mourners were hired to make loud laments. Flute players were already at the house. But when Jesus arrived at the home, He dismissed the mourners. It seems that Jesus preferred to work in the quiet. Jesus had told the family members that her death was only temporary (verse 24). It was like a sleep from which she would soon awake, and they ridiculed Him.

Did you ever stand by the bedside of someone who was dying? Did you ever touch a dead body? Nothing else is so final, so still, and so cold.

Can Jesus do anything for the young girl? Can He bring life back to her body, and warmth to her spirit, and color to her cheeks?

Jesus took the tender hand of this young girl and spoke these words: "Little girl, I say to you, arise" (Mark 5:41)—and immediately she sat up, jumped out of bed, and began walking! And the parents, the friends, the mourners, the disciples, the crowd—all knew that Jesus had performed a mighty miracle; He had raised the girl from the dead.

In verses 20-22, we learn that on the way to Jairus' house, Jesus was momentarily delayed by a woman who suffered an incurable disease. Mark says she had been seeking the help of many doctors, but none could help her (Mark 5:26). She had learned of Jesus, and believed that if she could just touch the border of His garment, she would be healed (verses 20-21).

In the midst of the jostling crowd, she made her way to His side, reached out her hand, and was rewarded with instant healing (verse 22). Jesus knew that the woman had touched His garment. We do not know how, but Jesus knew the difference between the crush of that choking crowd, and the touch of faith in the heart of one desperate soul.⁴⁰

6. The Blind and Mute Healed (9:27-38)

Matthew 9 closes with an account of two further brief miraculous healings. In verses 27-31, Jesus restored sight to two blind men. In verses 32-34, He restored speech to a man who was mute.

(9:27-34) When Jesus departed from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out and saying, "Son of David, have mercy on us!" And when He had come into the house, the blind men came 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, "According to your faith let it be to you." And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned them, saying, "See that no one knows it." But when they had departed, they spread the news about Him in all that country. As they went out, behold, they brought to Him a man, mute and demon-possessed.

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One of the beauties of the account in verses 18-26, is that here were two almost opposite kinds of persons—and yet Jesus met the needs of both. Jairus was a leading Jewish man, a ruler of the synagogue—a top man in the synagogue. The woman with an issue of blood was unknown and had no prestige. Jairus' daughter was healthy for twelve years, and then died; the woman who touched His garment was sick for twelve years, and then she was made well. Jairus' need was public, and everyone knew about it. His twelve-year-old daughter was sick and had died; the woman's need was private, and scarcely anyone else was aware of it. Jesus understood the needs in both cases, and brought the help they needed.

And when the demon was cast out, the mute spoke. And the multitudes marveled, saying, "It was never seen like this in Israel!" But the Pharisees said, "He casts out demons by the ruler of the demons."

After the raising of Jairus' daughter, there was likely a large crowd of people following Jesus—among them were two blind men. They addressed Jesus as "Son of David" and by this acknowledged that He was the Messiah. Jesus granted their request for healing, and by His authoritative word they were healed. He touched the eyes of the two men and said, "According to your faith let it be to you."

The words (verse 29) "according to your faith" do not mean *in proportion to*, but *in response to* your faith. Then they were sternly told, "See that no one knows it" (verse 30). That is, Jesus did not want to be known merely as a miracle-worker. He came as One who would heal broken lives.

Jesus also cast demons out of a man who was mute and perhaps was unable to talk (verses 32-33).⁴¹

The long series of miracles described in Matthew 8 and 9 made such an impact on the people, that the enemies of Christ were troubled, and they leveled the charge that Jesus used the power of Satan to cast our demons (verse 34). That is a dangerous charge to make. 42 We should never attribute the work of God to demonic beings, because that constitutes the unpardonable sin (see Mark 3:29-30).

(9:35-38) Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest."

This passage introduces the discourse which is recorded in Matthew 10. The multitude of people were scattered, divided, and distressed. Jesus was moved with compassion. He saw the crowds as a field ripe for harvest, and urged the disciples to pray that "the Lord of the harvest" would "send out" laborers to warn people of coming judgment and call them to repentance. 44

The word "mute" is translated from the Greek *kophos* which can refer to one who cannot hear and is unable to talk—or both.

The Greek word translated "send out" (*echbale*) is a strong word which means "to thrust out"—and thus speaks of a strong push to get workers into the field. Jesus calls for prayer and urges vigorous action in order to get soul-winning missionaries out into the harvest field.

Jesus spoke about a sin for which there is no forgiveness, and Mark explains that to attribute to the devil that which may be the work of God is blaspheming the Holy Spirit, and subjects one to eternal condemnation—because they said "He has an unclean spirit" (Mark 3:28-30). This becomes the unpardonable sin which many inquire about.

Every believer is called to be an evangelist for Jesus. The field is the world. The time is limited. The power is available. All Christians are expected to be ambassadors for Jesus, beginning with our own families, and our communities, and then to all the earth. Verse 38 is a call to missions activity.

The miracles in Matthew 8 and 9 demonstrate that Jesus has complete power and complete sovereignty in every realm of life. There is no human need that Jesus cannot meet if He chooses to do so. No sin is too black; no problem is too difficult; no circumstance is too hard—for His power!

Jesus is more than "the stranger of Galilee." Jesus is the powerful Son of God! Such power demands our respect, and it should inspire complete confidence in His ability to deal *with any situation* which may confront us!

7. THE CHOSEN AMBASSADORS FOR JESUS

Matthew 10:1-42

Jesus extends His ministry now by appointing preachers of the good news—ambassadors to go out into all of Israel. Jesus chose and sent out the twelve apostles. He told them about the blessings and problems that go along with being spokesmen for Christ.

1. The Call to Christian Service (10:1-15)

Jesus chose twelve disciples to go on a missionary tour among the twelve tribes of Israel. The gospel is "for the Jew first, and also for the Greek" (Romans 1:16).

(10:1-4) And when He had called His twelve disciples to Him, He gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease. Now the names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Lebbaeus, whose surname was Thaddaeus; Simon the Canaanite, and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed Him.

The twelve apostles⁴⁵ whom Jesus chose, were told to heal and to cast out evil spirits. Jesus gave them "power" to perform their assigned duties (verse 1). Personality and education might be helpful in ministry, but in the Lord's work, without power from on high—our ministries will be a failure. Like the early apostles we need power from above.

In verses 2-4 Jesus named each disciple. The names of the twelve are arranged in three groups of four, and by comparing the various accounts in the New Testament, we learn some interesting facts about the twelve:

James the son of Alphaeus may be James the Less. Bartholomew is the same as Nathanael.⁴⁶ Thaddaeus is thought to be the same as Judas (the son of James). John 14:22 refers *to this Judas* as Judas (not Iscariot).

Each New Testament listing begins by naming Simon Peter first, and ends by naming Judas Iscariot last. "Iscariot" means "of Kerioth"—a town in Judea. Judas Iscariot was the only one of the twelve who was not from Galilee.

Matthew 10:2 is the only place the phrase "the twelve apostles" (meaning those who are sent) is used anywhere in the Gospel accounts. The phrase also occurs in Revelation 21:14. These men are really identical with the "twelve disciples" (verse 1), although the word "disciple" has a wider significance than the word "apostle" does. The apostles were leaders among the larger group of disciples who had identified themselves as followers of Jesus.

In Matthew 10:3 and Mark 3:18, Philip and Bartholomew are listed together, and in John's Gospel, Philip and Nathanael are listed in the same setting (John 1:45). John does not mention Bartholomew and the other Gospel accounts do not mention Nathanael.

All twelve of the men whom Jesus chose, had contrasting personalities. Peter was an optimist, Thomas was a pessimist, James and John were called "sons of thunder." Thaddaeus was a zealot (dedicated to the overthrow of Rome), and Matthew was a tax collector (gathering money for the Roman government). Yet Jesus took these men, with all their faults—and with mixed temperaments and differing backgrounds—and welded them into a flaming body of witnesses for Him.

(10:5-10) These twelve Jesus sent out and commanded them, saying: "Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather 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, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Provide neither gold nor silver nor copper in your money belts, nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staffs; for a worker is worthy of his food."

Verses 5-7 tell us that the special mission given to the twelve apostles was to preach that "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." That is, the reign of God was asserting itself in a new and powerful way now that Jesus was in their midst—and they were to tell that message to the people.⁴⁷

The disciples at first were commissioned to go only to the Jews (verses 5-6), but after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, that commission was extended to take the gospel out to the whole world (Matthew 28:19). That is why we support missions; that is why people sense a call to plant churches in other states and in new places.

In verses 9 and 10 the disciples were told to take "neither gold nor silver nor copper" in their money belts, nor bag for their journey; nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staffs. In other words, the disciples were to go without extra provisions—no money, no extra clothing, no traveling bag, and no staffs. The disciples were to learn the lessons of faith and trust, and the people in the communities were to learn the lesson of hospitality.

The instructions were designed for this one particular mission. The climate was warm; distances in Israel were not great; hospitality was to be shown by fellow Jews. Later on, Jesus told His ambassadors that *they should take* a purse, and a bag of supplies, and a sword (Luke 22:35-36). Certainly to go as a missionary, without provisions, into lands inhabited by hostile tribes, would be the height of folly.

(10:11-15) "Now whatever city or town you enter, inquire who in it is worthy, and stay there till you go out. And when you go into a household, greet it. If the household is worthy, let your peace come upon it. But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off

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The Jews were waiting for the Messiah to usher in a political kingdom. They were hoping He would free them from Roman rule and bring back the days of glory that marked the days of David and Solomon. But Jesus was talking about a spiritual kingdom, which had already begun on earth in the hearts of some of His disciples, and continues today.

Mark's account (Mark 6:8) records that Jesus told the disciples to take nothing *except* staffs—while Matthew and Luke say that they were not even to take staffs. One way to explain the seeming discrepancy is that Matthew and Luke were referring to a heavy stick (a club) used for protection, while Mark was speaking of a shepherd's crook for walking.

the dust from your feet. Assuredly, 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!"

In verses 11-15, Jesus explained that the apostles were to stay only where they were gladly received. The "worthy" (verses 11,13) were those persons who responded to and believed the gospel message. As the apostles entered a town or village, they were to look around for a congenial family who would invite them into their home. They were to accept food and shelter from persons who were willing to receive them (verses 11-12).

If they were graciously received, the greeting of "peace" was to be pronounced on those families (verse 13). If they were received with scorn, they were to leave and even shake the dust off their feet (verse 14).⁴⁹ Refusal to accept the offer to let God's reign rule over them would bring tragic results. In verse 15, Jesus says that the judgments upon those who reject Him would be more severe than those judgments that fell on Sodom and Gomorrah.

We don't know how long this early "evangelistic campaign" among the Jewish people lasted. We do know that Jesus himself went out to preach (Matthew 11:1), and that later, the apostles returned and reported what had happened (Luke 9:10).

In the Great Commission (and in Acts 1:8), God has extended the call to all of us. We are to go into the entire world and preach the gospel, proclaiming all that the Lord Jesus and His disciples have taught us. We are to begin with our own families, then reach out to the people in our communities, and then to all the earth. Keep in mind that the men whom Jesus chose were ordinary persons. They had no academic background, no special educational training, no wealth; they were just common people who did ordinary things. The Lord still uses ordinary, common people.

2. Troubles in Christian Service (10:16-25)

Our Lord's words to the disciples, concerning the response to their ministry, were not very encouraging. Their task would be difficult, because they would be like sheep among wolves.

(10:16-20) "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. You will 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 worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you."

Christian service is never easy. Many will reject the message of the gospel; multitudes will spurn all attempts to reach them. Some will actually become hostile. God's servants can expect opposition. Second Timothy 4:3 indicates that while the Christian life may seem relatively peaceful, perilous times will be on the increase especially as we approach the

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⁴⁹ Leon Morris says that this was "a symbolic act whereby the unfriendly people are repudiated. It points to the severing of the smallest of ties. The Jews held that even the earth in Gentile lands was unclean, and it was their custom when they returned from abroad, to shake from their feet the dust they had acquired when abroad" (*The Gospel according to Matthew*, page 250).

end of the age.

"Sheep" (verse 16) are models of submissiveness. "Wolves" are blood-thirsty by nature and represent malicious opponents of the gospel. When facing such opposition, we are not to fight the wolves, nor drive them out of their haunts. Instead, we are to preach a message which might transform some of them—and to do so, we must be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves." A "serpent" is sharp-sighted and quick to discern danger. The lesson for us is that we are to be discreet, careful with words, using wisdom and good sense in our approach. A "dove" is gentle, innocent, and unruffled. The lesson for us is to be kind, peaceful, and charitable, attempting to respond with the sweet spirit that characterized the life and attitude of Jesus. We should often pray, "Oh God, help us to conquer with the meekness of a lamb."

In verses 17-18, Jesus said that faithful disciples would be delivered "up to councils" (verse 17)⁵⁰ and will be scourged in the synagogues; some will be brought before governors and kings (verse 18) for His sake. Persecution is to be expected. Those who speak for God will become victims of severe criticism; they will sometimes be condemned by political authorities.

The word "governors" refers to provincial rulers (such as Festus and Felix at Caesarea). The word "kings" speaks of heads of nations and empires (such as Domitian in Rome, Idi Amin in Uganda, and others in various periods of history). The suffering is the result of loyalty to Christ.

The words "as a testimony to them" (verse 18) is a reference to the fact that every time a Christian is brought before a tribunal for trial, the charge for which he is being brought (preaching the gospel)—is being rehearsed, and thus political leaders at the trial are hearing the testimony of Christ's followers. For some political leaders, this may be the only time they will hear the essence of the gospel.

In verses 19-20 we are told what to do in emergency situations. People who are persecuted never know exactly when they will be apprehended. The nature of the accusation against them is uncertain. In such settings, the Holy Spirit will give the proper words to say.

The promise that the Spirit will give words to speak is not for the preacher who failed to prepare his sermon, but for followers of Christ who are being persecuted for their faith. We must not use the promise of these verses as an excuse to avoid study in preparation for teaching and preaching the Word. The promise is for the persecuted, not a general promise of last-minute help for preachers.

(10:21-25) "Now 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 for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes. A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a

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The "councils" were local courts that took up the task of settling small problems among the Jewish people. The verb "scourge" refers to a form of punishment in which a person was whipped across the back with a leather whip. The scourging was limited to not more than 40 lashes.

servant above his master. It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household!"

Verse 21 says that faithfulness to Christ will divide families, sometimes so severely that children will even cause their parents to be put to death. This has happened much more often than most of us would want to believe—especially in those countries where the younger generation embraced the ideas of Karl Marx, and used what is called the "Machiavellian philosophy" as a justification for executing their aged Christian parents.

In verse 22 Jesus *crushes* the idea that the life of a spokesperson for Him is a glamorous thing (a bed of roses). Those who follow the Lord Jesus may experience hardship and death instead of a life of comfort and ease. But those who endure (keep on serving and obeying Him),⁵² in spite of ridicule and persecution, will ultimately be delivered and saved forever in Heaven. Enduring unkindness for the sake of loyalty to Christ will in the end be worth it all!

In verse 23 Jesus says that it is no use to force religion on any person (or any group of people). If people get disturbed over what you are preaching, move on to another place where people are more open to the gospel message. In the latter part of verse 23, Jesus says that missionary activities will go on generation after generation. There is a sense at least, that the task will not be finished, right up to the time of the coming of the Son of Man.

People persecuted Jesus when He was ministering on earth, and we see in verse 24 that they very likely will do the same to us, for "a disciple is not above his teacher." God's people try to be loyal to God's ways, and this cuts across the grain of worldly ways of thinking, and pricks the consciences of unsaved people. Many unsaved persons try to ease their disturbed consciences by making fun of God's people and making light of God's truth. Some religious leaders (verse 25) called Christ "Beelzebub" (a synonym for *Satan*), and we can expect similar kinds of accusations.

3. Fear and Loyalty in Christian Service (10:26-42)

In spite of all the warnings about persecution in verses 16-25, Jesus tells His disciples not to be afraid, for the heavenly Father watches over those who carry His message. At the end of life's journey there will be a rich reward. When the Apostle Paul came to the end of his earthly journey, he said, "Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day" (2 Timothy 4:8).

(10:26-33) "Therefore do not fear them. For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed,

It is the belief that "the end justifies the means." If one has a good goal, any means may be used to try and achieve that goal. It is the doctrine of Machi-avelli (1449-1527) who denied the relevance of morality in political affairs, and held that craft and deceit are justified in seeking worthy goals.

The words "he who endures to the end will be saved" are a reminder that while it is important to make a commitment to follow Christ, much more than that is required. Jesus looks for us *to continue* in the Christian way, and to be persevering right on through whatever trials might come our way. Perseverance is not a way to be saved, but it is evidence that one is really committed to Jesus.

and hidden that will not be known. Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops. And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot 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 copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven."

The words "do not fear" appear three times in this section of Matthew (10:26,28,31), and these words provide the keynote for the latter part of the chapter. Jesus has been saying that suffering is to be expected (verses 24-31).

Verse 26 says, "There is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known." That is, the truths entrusted to God's people will eventually be made known, no matter how much the opposition tries to defeat their efforts. God's truth will emerge! Verse 27 declares that what the disciples had learned from Jesus "in the dark" (in private) they were to proclaim boldly in public places, and not to fear the reactions of people.

Jesus gave further reasons why we are not to fear (verses 28-31). Verse 28 says that men can destroy the body, but the human soul they cannot touch. God "is able to destroy" both body and soul in Hell,⁵³ but those who serve God faithfully have nothing to fear.

In verses 29-31 Jesus encourages the disciples not to be afraid—because God is concerned about them, and He is carefully watching. Sparrows were very common in New Testament Palestine; people ate them for food. It did not cost much to purchase sparrows in the market. Two of them could be bought for a penny, the smallest copper coin. And five sparrows could be bought for two pennies (Luke 12:6).

If we compare the verses in Matthew 10 with Luke 12:6—we learn that sparrows were so cheap that if a person bought four of them (and paid two copper coins, two pennies)—the merchant would throw in an extra sparrow for free! And yet God *cares for, and notices, that one extra tiny sparrow!* Our heavenly Father is the God concerned even about the fifth sparrow. That shows the extent of His providential care. A God who cares for sparrows will surely provide for saints.

We can be sure that God is concerned about all the details of our lives, even down to the hairs of our head (verse 30). Certainly there is no need to fear when God is exercising such wonderful care over us.

Jesus says in verses 32-33 that another reason why we should not fear taking a stand for our Lord Jesus is because Christ honors those who confess Him before others.

in Hell.

The essence of the truth stated in verse 28 is that it is far more fearful to disobey God than it is to face martyrdom at the hands of man. Verse 28 does not teach the annihilation of the wicked after death. The word translated "destroy" means "to render useless," not "to annihilate." An automobile is "destroyed" in an accident, but not "annihilated." Anyone looking at the wreck can see that it had been destroyed (rendered useless), but it has not ceased to exist. Satan may have great power, but only God can destroy soul and body

What if others do say evil things against us? What does it matter? Those who live for Christ here can be assured that He will plead our cause in the hereafter. When the labors of this life are over, Jesus will say to the Father, "He stood for me on earth; now I will stand for him." The tense of the word "denies" (verse 33), "whoever denies Me"—refers to a continual life of rejection. This is different from Peter's *momentary* denial, recorded in Matthew 26:70-75.

(10:34-42) "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household.' He who loves father or mother 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 finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will 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 gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward."

Jesus continues by saying that He did not come to send peace on the earth, but a sword. When Jesus was born, the angels spoke the words, "Peace on earth," but the coming of Christ has actually divided the world into two warring camps—and down through the years, the opponents of Christ have tried to destroy Him and His people.

The opposition has sometimes even severed intimate family ties.⁵⁴ In verse 35, Jesus tells about a family of five people, in which three young people (a daughter, a son, the son's wife) are arrayed against two older people (the father and the mother)—all because of differences in response to Christ. The lesson is that we must never let even close family ties prevent us from taking a clear stand for Christ. We may not disown Christ, or disobey Him, even because of opposition from family members. Normally, children should love father and mother, but they are not to love parents *more* than they love Jesus.

You may have heard about the girl—reared in a worldly, society-minded home, who, one night went with a friend to a revival meeting. The voice of God spoke, and she gave her heart to the Lord. When she told her wealthy parents, they were full of anger. They told her that she must give up this foolishness or leave home for good. They declared that they would remove her inheritance and not leave her a single penny. That night she prayed long, and shed tears of sorrow (but the tears were mixed with joy). She slept well. The next morning, when she came downstairs, she went to the piano and played and sang the hymn, "Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow Thee, destitute, despised, forsaken; Thou from hence, my all shall be." This touched the hearts of her parents, and with tears in their eyes, they asked her to tell them about the Savior who meant so much to her.

Jesus is not encouraging disobedience to parents, nor does He enjoy seeing conflict in the home. But those who "name His Name" will find that conflict often arises, because some will choose not to follow Christ.

The "cross" that Jesus speaks about (verse 38), is the reproach and the contempt that we will experience when we decide to follow the Lord and determine to live right, in the midst of a crooked and unrighteous world. To be worthy of Christ, we are to accept the stigma of being identified with Him. Jesus says (verse 39) that we have two alternatives: We can live for self and insist on going our own way. In the end, we will be losers. Or we can die to self, and live for God. In the end, we will be winners.

In the last three verses of the chapter, Jesus reminds us that we can become a blessing to others. Even the simplest deed done (the smallest service), is not going to go unnoticed by our Lord. There will be a reward. However, the "cup of cold water" (verse 42) refers to a real sacrifice. A person in New Testament times could not open the door of a refrigerator and take out a bottle of cold water like most of us can. Nor could he get ice cubes to cool a glass of water. A "cup of cold water" meant going to a spring (or to a deep well) and letting down a bucket, and then pulling it up and walking over a dirt path to get it back to the house.

Each of the Lord's disciples should set out to help and encourage those who proclaim the word and those who are new believers in Christ. We are to do our best not to impede others but to cheer them on. Bishop J. C. Ryle says "they do well and wisely who give the 'cup of cold water' whenever they have opportunity...May we all strive to leave the world a better world than it was when we were born."⁵⁵

There are special rewards for those who receive and encourage true disciples of our Lord (verse 40). Likewise, the labor of God's servants will not be in vain, in the Lord. Nothing that we do for the Lord will be wasted in the end.

⁵⁵ Ryle's Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, page 108.

8. THE STRONG OPPOSITION TO JESUS

Matthew 11:1-12:50

In Matthew 11 and 12, we learn about the opposition which the people showed toward Jesus. As His popularity and success grew, so did the opposition to His ministry.

1. Doubt Manifested by John the Baptist (11:1-19)

John the Baptist was in prison because he had courageously denounced the adulterous marriage of Herod Antipas and Herodias (Matthew 14:3-4). Herod had paid a visit to his brother in Rome, and during that visit, he seduced his brother's wife, Herodias. Herod came home, dismissed his own wife, and then married Herodias—his sister-in-law.

(11:1-6) Now it came to pass, when Jesus finished commanding His twelve disciples, that He departed from there to teach and to preach in their cities. And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."

Luke 3:19-20 says that John the Baptist had at one time rebuked Herod for taking the wife of his brother, Philip, and for "all the evils which Herod had done." Because of this, Herod "shut John up in prison."

We see a little bit of John's human side in these verses. It is easy to sympathize with John the Baptist as he suffered in prison: He had been an active man; now he was confined indoors. He had a mandate to preach; now he was silenced. He had announced judgment; he had said that those who rejected the Messiah would be baptized with "fire" (Matthew 3:11). But, instead of bringing judgment and burning up the wicked, Jesus took children into His arms, restored sight to some blind men, and healed a woman that touched the hem of His garment. John had no problem with healing the sick, raising the dead, and casting out demons—but must have wondered where the baptism of fire was.

While in prison John had received only partial reports about Jesus' ministry, and he was uncertain about what was happening. So John sent two of his followers to question Jesus (verses 2-3); they were to inquire whether Jesus was indeed the Christ.

In the Old Testament, the Messiah was pictured as a suffering servant, and as a reigning monarch. John saw Christ as a servant—but was not able to see Him as a reigning king who burned up His enemies. John was perhaps not so much *expressing doubt* as *requesting clarification*—because he had expected the Messiah to be a leader who would judge wickedness and set up a physical kingdom, and that was not happening.

Jesus was very compassionate toward John, and sent a message back with John's representatives (verses 4-5), saying that He was indeed doing precisely what Isaiah had

prophesied (Isaiah 35:5; 61:1). And Jesus said, "Blessed is he who is not offended because of Me" (verse 6). Or as the NEB says it, "Blessed is the man who does not find me a stumbling block."

(11:7-11) As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.' Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

After John's disciples left, Jesus addressed the multitude (verse 7a), and expressed praise for John the Baptist. John was not a popular preacher who catered to the crowds. He was not an unstable person, swayed by every wind of belief (verse 7b). John was a man of conviction and courage and boldness. John was a sturdy oak, not a trembling reed, and not one wearing "soft garments" (verse 8).

He was more than a prophet (verse 9b) because he not only predicted that the Messiah was to come (Matthew 3:11-12), but he actually saw Him and pointed people to Him (verse 10). And yet, in spite of John's discouragement (and his incomplete understanding), Jesus said that none had been greater than John (verse 11a). John was a man of courage and principle and integrity. We should note that *Jesus does not judge a person by a passing mood.* John was in a moment of doubt, but Jesus judged him by the general trend of his life.

All of us have fallen short at some point along the journey of life. We have worried when it was totally unnecessary, spoken quickly when we should have kept quiet, and become disgruntled when something did not go our way. Jesus shows by example that *it is wrong* to condemn a person on the basis of one deviation from the straight path. *It is wrong* for us to condemn ourselves on the basis of one deviation. Let's pick ourselves up and move along. We must confess our sins, and face the future with the freedom of a forgiven person.

The latter part of verse 11 says, "He who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." John the Baptist never lived to see the Cross; he never saw the full revelation of the love of God. Those of us who live in this age, and can look back at the blood shed on Calvary—are much greater in privilege than John and the others who lived in Old Testament times.

(11:12-19) "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear! But to what shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their companions, and saying: 'We played the flute for you, And you did not dance; We mourned to you, And you did not lament.' 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, 'Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' But wisdom is justified by her children."

Verse 12 is one of the very difficult passages in the New Testament: "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force." The first phrase "suffers violence" speaks of the violence of persecution. The Greek word *biastai* is in the passive voice, and literally says, "the kingdom is violently treated." Violence here means "the physical force used to injure or destroy." This is the kind of thing we usually associate with violence.

The second phrase "the violent take it by force" speaks of *the violence of devotion*. The Greek word is in the active voice, and literally says, "the kingdom is sought with ardent zeal and with intensity."

One of the definitions for "violence" in the Collegiate Dictionary is simply "intensity." In other words, during the early days of our Lord's ministry, there was evidence of the *violence of persecution* and the *violence of devotion*.

The *violence of persecution* was seen when Herod slew the infants already at Jesus' birth. It was seen also when the scribes and Pharisees bitterly opposed Jesus. It speaks of violent opponents of the gospel.

The *violence of devotion* indicates that only those who are fervent and desperately in earnest will enter Christ's kingdom. Those who are indifferent and lovers of ease will never get in. God's kingdom is not for compromisers like Balaam, or Pilate or Demas. God's kingdom is made up of strong and sturdy persons like Joseph, Daniel, Esther, Elijah, Stephen, and Paul. So the phrase "the violent take it by force" indicates that only those who are intensely earnest will ever get in. It speaks of the zeal of enthusiastic supporters.

Verse 13 indicates that John the Baptist was a kind of intermediate between the Age of Law and the Age of Grace.

Verse 14 is explained more clearly in the first chapter of Luke, where the angel said to the father of John the Baptist, "He will go before Him (the Messiah) in the spirit and power of Elijah." Just as Elijah was a stern prophet who rebuked King Ahab (1 Kings 21:17-24), and preached a message of repentance—so John the Baptist rebuked kings, and cried out to his audiences. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 3:2).

Verses 15-19 are a rebuke to the many who rejected Jesus and cast aside the message of John the Baptist. Jesus said to these multitudes, "You are like irresponsible children who never seem to know what they want." One says, "Let's play wedding," but the rest want to do something different. Another says, "Let's play funeral," but the others don't want to do that either. John was an austere man who withdrew himself from society, and the people said, "He has a demon." Jesus was a sociable person, feasting with His friends, and they said, "He is a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"

John the Baptist preached repentance and the need to turn from sin (Matthew 3:1-3). Jesus appealed to people by asking them to take up the cross and follow Him (Matthew 10:38). But neither John's call to repentance, nor Christ's glad invitation to find rest—seemed to make much impact on the multitudes. The final sentence in verse 19 is just a proverbial way of saying that these brilliant people found some kind of excuse to justify what they were doing.

2. Unbelief of Three Galilean Cities (11:20-30)

It is clearly stated in this passage that neither the performance of miracles, nor the presence of the powerful and compassionate Christ, will necessarily lead to a large number of conversions.

(11:20-24) Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you."

Verse 20 says that Jesus began "to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done." The word "woe" (verse 21) means "judgment"—but it carries with it the concept of pity and sorrow.

It was tragic that the people in Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum treated lightly their opportunities to hear and respond to what Jesus was saying. The Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon, and the godless city of Sodom (verses 21-24), would have repented if they could have seen the miracles which Jesus performed.

Five of the ten miracles recorded in Matthew 8 and 9, were performed in Capernaum. Capernaum was the headquarters city for Jesus during His ministry in Galilee. Capernaum was "exalted to heaven" (verse 23)—she had great privileges. Today the city is almost totally in ruins.

The lesson is this: Light brings responsibility—and the more light the greater the responsibility. The sin of the Galilean cities was the sin of indifference. These people did not attack Jesus. They did not drive Him away from their gates. They did not seek to crucify Him. They were just cold, frozen, and indifferent. They saw lots of things happening, but they were unmoved.

(11:25-27) At that time Jesus answered and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight. All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him."

The "wise and prudent" (verse 25b) have the truth of God withheld from them, because they believe that truth can only be known through human reason—human brilliance. The "babes" (or infants) are those who sense their spiritual helplessness, and have a childlike eagerness to learn the truth of God. Small children are typically eager to learn, and are very willing to submit themselves to higher wisdom.

The words, "All things have been delivered to Me by My Father" (verse 27), contain heights and depths which our feeble minds cannot comprehend. All we can do is determine to accept these words in the spirit of a child. The term "all things" surely includes our Lord's

authority over demons, nature, life, and death.

(11:28-30) Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

The last three verses of Matthew 11 are a beautiful invitation to come to Jesus for salvation and rest. "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." In Jesus, there is rest from the burden of sin, and rest from the inability to cope with the problems of life.

Some are afraid to come to Jesus lest there be too much to give up—but the Christian life is filled with joys about which the average person knows nothing. For example, there is the relief that comes when we know that our sins are washed away, and the joy that comes when we know there is Someone standing by our side to help with the cares of life.

Jesus continues, "Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me." A "yoke" is a device which is put on animals for pulling heavy loads. A yoke always has two sides to it—and in this case, we (as Christians) are on one side of it, and our Lord Jesus is on the other side. To "learn" from Jesus is to fix our minds on His servant nature, seeking to follow His pattern of humble service and willing obedience.

We are all moving along on the journey of life—but we are not alone! Our Saviour walks with us. His neck is on one side of the yoke and ours is on the other. Responding to the invitation described in verses 28-30 with a great big "yes"—is the key to true happiness and the secret for having a radiant heart!

3. Hostility over Healing on the Sabbath (12:1-21)

Matthew, in this section introduces a series of incidents to show the hostility of the Pharisees toward Jesus.

(12:1-8) At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!" But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

Jesus and His disciples passed through a field of grain, and the hungry disciples began to pick a few hands full of grain and eat it (verse 1). It was the Sabbath, and the Pharisees complained that Jesus permitted His followers to work on the Sabbath.

The disciples were not accused of stealing. The Law permitted an individual to pick grain out of a neighbor's field for his personal use, but was not allowed to put extra in a container (Deuteronomy 23:24-25). To pick some grain on the Sabbath was a breach of the Law, according to the scribes and Pharisees. To pluck the grain off the stalks was *reaping*; to

rub it between their hands was threshing (Luke 6:1).

The Pharisees had added to the teachings of Scripture and built a series of extensive laws which forbade various kinds of "work" on the Sabbath. They forbade a man to spit on the ground on the Sabbath, lest he rub it with his sandal, and roll up a ball of dirt. That would be *plowing*. They forbade a woman to look into a mirror on the Sabbath, lest she see a hair on her face, and be tempted to pull it. That would be *reaping*. They forbade any person to "carry a burden" on the Sabbath—and "a burden" was anything weighing as much as two dried figs.⁵⁶

Jesus cited two examples from the Old Testament to explain that human need stands above ritual law: First, in verses 3-4, Jesus reminds us that the bread in the Tabernacle in Old Testament times was to be eaten only by the priests, yet (Jesus says) it was not so sacred that it could not meet human need. The "showbread" in the Tabernacle (according to Leviticus 24:5-9) consisted of twelve loaves of bread, placed every week (in two rows of six) in the Holy Place of the Tabernacle. It was a symbolic offering to God, thanking Him for the sustaining gift of food. The loaves were changed every week and the old loaves were given to the priests, and only they (the sons of Aaron) were to eat the bread.

But one time David and his soldiers were weak and tired because of a lack of food, and they decided to eat the bread from the Table of Showbread in the Tabernacle—and they were not condemned for eating what was designated only for the priests. The account is found in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. Jesus is citing this example to illustrate that extreme human need is to be met even if some technicalities of the Law must be laid aside. And thus the Pharisees should not have been so hard on His disciples for eating some grain.

The second example which explains that human need stands above ritual law is found in verse 5. The Jewish priests were commanded to offer a number of special sacrifices every Sabbath. Numbers 28:9-10 says the offerings were doubled on the Sabbath—and yet we are aware that it was a lot of work for the priest. He had to kindle a fire and slaughter the animals, and lift them on to the altar. Jesus is saying that works of piety and service are very proper on the Sabbath Day, and thus the strict Jewish technicalities about "reaping" on the Sabbath contradicted God's own laws.

Jesus is "greater than the temple" (verse 6), means that what God did in sending Jesus far surpassed what He did in planning temple worship. And the words "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (verse 7) mean that the mere mechanical observance of rules is far inferior to the compassion which will characterize those who are genuine servants of God.

We are told in verse 8 that Christ "is Lord even of the Sabbath." This means that He who instituted the Sabbath in the first place, is the One who determines how the principle of Sabbath observance is to be worked out. He knows what the Sabbath law involves, and

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Donald Durnbaugh describes Conrad Beissel's divide from the body of Brethren by noting that one of the problems "was Beissel's inclination to introduce Judaizing practices, from observing Saturday as the day of rest and worship, to the elimination of all those foods from the diet (such as pork) that were banned by Old Testament laws" (*Fruit of the Vine*, page 87).

He knows when it is being violated.

(12:9-14) Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue. And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—that they might accuse Him. Then He said to them, "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore 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 as whole as the other. Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him.

Beginning at verse 9, we learn that Jesus proved His claim to be "Lord even of the Sabbath" by healing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. Verse 10 indicates that the Pharisees used this man with the paralyzed hand as a weapon to launch a further attack against Jesus.

Jesus responded (verses 11-12) by saying that if it is acceptable for a farmer to care for his animals on the Sabbath, surely it is right to care for human beings on the Sabbath. Human beings are created in the image of God and are more valuable than sheep.

Jesus healed the man with the withered hand (verse 13), but the Pharisees claimed that by doing so He was deliberately violating the law of God—and so they plotted to kill Jesus (verse 14). Notice the Pharisees thought it was wrong to heal on the Sabbath, but they did not think it was wrong to plot murder on the Sabbath.

(12:15-21) But when Jesus knew it, He withdrew from there. And great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them all. Yet He warned them not to make Him known, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, 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 will declare justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel nor cry out, Nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not quench, Till He sends forth justice to victory; And in His name Gentiles will trust."

Our Lord's response to the hatred of the Pharisees was withdrawal to another part of Palestine (verse 15). Jesus was not afraid; but He knew that His hour for bearing the sin of the world had not yet come. Verse 15b says that "great multitudes followed Him and He healed them all." In contrast to the carping criticism from the religious leaders, there was encouraging enthusiasm from the common people.

The words of verses 17-21 highlight the gracious spirit and the gentle attitude which Jesus manifested during His ministry. Verse 19 says that Jesus did His miracles quietly, without becoming sensational, or creating astonishment in the minds of those who witnessed His activity. And in verse 20 we learn that Jesus was tender and compassionate in His approach, careful not to destroy the fragile lives of hurting people. He was not like a powerful ruler who ruthlessly crushed all opposition. The "smoking flax" refers to a lamp in which the wick is almost burned down.

The "bruised reed" and the "smoking flax" are pictures of people almost destroyed by sin; their faith is weak, and they are weary with the burdens of life. Jesus gives courage and support to such people.

4. Charge about Working by Satan's Power (12:22-50)

The Pharisees were moved with jealous rage when they saw Jesus. They tried to diminish the work of Jesus by accusing Him of being in league with Satan, the prince of demons, and the leader of a kingdom of darkness.

(12:22-30) Then one was brought to Him who was demon-possessed, blind and mute; and He healed him, so that the blind and mute man both spoke and saw. And all the multitudes were amazed and said, "Could this be the Son of David?" Now when the Pharisees heard it they said, "This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons." But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them: "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, 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 abroad."

A man who was born blind and dumb, and possessed with a devil, was brought to Jesus. Jesus healed the man, and cast out the demon so that he could speak and see (verse 22).

The opposition was growing now. As a result of the spectacular healing, *the multitudes* were more and more convinced that Jesus was the Messiah (verse 23). They were amazed and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"—but the *religious leaders* were unwilling to give Jesus credit, and so they declared (verse 24) that He had released the man from bondage by the power of Beelzebub (the prince of devils).⁵⁷

In verses 25-27 Jesus pointed out that their accusation simply did not make sense. It is unreasonable to suppose that the devil would help to pull down⁵⁸ his own kingdom, and to think that Satan would cast out Satan. Why would Satan fight against himself?

Jesus was casting out demons by the power of the Spirit of God (verse 28), and not by the power of the evil one. In order that Satan ("the strong man" in verse 29) should be restrained—he has to be confronted by One of greater power—One who can bind him. Christ is that superior Power. Jesus was not in league with Satan; He was Satan's Conqueror.

The statement in verse 30, "He that is not with Me is against Me"—is a warning that in the spiritual realm there is no neutral ground. We must either be for Christ or against Him. We cannot be neutral. There are only two kingdoms—the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. We cannot be partly committed to the world and still be saved. Either we are "all

Over the years the name *Beelzebub* came to be used for Satan, the prince of demons.

Nhen a nation or city engages in a civil war, the countryside is made desolate. When a factor

Beelzebub was a Philistine deity associated with demonic rituals and pagan idolatry (2 Kings 1:2). Over the years the name *Beelzebub* came to be used for Satan, the prince of demons.

When a nation or city engages in a civil war, the countryside is made desolate. When a family is divided by infighting among themselves, the family cannot long survive as a healthy unit. Just so, Satan's domain cannot survive if Satan wages war against himself, by casting out some of his own evil forces.

out" for Christ, or we are in the devil's domain. Someone says, "How many active members are there in your church?" The fact is, in every church, they are *all* active—either for God or for the devil. Every person is on one side or the other.

(12:31-37) "Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come. Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or else make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for a tree is known by its fruit. Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

The Pharisees' blasphemous attitude showed that they were not on the side of our Lord Jesus. The Pharisees were blaspheming the Holy Spirit. The "blasphemy against the Spirit" (verses 31-32) is best explained in Mark 3:30. Mark makes it clear that "all sins will be forgiven"—but the one sin which can *not be forgiven* is that of attributing to the devil something which is really of God. And that is what the religious leaders were doing. They were attributing to the devil that which Jesus really did by the power of the Spirit.

To attribute to the devil that which is done by the Holy Spirit, is a very dangerous action. It is, in fact, an unforgivable sin.

In verses 33-37, Jesus compared His works with those of the Pharisees. A "tree" is recognized by its fruit He said—because the fruit is consistent with the nature of the tree. An apple tree yields apples and a persimmon tree yields persimmons. And just as the fruit of a tree reveals the kind of tree it is—so people (by their words and works) reveal the kinds of persons they are.

Verses 36 and 37 contain a sobering statement from the lips of Jesus. He said, "For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." If our words are of enough significance to decide our fate for good or ill in the last judgment—it should cause every one of us to be exceedingly careful with our speech.

Think back over the past weeks and months, and try to recall especially your words—your words in a moment of pressure, or a moment of sorrow, or a moment of excitement. How many idle, foolish, vain, light, frivolous, sinful, and unprofitable things all of us have said! It would be well for all of us to cry out with the Psalmist, "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips" (Psalm 141:3).

(12:38-42) Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and indeed a greater than Solomon is here."

The Pharisees said to Jesus, "If You are really the Messiah, prove it by doing something so spectacular that there will be no doubt in our minds." Their wickedness was not in seeking *a sign*, but in asking for a sign after they had already been given many signs—and they had turned their backs on those signs.⁵⁹ Jesus called attention especially to "the sign of the prophet Jonah" (verse 39b)—a picture of death, burial, and resurrection.

The expression "three days and three nights" (verse 40) troubles some people because the period of time from Good Friday to Sunday morning is not 72 hours. The phrase is an idiom that does not require 72 hours of time. The Jews reckoned parts of days as whole days. The most accurate clock they possessed was a sun-dial; they were not as meticulous about time as we are. A Wednesday crucifixion, as some insist, would require a resurrection on late Saturday afternoon. A Thursday crucifixion does not explain Jesus' own words when He said He would be raised "on the third day." Thus, it is most accurate to accept Friday as the day of our Lord's crucifixion.

In verses 41-42, Jesus reprimanded those who rejected Him and His kingdom, and said that they will be worse off than the Queen of Sheba and the men of Nineveh in the Day of Judgment. The Gentiles of Nineveh, for example, were far less privileged than the Jews of Palestine, yet when the Ninevites heard the preaching of Jonah, they repented with deep grief. They will rise up in judgment to condemn the men of Jesus' day for failing to receive Someone greater than Jonah—the Son of God.

(12:43-45) "When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none. Then he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first. So shall it also be with this wicked generation."

In verses 43-45, Jesus told a parable that pictures the spiritual condition of the person who reforms, but does not experience genuine repentance. The person who reforms, lays aside many things that are bad, and takes up many things that are good, but does not invite Jesus to come *and reign* in his heart. As a result, there is a void and emptiness—and after a while his heart fills up with other sins. The evil spirit comes back and having found seven other spirits more wicked than himself—all eight take up abode in the man's life. One obvious lesson in these verses is *that Christ must fill* the cleansed life in order to keep it safe. Another lesson is that self-reformation without spiritual conversion can lead to serious consequences.

(12:46-50) While He was still talking to the multitudes, behold, His mother and brothers stood outside, seeking to speak with Him. Then one said to Him, "Look, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with You." But He answered and said to the one who told Him, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?" And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother."

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The attitude which demands miraculous signs as a condition for belief in Christ does not please God. Jesus said to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

The "brothers" are understood to be the children of Joseph and Mary born after the birth of Jesus. Mary, along with our Lord's brothers were unable to get close to Jesus because of the crowds, but they were able to get a message to Him, indicating that they wanted to speak with Him.

Jesus responded with two questions of His own, but He proceeded to answer the questions Himself. Jesus explained that whoever is doing the will of the Father and is wholeheartedly committed to Him—is part of His family. Over and over again in the New Testament, we learn that *doing the will of God* is extremely important.

Matthew closes these chapters by telling about the tender affection Jesus has *for all who* are *His children*. Those who do the will of the Father in heaven are truly brothers and sisters and relatives of Christ (verse 50). Whoever hears and believes and follows Jesus—is a member of a new spiritual family, and Jesus is the head of that family. Obedience to God must be given first place.

Jesus did not reject the tender ties of family relationships (when He said in verse 48), "Who is My mother, and who are My brothers?"—but He placed the physical family in a secondary position to those who are members of His larger spiritual family.

Jesus had a pure and unselfish love for His family members in the flesh, and we are taught in these verses that He has a mighty love which passes all understanding *toward all those* who are believing disciples of His. We are counted as the relatives of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Chapters 11 and 12 (in the Gospel according to Matthew) tell about those who opposed Jesus. They speak of *the unbelief* of the people in Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, *the hostility* of the scribes and Pharisees over His healing on the Sabbath, and *the accusation* from people who said that Jesus worked by Satan's power.

Obviously, Jesus had a multitude of enemies. None of us needs to belong to the crowd of enemies. It is a great joy to be counted as *a friend* of Jesus. We can rejoice in what Jesus said in John 15:14—"You are My friends, if you do whatever I command you."

9. THE PARABLE TEACHINGS OF JESUS

Matthew 13:1-58

Some of the basic truths for understanding the mission of the church are found in Matthew 13.

There are many definitions of a parable—some are long, some are short—but perhaps the oldest and the most commonly known is by far the best. A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. A parable compares things that are unfamiliar with things that are familiar. Jesus at times spoke of the wind and storm, a hen sitting on her nest, a grain of mustard seed, and children asking for bread—to help explain the unfamiliar. A parable is a simple story that illustrates spiritual truth in clear terms that can easily be understood. It is a down-to-earth happening with a spiritual or heavenly application.

The parables in Matthew 13 are parables of the "kingdom of heaven," a phrase which generally speaking, here in Matthew 13, represents the whole broad realm of religious profession (saved and lost alike), while the term "kingdom of God" speaks of God's rule over those persons who have had a real inner change.

Matthew 12 records the growing opposition to Jesus. The religious leaders were envious of Him, and finally came to the point where they said He did His activities by the power of the devil. The Jews for the most part rejected the kingdom (the rule) which Jesus offered them. And so the question naturally arose, "What will happen to God's kingdom program now?" And then in Matthew 13, on the same day that the events of chapter 12 took place, Jesus was preaching from a boat. The multitude was on the seashore. Jesus described the form which the kingdom of heaven would take during the period between His two advents. In other words, the parables in Matthew 13 give a picture of what Christendom will be like during the church age, between the first and second comings of Christ.

These parables⁶⁰ show that as the Word of God is proclaimed, there will arise a mixed group of people who will claim to submit to the authority of Christ—but in many hearts, that profession will not be real.

The *kingdom of heaven*, in its outward visible form, includes all professing Christians. It includes the true and the false, the good and the bad, the real and the unreal, the wheat and the tares, the good fish and the bad fish. Some of these parables were interpreted by Jesus Himself, and so there can be no uncertainty as to their meaning.

1. The Parable of the Sower (13:1-23)

We learn immediately in these verses that sowing the gospel seed is not going to be 100%

Two of the parables (the *sower* and the *mustard seed*) are also found in Mark and Luke. The *leaven* is found in Luke but not in Mark. The other parables are found only in Matthew.

successful. The seed will sometimes fall into unfavorable kinds of soil.

(13:1-9) On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea. And great multitudes were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore. Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: "Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

Jesus gives some striking illustrations here in parable form, and then says twice, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (13:9, 43). And after completing the parables, He says, "Have you understood all these things?" Jesus intends that these parables shall be understood (verse 51).

In verses 3b-9, Jesus tells what is commonly called the parable of the sower. However, the focus is not on the sower, but on the soils. A farmer scatters seed on the unfenced fields. The seed, depending on the nature of the soil, produces results that vary from no crop to an abundant crop. Just so, the gospel message meets with many different responses.

(13:10-17) And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: 'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, And seeing you will see and not perceive; For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.' But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; for assuredly, 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."

The disciples had asked Jesus why He spoke to the multitudes in parables. Jesus responded to their question by saying that the *disciples* could find the explanation for the parables simply by asking Him. But the spiritual meaning of the parables would be unclear to those who rejected Him. To *unbelievers*, the parables would seem like interesting fables, but would have no other meaning for them.

Jesus explains in verses 10-16, that those who refuse to accept Him as King will not have the capacity for under-standing. Only those who receive Him and become disciples of His will be given the ability to understand the deep truths of the parables.

The meaning of the Parable of the Sower is explained in verses 18-23.

(13:18-23) "Therefore hear the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside. But he who received

the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful. But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."

Jesus describes four kinds of soil—four conditions of the human heart—only one of which produces good results.

- 1. The hard-hearted unresponsive are the wayside hearers. The seed sown by the wayside fell by the edge of the path over which people traveled, and the ground was packed hard from much traffic. The seeds did not penetrate the soil, and the birds soon picked them up. This represents the sin-hardened hearts of human beings who are indifferent to the truth of God. They have no concern for the things of God, and are completely indifferent to anything spiritual. They hear the words or read the message, but the words do not penetrate their minds and hearts. There is no valid response.
- 2. The shallow-hearted superficial are the stony-ground hearers. The seed sown in stony places was sown "where they did not have much earth." This refers not to ground with lots of stones, but to a thin layer of soil over underlying beds of solid rock. For a brief period the plants looked healthy, but soon they shriveled up and died because the soil was very thin. The picture is that of people whose emotions are easily aroused so that they enthusiastically make a profession of faith in Christ, but there is no real conviction of sin. There is no depth of dedication to Christ. When trials and persecutions come along, shallow-hearted persons soon fall away. These are sometimes called "fair-weather Christians." As long as things are going well, they seem content with their relationship with God, but when serious illness or some other crisis strikes, they become angry and suddenly want nothing more to do with God.
- 3. The half-hearted worldly are the thorny-ground hearers. The soil looked good when it was first plowed, but when the grain began to sprout, so did the thorns, and they eventually choked the good plants by taking most of the moisture and nourishment for themselves. The seed that fell among thorns pictures those who retain a measure of faith in Christ, but the real spiritual life is gradually choked out by the cares and pleasures and worldly plans of this life.

It is hard to be a faithful Christian in today's world. It has always been hard, but it seems especially so in these days of materialism, jet travel, media pollution, and declining morals. Multitudes in our communities have consciences that are so scarred and seared that almost any kind of conduct is tolerated and looked upon with acceptance.

4. The whole-hearted receptive are the good-ground hearers. The soil was loose and soft and deep enough to support healthy plants. These are those persons, who with an honest heart, receive the Word of God and let it become the mainspring of their daily conduct. These are people who accept the Word of God and make a serious commitment to set goals and live by the Word.

We note again that only a fractional part of those who hear the Word of God will respond

favorably to its message. Four kinds of people hear the good news, but only one of the four responds in such a way as to produce acceptable fruit.

We are to sow the seed of the Word of God far and wide—among the rocks and thorns, and where the soil appears to be fertile. The message is, "Whoever will, may come and follow Christ." We are not to worry about the consequences of our seed scattering. Salvation belongs to God (Revelation 7:10), and He will bring about fruit in His own way. We can be sure that our work will not be in vain.

2. The Parable of Wheat and Tares (13:24-30; 36-43)

In the second parable recorded in Matthew 13, the devil is presented as sowing a false seed among the good grain. The devil becomes a farmer, who sows a black, bitter seed which in its early stages looks almost like the genuine wheat in its outward appearance. Only when the wheat ripens, can one distinguish between the good grain and the tares with certainty. Just so, the devil has people scattered throughout the world who look and act like Christians—and who associate with believers—but some are false professors and insincere counterfeits.

(13:24-30) Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

The parable describes a man who sowed good seed in a field, but during the night an enemy came and sowed weeds (Greek, *zizania*) over the plot of ground. In the early stages the weeds closely resembled the wheat. The lesson is that in the professing church it is not always possible to distinguish true believers from those who are counterfeit.

The "tares" are a picture of those insincere and shallow persons who are not born-again Christians, but are scattered in churches throughout the world—which is the field. There are people who so successfully imitate the true child of God that it is often impossible for a human being to distinguish between the real and the unreal. In the parable, the wheat and the tares grow side by side—and just so, the visible church in all parts of the world contains members who are not genuine disciples of Jesus Christ.

In the parable, Jesus mentioned that the laborers asked whether they should try and clear out the weeds (verse 28). But the owner observed that such action might be a mistake, because in the process they might "uproot the wheat with them" (verse 29).

(13:36-43) Then Jesus sent the multitude away and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field." He answered and said to them: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy

who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

After Jesus had spoken publicly to the crowds, He returned to the house and entered into a private discussion with His disciples who had asked for an explanation of the parable of the wheat and tares.

Jesus said that "the field is the world" (verse 38), a reference to the whole populated globe. The *good seed* refers to "sons of the kingdom"—those who receive and respond to the Word. The *tares* are "the sons of the wicked one"—those who seem to be part of God's flock, but are really part of the kingdom of Satan (verse 38b). The parable teaches that there are those who appear as outwardly good persons (but are spiritually dead), alongside those who are true believers.

The church is charged with the task of disciplining those who engage in open, commonly known sin—but no matter what we do to purify the church, a perfectly pure group of believers will not be found anywhere in the world. Tares will be found among the wheat. Hypocrites are going to creep in. There are always false and true believers in the worldwide church, and we cannot always distinguish between them. The presence of false believers does harm Christ's body, but harm may also come from human efforts to remove them. Evil persons, of course, should be removed if they can be positively identified.

We are to remember, however, that this present mixed state of affairs will not last forever. The wheat and the tares *will* be divided at some future time. The mighty reapers are the angels (verse 41) who will make no mistake. The tares will be separated from the wheat and will face the righteous judgment of God. Their destiny will be "the furnace of fire" (verse 42).

This parable, like the Parable of the Sower, refutes the notion that the preaching of the Gospel will extend until the whole earth is filled with the knowledge of God. There is no hint that the tares will gradually die out, but that they will abound until the end, and then they will be bundled together and burned.

The notion that we can improve the world by gathering out evil weeds in society (such as banishing drunkenness and abortion and immoral sexual behavior) is only an idle dream. We must not waste time trying to cultivate the tares. Instead, we are to preach the saving gospel of Christ to people in all parts of the world, and snatch as many souls out from the grip of Satan as we possibly can.

3. The Parable of the Mustard Seed (13:31-32)

Jesus chose the mustard seed for this illustration because it is among the smallest of all seeds, and yet when it is grown, it becomes the greatest of all herbs.

(13:31-32) Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the

seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."

The "mustard seed" is a picture of the development of the professing church, from a small beginning, into a giant ecclesiastical power. Jesus grew up in a despised province. He taught for only two or three years in neighboring villages, His few converts were chiefly among the poor and unlearned, and then He died a shameful death on a cross.

From such a humble beginning, centered on a despised, crucified Man from Nazareth—there has grown the tremendous development which we know as Christendom, and it has spread throughout the world. Who would have expected anything to come out of Nazareth, especially from a bleeding Victim nailed to a Cross? Yet the tiny seed⁶¹ has grown until it has become a giant tree with many branches. Christendom has developed from a small band of twelve disciples into a tremendous organization.

Christendom includes all professing Christians (true and false), from the time when Jesus was on earth two millennia ago, until He comes to reign over all the earth. We get a little concept of the vastness of this kingdom when we see the great Orthodox Cathedrals in Europe, the images and icons in Vatican City, the bamboo church buildings in the South Sea Islands, and the variety of church groups in North America. There are hundreds of denominations and millions of persons who claim to be Christian.

When Constantine, the fourth century Roman emperor, became a nominal Christian and made Christianity the state religion, all persons in the Empire had to declare that they were Christians, and so *the embrace* of Christianity was rapidly enlarged. And what once had been a small group of despised followers of Jesus soon became a great political religious system that ruled over all Europe during the Middle Ages. The tiny mustard seed had developed into a huge monstrosity. Outwardly there was rapid growth because the king required everyone in the Empire to unite with the church, but this action became a fearful curse because multitudes in the church were not genuine believers. Soon, agents of the devil lodged "in its branches" (verse 32b). Jesus had already explained in the Parable of the Sower that the "birds of the air" represented the devil and his co-workers. Compare Matthew 13:4 with Matthew 13:19.

The early church was concerned primarily about sowing the seed of the gospel, but as the age progressed, the emphasis changed from seed-sowing to tree-growing. Instead of scattering gospel seed, many church leaders seem more interested in building big denominational machines.

Jesus, in the Parable of the Mustard Seed, foretells the fact that the professing church would become a giant system on earth, and that even the representatives of Satan would

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Some critics claim that the Bible is not trustworthy because Jesus says that the mustard seed is "the least of all the seeds" (The NRSV and NIV say "the smallest of all seeds"). And yet it is true that there are smaller seeds than the mustard seed. Leon Morris explains that the mustard seed was "popularly held to be the smallest of all seeds" (*The Gospel according to Matthew*, page 352). The mustard seed was used in rabbinic proverbs to stand for the smallest of things. In the parable, Jesus was appealing to this well-known proverbial view, rather than speaking in technical, scientific language.

find lodging in its many branches.

4. The Parable of the Leaven (13:33-35)

Perhaps among all the teachings which our Lord gave, none has been more misunderstood than this.

(13:33-35) Another parable He spoke to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened." All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: "I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world."

The general idea held by many today is that in the parable (verse 33) "the woman" represents the church and "the measures of meal" represent the world. And for some, the "leaven" represents the gospel. Multitudes teach that as a result of the mixing of the leaven (the gospel) throughout the world, the whole world will eventually become leavened (converted to Christ). The teaching then is that the good gospel will penetrate the bad world until the whole bad world becomes good.⁶²

One writer says, "We believe the church is called to be the leaven in the loaf. We must not accept the world as it is. We are called to be God's instrument for transforming, changing, improving, and redeeming it. Our leaven will permeate the whole community." Another writer says, "It is your responsibility and mine to go out and create the sort of world in which a person can be a Christian...a world that will support and encourage the Christian way of life." These statements contradict the condition pictured in verse 33.

They teach that the good gospel will penetrate the bad world until society at large conforms to God's design, but nothing could be more contrary to the truth. Such a view flatly contradicts the teaching of the other six parables in Matthew 13. Jesus Himself interpreted the first two parables, and these should serve as a guide for understanding the other five. The first parable teaches that the good seed will not bear fruit in every part of the field, for most of the ground will be unproductive. The second parable rules out world con-version, for at the time of the harvest, both wheat and tares still exist. The fourth parable surely does not teach the very opposite of what is taught in the first and second parables.

Leaven in the Bible is used in an evil sense.⁶³ Yeast is sour dough, corruption in action. The people of Israel were to put all leaven out of their houses during the Passover season.

Some, like Leon Morris, hold simply that like the Mustard Seed parable, the Leaven parable "brings out the contrast and continuity between the small beginnings of the kingdom and its great consummation" (The Gospel according Matthew, page 352). Early Brethren commentator, I. W. Teeter sees the parable

⁽*The Gospel according Matthew*, page 352). Early Brethren commentator, L. W. Teeter sees the parable as illustrating God's great work *in the lives of individuals* who choose to follow Jesus (*The New Testament Commentary*, page 60). These writers hold that the leaven symbolizes *good changes* which leaven effects in organisms.

⁶³ Leaven refers to the doctrines of the Pharisees (Matthew 16:6,12); to ungodly people who claim to be true followers (1 Corinthians 5:6,7); to false teachers (Galatians 5:8-9); and to malice and evil (1 Corinthians 5:8).

Paul speaks of the "leaven of malice and wickedness." Jesus warned His disciples to "beware of the leaven (the self-righteousness) of the Pharisees" (Mark 8:15).

The most natural understanding of the Parable of the Leaven is this: The "woman" represents the false leaders in the church who corrupt God's truth. The "meal" represents the truth of God (the food for God's people). The "leaven" symbolizes the corrupt doctrines which the false teachers cunningly hide in the meal. Down through the years, error has been mixed with truth. There is so much tolerance of false doctrines. There is so much looseness toward observing moral standards. There are so few places where hungry hearts can go and still receive pure bread.

The woman takes leaven, and hides it in three measures of meal until every part of the meal is leavened. Some of *the corrupt ideas* which have been mixed in with the truth are these: God is spoken of as male and female; Jesus is said to be a mere prophet (not God the Son); the Holy Spirit is described as mere energy, something like magnetism or electricity; peace and love are the essence of the gospel message; there are many paths to Heaven, etc.

The Mustard Seed Parable depicts the unwieldy and rapid *outward* growth and corruption of the church. The Leaven Parable depicts the *inner* corruption of the basic foundational teachings of the church.

We have looked now briefly at the first four parables which Jesus spoke to the multitudes on the sea shore. The disciples must have been very much perplexed at the gloomy picture which Jesus had given with regard to the kingdom of heaven. In the first parable, only a fractional part of the gospel seed would take root and bear fruit. In the second parable, the devil would sow the field with tares. In the third parable, the kingdom would grow into a huge monstrosity which shelters agents of the enemy. And in the fourth parable, the truth of God would be corrupted by the leaven of false doctrines.

Surely the disciples were perplexed and dismayed, and so our Lord took them into a house (verse 36), and in the last three parables, He spoke words to reassure their hearts. The first four parables picture the kingdom of heaven as we see it outwardly, while the last three parables picture the kingdom of heaven as God sees it inwardly.

5. The Parable of the Hidden Treasure (13:44)

The practice of hiding valuables in the ground was common in early societies. There were no banks (financial institutions), and so most people protected their valuables at some secret spot in the ground. When they needed money or decided to sell a valuable item, they would go out at night, uncover the jar, and take out what treasures they desired, and then re-bury the rest of the treasure. When the owner died or was driven from the land, the treasures often stayed. And so, over the years, the ground in Palestine became a real "treasure house."

(13:44) "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

In the parable of the hidden treasure, a man stumbled over something valuable in the ground. He was an honest man; he did not steal it, but he wanted it so much that he sold

all he had and bought the field.

The parable can hardly be a picture of the sinner seeking after Jesus (the treasure), as some would teach it. The sinner does not *buy* salvation; Jesus is not for sale, and neither is He hidden in a field. The best understanding is that the "treasure" is Israel. Psalm 135:4 says, "For the Lord has chosen....Israel for His special treasure." The "man" is Jesus, who sold all that He had—that is, Jesus laid aside His glory when He left the realms of heaven to come to earth. He that was rich became poor. Jesus, during His earthly ministry found the lost sheep of the house of Israel. They rejected Him for the most part, and once again they have been hidden, dispersed and scattered throughout the whole earth.⁶⁴

But Jesus "bought the field"—that is, He died for the sins of the whole world. He paid the price and in the purpose of God, one day in the future, Israel as a nation will be saved (Romans 11:26). Israel has been set aside for the time being, but she is still God's special treasure and the apple of His eye.

6. The Pearl of Great Price (13:45-46)

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who when he had found a pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it.

(13:45-46) "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it."

Again, the seeker is Jesus Christ, who came from the throne in glory, to this poor world, seeking for jewels to adorn His crown forever. This is not a picture of an unsaved person desiring salvation, and going to great lengths to obtain it; rather, it is a picture of the Savior purchasing mankind's redemption at the Cross.

The "pearl" is formed when a grain of sand penetrates its way into the side of an oyster. For protection, the tiny oyster will painfully secrete layer by layer, a cover over the grain of sand. That cover is a hard calcite "pearl." The pearl is formed by an invasion into the tender flesh of the oyster; it comes into being through the suffering and travail of the oyster. The *merchant* is Christ. The *pearl* is the church.⁶⁵ Calvary is the *price paid* for the pearl.

And just so, another "Side" has been wounded—and the church has been formed out of the suffering and death and travail of Christ's soul. We learn that the pearl originally has its home in the depths of the sea, in the midst of the mire and the filth—for that is where oysters congregate—but ultimately, it gets a place in the diadem (the crown) of a king. Colossians 3:4 says, "When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory." God's people today are often despised and ridiculed by the world, but someday they will

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The Hidden Treasure Parable is sometimes held to mean instead that the "man" who discovered the treasure is Christ himself, who gave His all to purchase *the church*. Others simply say that the gospel has such value that a person should give up everything, in order to possess that which is the greatest of all things (Matthew 16:26).

⁶⁵ Some hold that the pearl of great price is *salvation*, even though it costs us nothing, because Jesus paid it all.

reach an exalted position, and will be like a pearl in the crown of a king.

7. The Parable of the Drag Net (13:47-52)

This parable pictures a large net which is let down into the sea, and then later it is hauled in. The net had within its meshes all kinds of fish. It was drawn to shore and the process of separation began. The good fish were gathered into buckets, and the bad fish were cast away.

(13:47-50) "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth."

The parable pictures the mixture of saved and unsaved who join the church. Christendom has gathered all kinds of creatures into its net. There are fish of every kind. There is the bullhead—those who must have their own way. There is the swordfish—those who are sharp with the tongue. There is the eel—those who are slippery, and cunningly teach false doctrines. There are also the peace-loving and godly persons who seek to order their lives by the Word.

When the drag-net is full, it will be drawn to shore, and the good and bad will be separated from each other. That separation is going to be tragic indeed. The "angels will come...and cast [the wicked] into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth" (verses 49-50). A rock singer a few years ago declared that she was looking forward to death, saying, "I want to go to hell because hell will be fun." That girl is badly deceived. Hell is a "furnace of fire"—a place of constant torment, misery, and pain.

The parable is a picture of the saved and unsaved inside the professing church. The "kingdom of heaven" is a phrase which represents Christendom at large. Some who sang in choirs and taught Sunday School classes and preached from the pulpit, will be forever separated from others. There is a day coming when those who are unreal and insincere and are just putting on a front—are going to be exposed and judged.

These parables have been a picture of the professing Christian church from the time of Christ's first Advent until His coming again. We can sum up the teaching by saying that there will be a sowing of the Word of God throughout the age. The sowing will be imitated by a false counter-sowing. The kingdom will assume huge outer proportions. It will be marked by inner doctrinal corruption. Yet the Lord will gain for Himself a peculiar treasure. He will purchase a beautiful pearl from among the Gentiles. The age will end with judgment—with the unreal and insincere excluded from God's presence, and the righteous taken into the heavenly abode to enjoy the blessings of the eternal world.

The testimony of all these parables is that good and evil will continue side by side, and that the world will grow worse, and not better. Keep in mind however that God is not failing. He is still saving those who come out from the world, repent of sin, and receive Jesus by faith.

(13:51-52) Jesus said to them, "Have you understood all these things?" They said to Him, "Yes, Lord." Then He said to them, "Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the

kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old."

At the conclusion of the series of parables, the disciples indicate that they understand the points that Jesus had been making. So Jesus tells them that they are informed teachers of God's truth, and obligates them to proclaim those truths to others. The "things new and old" refer to the truths of the Old Testament and the new truths revealed in the parables they had just heard.

8. Jesus Rejected at Nazareth (13:53-58)

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, He had been rejected at Nazareth, and the people threatened to kill Him (Luke 4:16-29). Now, near the close of His Galilean ministry He returned to Nazareth and again was rejected.

(13:53-58) Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these parables, that He departed from there. When He had come to His own country, He taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, "Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this Man get all these things?" So they were offended at Him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house." Now He did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief.

Jesus was now teaching the hometown people in their synagogue (verse 54). ⁶⁶ The residents of Nazareth thought they knew all there was to know about Jesus. He grew up among them as "the carpenter's son," and the people knew His mother and His brothers and sisters. ⁶⁷ They looked at Him as just a common laborer.

The people of Nazareth could not figure where Jesus got "all these things" (verse 56)—that is, His ability to perform mighty deeds and speak words of wisdom (verse 54b). The words "they were offended at Him" mean that they seemed envious because others were impressed by Jesus and were eager to follow Him.

Jesus did not do many miracles at Nazareth (verse 58). It is not that His power was restricted, but Jesus *chose* not to use miraculous works to induce faith in those who were rigorously set against Him. A lack of faith blinds people to the truth and robs them of many blessings.

We should note that *in the single word "unbelief"* lies the secret of the everlasting ruin of many people. The masses of men and women in the world about us will perish because they choose not to believe that Jesus Christ is the only Way to salvation and Heaven. The gospel message is that our sins can all be forgiven. God's love is extended to *all* human beings in many ways. The blood of Christ is able to cleanse all who come to God in simple

This is Matthew's last mention of Jesus' teaching in the "synagogue." From this point on, His ministry is carried on outside the confines of official Judaism.

Jesus had apparently taken over the family business after Joseph died, for in Mark 6:3 Jesus is called "the carpenter." This implies that Jesus would have been well known in His home town.

faith and repentance. The one great road-block centers on unbelief.

And so, Matthew 13 closes with the sad comment that Jesus did not do many mighty works in His hometown because of their unbelief.

10. THE DISCIPLES REASSURED BY JESUS

Matthew 14:1-36

Matthew continues to record various responses to the ministry of Jesus. The Pharisees have accused Him of being under Satan's power (Matthew 12:22-30). Other religious leaders wanted to see "a sign" (Matthew 12:38-42). The people in Galilee had rejected Christ's claim that He was the Messiah; even in His hometown of Nazareth, the people had spurned Him. Matthew 13:57 says "they were offended at Him." Opposition against Jesus was beginning to mount.

As the opposition against Jesus continued to grow, our Lord's disciples needed to be reassured, and the reassurance was especially necessary after they learned that John the Baptist had been beheaded.

The miracles described in Matthew 14 strengthened the disciples' conviction that Jesus was God, and that He was the true Messiah, even though the Jewish nation as a whole refused to recognize Him as such.

1. Jesus Hears of John's Martyrdom (14:1-12)

Nearly everyone in Judea and Galilee was talking about Jesus and what He was doing. The news filtered even into the palace and reached the ears of King Herod. The Herod mentioned here, and everywhere else in the four Gospels (except the birth accounts in Matthew and Luke), was Herod Antipas. Herod Antipas was the ruler of Galilee from the year 4 B.C.-39 A.D.

(14:1-12) At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the report about Jesus and said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him." For Herod had laid hold of John and bound him, and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. Because John had said 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 counted him as a prophet. But when Herod's birthday was celebrated, the daughter of Herodias danced before them and pleased Herod. Therefore he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. So she, having been prompted by her mother, said, "Give me John the Baptist's head here on a platter." And the king was sorry; nevertheless, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he commanded it to be given to her. So he sent and had John beheaded in prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. Then his disciples came and took away the body and buried it, and went and told Jesus.

Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great. Herod the Great was the ruler responsible for the death of the baby boys at the time of Jesus' infancy. Herod Antipas (sometime before the events described in Matthew 14) made a visit to Rome, and while there, stayed in the home of his brother Philip. During that brief visit, Herod seduced Philip's wife, took her back to Galilee, divorced his own wife, and married Philip's wife, Herodias.

John the Baptist was preaching at that time, and he flatly told Herod that it was a sin against God to divorce his wife and marry Herodias. John the Baptist had boldly warned Herod, and called him to repentance (verse 4). Herod arrested John and had him placed in prison. He would have killed John, but he feared the people's response, and so he decreed instead to simply put him in prison. But Herodias, Herod's unlawful wife, continued to hold a grudge against John the Baptist, and so she plotted to have her daughter perform a lascivious dance⁶⁸ at Herod's birthday feast (verse 6).

Matthew gives us a flash-back picture to tell us how John the Baptist met his death. It was Herod's birthday. Herod and the immoral woman he had married were having a wild time at his party. The wine flowed—and the people were eating, drinking, talking, and laughing. At one point during the party, the daughter of Herodias came out and danced⁶⁹ a sensual dance before the crowd. Herod and his friends were so greatly pleased, and so much aroused by the carnal movements of the young girl's body, that he promised to give her anything she asked. She checked with her mother and then requested the head of John the Baptist (verse 8).

It takes a cruel, hard-hearted, cold-blooded woman to make that kind of demand, but that was what Herodias wanted—and so John was beheaded, and his gruesome head was brought on a platter to the girl, who in turn gave it to her mother (verse 11).⁷⁰

Verse 12 says that some of John's disciples came and were allowed to claim the body of John the Baptist for burial. We notice two facts: a) The text does not say that they buried John, but that they took up *the body* and buried "it" (verse 12). John went to be with the Lord; only his body was placed in the ground. b) After his disciples had buried the body, they went to Jesus and told Him what had taken place. And just so, when we are troubled about circumstances—and when we have deep concerns—we should do what John's disciples did. We are invited to "tell it to Jesus" (1 Peter 5:6-7).

After the flash-back about John's death, Matthew goes back to the main narrative. When Herod heard about all that Jesus was doing, he was greatly distressed, and had a strange feeling that maybe John the Baptist had been raised from the dead, and had been endowed with some unusual powers. Herod's conscience was troubling him. There are some practical lessons found in Matthew 14:1-12:

D. A. Carson says, "The dance may have been very sensual, but the text does not say so. The outrageous morals of the Herodians suggest it, as does the low status of dancing girls" (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew*, Volume 8, page 338).

The article on "Worldly Amusements" in *The Brethren Encyclopedia* says that "social dancing was prohibited and remains prohibited in several Brethren groups in the late 20th century" (page 26).

Jewish tradition says that when Herodias received the head, she ran a knitting needle through his tongue, to show how much she hated this man of God who had exposed her sin. Such ghoulish things were not uncommon among pagan people in New Testament times. Herodias had an ancestor named Alexander Julius who planned a large feast for some of his friends. During the day-long event, 800 rebels were crucified in order to entertain them—and while the 800 men were hanging on crosses, their wives and children were massacred in front of their eyes for mere entertainment.

1) We see the tremendous power of conscience.

The conscience acts as a "policeman," which seeks to enforce the standards we accept with our wills. Herod remembered that he had killed John, and in his heart he knew there would be a day of reckoning. A bad conscience has a good memory, and even kings can become miserable when they reject the demands of conscience. Herod had beheaded John at least some months before, but the voice of John the Baptist was still haunting him.

2) Faithful preaching bears fruit in due time.

We preach and teach and instruct, and sometimes it seems like our teaching goes unheeded—but when God's truth is declared, our efforts will not be in vain. There is a conscience in those who hear our sermons. There is a conscience in the children whom we teach. Many sermons and lessons seem not to make an impact on listeners, but the words will rise again at some future time and prick the consciences of those who heard. Our teaching will be like the preaching of John the Baptist which pricked Herod's heart.

3) The reward for God's people is not in this world.

John was martyred because of his faithful preaching, but his reward in heaven is sure. John's life was cut off when he was still relatively young, but now his suffering was over, his battles were fought, and life in the eternal world is rich beyond the power of words to describe. John the Baptist went to his eternal home. Charles Spurgeon once said, "John the Baptist received a crown in heaven even though he lost his head on earth."

In Matthew 14:1-12, we see a drunken king, a dancing daughter, a determined woman, and a man of God who lost his head but received a crown of life.

2. Jesus Feeds More Than 5000 People (14:13-21)

When Jesus heard about John's murder, He did not lash out at His enemies. He did not panic when He received the news. He went off to a quiet place to meditate and pray. Jesus went to a deserted place to get some rest, and very likely to avoid deliberately provoking trouble with Herod.

(14:13-21) When Jesus heard it, He departed from there by boat to a deserted place by Himself. But when the multitudes heard it, they followed Him on foot from the cities. And when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick. When it was evening, His disciples came to Him, saying, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is already late. Send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food." 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." He said, "Bring them here to Me." Then He commanded the multitudes to sit down on the grass. And He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples; and the disciples gave to the multitudes. So they all ate and were filled, and they took up twelve baskets full of the fragments that remained. Now those who had eaten were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Jesus knew the importance of having times for rest and privacy, and He worked hard to find such occasions. Galilee was a province about 40 miles long and 25 miles wide, and

yet in that small region Josephus the historian says there were 204 towns and villages. It was a heavily populated area. Jesus was busy, and He needed some privacy and rest.

But a great multitude of people followed Jesus. They walked around the north end of the Sea of Galilee to where He was—and when Jesus saw the crowd of people—He was moved with pity and compassion. Jesus regarded the crowds as sheep without a Shepherd, and He healed the sick among them (verse 14).

Verses 23 and 15 speak about events that happened "in the evening." ⁷¹ Late in the afternoon, according to verse 15, the disciples suggested that Jesus send the people away so that they might have a chance to get some food. To their astonishment, Jesus said to the disciples, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat" (verse 16).

Obviously, the disciples were astonished at the statement. In essence, they said, "What do You mean? We only have five loaves of bread and two small fish; how can we feed more than 5,000 people with such a small amount of food?" They were staggered by the thought of feeding 5,000 men (plus women and children), when all they had to give them was contained in one small lunch basket. And then Jesus told the disciples to bring what they had, to Him. He told the people to sit down in groups of fifties and hundreds (Mark 6:40). He looked up to heaven and offered prayer. He broke the loaves apart and multiplied the food. When the masses of people had finished eating, the scraps were picked up, and twelve basketsful were left over.

We are not told exactly at what moment the food multiplied. Likely it happened continuously, as the disciples walked among the groups of people and distributed the food. The disciples could hardly have carried containers large enough to hold all the food, if it had been multiplied all at once before it was distributed.

Anyhow, there was no fanfare and no dramatic scene. I doubt that great amounts of bread just kept piling up. The miracle was all but invisible, and the magnitude of it only became evident as the thousands of people were eating.

We can sense something of the immensity of this miracle by noting a more recent feeding of a large number of people. At the Atlantic City Centennial in 1954, there was a supper in the main auditorium of the Convention Hall. The meal was served to more than 6,000 men and women. The people consumed 9 tons of chicken, 2,400 quarts of soup, 3,000 grapefruits, and 120 pounds of candy mints. The press claimed it was the largest catered meal ever served in human history. Jesus fed 5,000 men (beside women and children) when they were gathered on that Galilean hillside, and the Bible says, "They all ate and were filled" (verse 20).

Many consider the feeding of 5000 to be the greatest of Christ's miracles. It is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospel accounts. It was so impressive, that according to John's account, the people wanted to make Jesus their king right after the feeding of the 5,000

The "evening" in verse 15 is different from the evening in verse 23. Jews actually had two evenings—one beginning about 3 P.M., and one beginning at sundown. In verse 15 the first evening is meant. In verse 23 the second evening is meant.

(John 6:14-15). There are some practical lessons found in verses 13-21:

1) We see our Lord's compassion toward people.

Jesus saw a great company of people in a deserted place, ready to faint from hunger. He might have resented the crowd, and considered them a nuisance—especially when He was seeking some quiet and rest—but He felt compassion for the people. Jesus experienced a sense of pain and anguish for the suffering of others.

2) Jesus set an example in not wasting anything.

The fragments were not wasted, but gathered up. In this materialistic age, each of us must guard against careless waste and teach our children and grandchildren not to destroy things that are useful.

A business executive a few years ago accidentally knocked over a wastebasket in one of the offices, and was amazed to see the useful items that fell out of it. He found a perfectly good memo pad, a clean envelope, an almost-new pencil, paper clips, and rubber bands. He computed their total value at only about six cents, but it was a large company, and the company had 2,500 wastebaskets in its complex of buildings. If each one contained six cents worth of good materials, this would mean throwing away \$150.00 a day—an annual loss of \$36,000.00 for the company.

Jesus said, "Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost" (John 6:12). It is a sin to throw away that which is still useful, even if it may not be the latest model.

3) There is a symbolic meaning in the feeding of the 5,000. The hungry multitude in a deserted place is a symbol of all humanity—helpless, hopeless, and spiritually starved. Spiritually, we are just like those poor, hungry people on the hillside. In John's account, we learn that Jesus went on to speak to the people about their need for spiritual sustenance. Jesus is the Bread of Life, and He says that the person who believes in Him "shall never hunger" (John 6:35).

Later on in the chapter, Jesus says, "Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:54). We may not know all that is implied in those words, but if we compare John 6:54 with John 6:40—we discover that eating "My flesh" and drinking "My blood" means that we must believe in Him with a sincere heart, and by faith appropriate Him as a Substitute offering for our sins—because John 6:40 says that "everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life, and I will raise him up at the last day." And John 6:54 says, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." *Eating Christ's flesh* and *believing in Him with a sincere heart*—are essentially the same thing.

3. Jesus Walks on the Water (14:22-36)

After feeding the 5,000, very early the next morning, Jesus performed another miracle. This time only the disciples experienced the supernatural event. This action on the part of Jesus was meant to re-assure them that even though He refused to let the people declare Him a king, He was indeed the true Messiah.

(14:22-33) Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the

other side, while He sent the multitudes away. And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there. But the boat was now in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary. Now in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Be of good cheer! 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." So He said, "Come." And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. Then those who were in the boat came and worshiped Him, saying, "Truly You are the Son of God."

Jesus had dismissed the multitude and sent the disciples across the Sea of Galilee in a boat. Then He went up into the surrounding hills to pray alone (verses 22-23).⁷² While He was in the hills praying, the disciples were rowing against a storm that had come up. The storm was battering their boat, and it took them much of the night to travel three or four miles out on the water (John 6:19). Finally, during the fourth watch (verse 25), sometime between 3 AM and 6 AM, Jesus walked out on the surface of the water toward the struggling boat. He knew about the storm, and He Himself took the initiative in coming to their aid. The disciples thought it was a ghost, and they were afraid (verse 26b). But indeed it was Jesus. He identified Himself by saying, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid" (verse 27).

The Apostle Peter, in a burst of faith, called out to Jesus, and said, "If it is You, command me to come to You on the water" (verse 28). And Jesus said, "Come." Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus (verse 29). He walked on the surface of the water as though it were firm ground. Before long however, he took his eyes off of Jesus, focused on the raging sea, and began to sink. Jesus came to the rescue. Both Jesus and Peter entered the boat, and the storm ceased (verses 31-32). John's account says that immediately they were at the shore (John 6:21).

There were really five miracles performed in this brief incident: 1) Jesus walked on the surface of the water. 2) Jesus enabled Peter to do the same (until his faith wavered). 3) Jesus saved Peter from sinking. 4) Jesus made the wind stop blowing. 5) Jesus brought the boat at once to the opposite shore.

These miracles ignited a sense of worship in the hearts of the disciples. They had witnessed such a display of omnipotent power that they fell down before the Lord and said, "Truly You are the Son of God" (verse 33). There are some practical lessons found in 14:22-33:

1) The will of God sometimes allows us to suffer difficulties. The rains descend, and the floods rise, and the storms beat upon the righteous as well as upon the wicked. Serving

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Earlier, in another storm, recorded in Matthew 8:23-27 and in Mark 4:35-41), they had to learn to trust Jesus who was asleep in back of the boat. The Lord Jesus was training the disciples to walk by faith and not by sight.

Christ does not guarantee freedom from stormy experiences in life. All of us will come to times when we are up against it. All of us will discover times when life is a desperate struggle. We won't always have smooth sailing, but God's people are promised a safe landing.

2) Focusing on Christ releases supernatural power to aid us in hard places.

Peter walked boldly on the water for a little way, but soon he was afraid, and began to sink. The Savior who enabled him to walk a few steps, could have enabled him for the entire walk. The lesson is this: If we take our eyes off the Lord Jesus, and become obsessed with the circumstances and difficulties around us, we too will panic and begin to sink.

3) Jesus is merciful to even those who are weak believers. Jesus stretched forth His hand immediately to save Peter, as soon as he had cried out for help. Our Lord is always delighted with a display of faith, even though that faith may not be strong and is not perfect. It is true that Peter wavered in faith, and then began to sink. The other side of it is that he was the only disciple with enough faith to even make an attempt to walk on the water. Jesus knows how feeble we are, and He is longsuffering toward us.

We see in the faltering faith of Peter, an evidence of God's grace reaching out, not only to Peter many years ago, but to all who are crying for help. Grace is the unmerited and unexplainable kindness of God poured out upon those who appeal to the Lord to save them.

Think of the grace of God displayed in behalf of some of the great men of the Bible. Three of the greatest men in the Bible account are Moses, David, and Paul. Like every fallen human being, these men had a proclivity to sin.

Moses killed a man. After he had killed the Egyptian, he buried the body in the sand (Exodus 2:12).

David killed a man. He was the one who ordered that Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, should be sent to the front lines of battle. When the prophet Nathan confronted David about the evil deed, he said, "You have killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword [and] have taken his wife to be your wife" (2 Samuel 12:9).

Paul gave consent to the killing of Stephen (the first martyr) and other New Testament believers. He says that in Jerusalem, he saw to it that many of the saints "were shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them" (Acts 26:10).

Each of these men repented and grieved over their sins, and God graciously forgave them. And in His magnanimous love for penitent sinners—God chose Moses to write the first five books of the Bible. He chose David to write a majority of the Psalms, and He chose Paul to write much of the New Testament!

The experience of the disciples out on the Sea of Galilee in the storm can be an encouragement to us when we go through the storms of life. Many of us are like the Apostle Peter when we are in deep waters. Jesus is all powerful, and as long as we look to Him, our footsteps are firm. When we look only at our difficulties, we tremble and begin to sink. And when we cry out, "Lord, save me!" He hearkens, hears and delivers—just like He

delivered Peter to safety.⁷³

(14:34-36) When they had crossed over, they came to the land of Gennesaret. And when the men of that place recognized Him, they sent out into all that surrounding region, brought to Him all who were sick, and begged Him that they might only touch the hem of His garment. And as many as touched it were made perfectly well.

The land of Gennesaret is on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. Soon after disembarking from the boat, word was sent throughout the towns and villages that Jesus had returned, and again people brought the sick to Jesus in order to be healed (verses 34-36). Jesus responded in mercy and made them perfectly well.

The lessons in Matthew 14 assure us that wherever we may be, however deep our sorrow, no matter how heavy our burdens—Jesus knows all about it. Sickness comes. A little child is born with a physical defect. A teenage friend gets involved with alcohol and other drugs. Jesus says to us just as He said to His disciples in a variety of expressions, "Do not be afraid; I am with you."

And after the Lord Jesus lets us ride out the storm for a period of time, He will bring peace and calm to our hearts—if we will hold on to His promises in faith. We need to pray often, "Oh God, give us the faith of a little child. Remind us of Your great power, and of the precious promise found at several places in the New Testament—that our Lord Jesus will never leave us nor forsake us" (Hebrews 13:5; Matthew 28:20).

In light of those promises, each believer should make a commitment to go on believing and to not be afraid. Our Lord Jesus is a constant Companion and an unfailing Friend to those who are servants of Christ.

God's people are out on the sea. Every one of us is walking in the midst of the storms of life. Yet Jesus knows all about us; He sees our needs. If we knew that Jesus, the powerful Son of God, was in the very next room, and that He was praying for us—that would give us new courage to endure the storms of life, and to press on in His service. That is what the Bible says He is doing. This event described in the latter part of Matthew 14, is far more than the story of what Jesus once did in a storm in far off Palestine. This is a symbol of what Jesus can always do for His people, when the wind is contrary.

11. THE DISCIPLES ARE INSTRUCTED BY JESUS

Matthew 15:1-17:27

Another delegation of Pharisees came to Jesus and debated the matter of disregard for oral traditions and rituals. In light of the opposition, there were some things Jesus still wanted to teach the twelve disciples. In Matthew 15 and the early part of chapter 16 we see Jesus instructing the disciples about consistency, compassion, and protection from the inroads of false teachings. Jesus instructed the disciples to prepare them for the road that lay ahead.

1. Concerning Man-made Traditions (15:1-20)

The scribes and Pharisees had high regard for "the tradition of the elders." These were interpretations of the Law which they claimed Moses had given to their forefathers; they were later written down in a book called the Mishnah. The Mishnah was a commentary on the Old Testament Law which was respected *more* by the Jewish theologians than the Scriptures themselves were.

(15:1-9) Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, "Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." He answered and said to them, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God—then he need not honor his father or mother.' Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'"

In verse 1 we learn that some scribes and Pharisees came all the way from Jerusalem, up to Galilee, to speak with Jesus. Actually, they were trying to find ways to hinder Jesus' ministry and to turn the people against Him.

The accusation about washing hands (verse 2b) had nothing to do with cleanliness. It was a reference to the ceremonial washings practiced by the Pharisees. The Jewish elders claimed that a ceremony of washing hands was necessary before each meal to remove the defilement acquired through contact with Gentiles. All non-Jews were considered unclean. The ceremony was required after coming in from the market place (Mark 7:4).

Water jars were kept ready at meal time. The water was first poured on both hands as they were held with the fingers pointed upwards. The process was repeated then with the hands held down in the opposite direction. And then finally—each hand was cleansed by rubbing it with the fist of the other hand. It was simply a ceremony; it was not actually a scrubbing of the hands. This ceremony was important to the scribes and Pharisees. One rabbi said

that it would be better to walk four miles out of the way to get water, than to eat with unwashed hands.

Jesus did not criticize their ceremony of washing hands, but He did go on to call attention to one of their traditions which actually had the effect of nullifying a clear command of God in the Old Testament (verses 3-6).

Suppose a man had a father or mother in poverty and in need, and suppose that poor aged parent came to the son with a request for help. The Pharisees had a strange tradition. They devised a way by which the son could avoid helping his parents. He could officially dedicate all his money and all his property to God and to the Temple; his property would then be "a gift to God" (verse 5b), or "Corban" (Mark 7:11), meaning "God dedicated." He could then say to his parents, "I'm sorry, mother and dad, but I can't give you anything, because all my belongings are dedicated to God."

It seemed like a worthy tradition, giving money to the Lord's work, but this practice was a man-made regulation which caused a person to directly violate a clear law of God. God had said, "Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12), and the word "honor" carries with it the concept of rendering help to our parents. But this particular tradition of the Pharisees made the law of God of no effect. They had devised a way *to get around God's law* found in Exodus 20.

A man-made rule must not contradict, but must support, God's broader principles. When the early church made the rule that a chariot-driver (a race-car driver) could not be received into the fellowship of the church, that rule supported God's law. God's principle is to do violence to no man—and so the practice of frowning on race-car driving is a valid rule.

But any man-made rule⁷⁴ in the church which contradicts God's law, is a wickedness which God hates, and in (verses 7-9), Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13 to declare that the Pharisees were paying mere lip-service to God, and were not rendering Him proper obedience. They were just going through the motions outwardly.

(15:10-20) When He had called the multitude to Himself, He said to them, "Hear and understand: Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man." Then His disciples came and said to Him, "Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" But He answered and said, "Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch." Then Peter answered and said to Him, "Explain this parable to us." So Jesus said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile

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The early Anabaptist leader, Pieter Pietersz, says, "Where there is no word or command of God, there no Christian has authority to make a commandment, nor to place it upon another" (Cornelius J. Dyck, *Spiritual Life in Anabaptism*, page 266). On the other hand, to establish guidelines that help God's people carry out a New Testament *principle* is valid.

a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man."

Verses 10-11 tell how Jesus then turned to the multitude and boldly declared that sin comes from the heart, not from the diet. It is not what goes into the mouth, but what comes out of the mouth that defiles a person.⁷⁵

The Pharisees were offended at Jesus' statement (verse 12). They knew His words were directed against them. But Jesus did not back off. He said they were like weeds, like a "plant" (verse 13) that needed to be rooted up, and that those who followed their teaching were headed for the ditch (verse 14).

In verse 15, Peter asked Jesus for a further explanation of the parable given in verse 11. And then in verses 16-20, Jesus patiently *explained the lesson again*. In essence, Jesus said, "What goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and then is eliminated from the body. But what comes out of the mouth, proceeds there from the heart, and it is the heart that gives rise to sinful words and deeds."

In other words, a person is not defiled by eating with unwashed hands, but he is defiled by the evil thoughts and deeds and words that come out of his unclean heart. What we need in order to get right with God is a new heart—a broken and contrite spirit. True religion is a matter of inward transformation which develops into a beautiful inner character, and then strives carefully to avoid inconsistencies.

In the first twenty verses of Matthew 15 we learn several lessons: 1) We must beware of any religious system which finds ways to disobey God's Word. 2) We must guard against worship that comes from the lips only, and not from the heart. 3) We must be aware of the black catalog of evils which are contained in the unregenerate human heart. These include "evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, [and] blasphemies" (verse19). Apart from the grace of God, any one of us has the potential for committing any of these sins.

2. Concerning Ministry to Gentiles (15:21-39)

After the events described in the first part of Matthew 15, Jesus walked some thirty miles beyond the borders of Palestine into the vicinity of Tyre and Sidon, It was there that a Gentile woman, a Canaanite, came to Jesus and begged Him to deliver her daughter from demon-possession (verse 22). Some of the early church leaders said her name was "Justa," and her daughter was named "Berneice."

(15:21-28) Then Jesus went out from there and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed." But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she cries out after us." But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" But He

⁷⁵ The pollution in our lives comes not from eating food without ceremonially washed hands, but from speaking ungodly words that come from unsanctified hearts. When one's heart has not been changed, then the words that come out of the mouth reveal the inner corruption.

answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." And she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

The Canaanite woman must have heard somehow about the wonderful things which Jesus could do, and she followed Him and His disciples, crying desperately for help (verse 22). At first, it seems that Jesus ignored her (verse 23). The text says that "He answered her not a word." But she persisted until the disciples got tired of it, and they asked Him to send her away. In essence they were saying, "Heal her daughter and get rid of her."

Jesus explained (in verse 24) that His mission was only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But at the end of verse 25, her simple prayer was, "Lord, help me!" She kept on asking Jesus to help her. We cannot help but admire her persistence.

In verse 26 Jesus tested her faith further. He said that it is not proper to take the children's bread and cast it to dogs. On the surface, Jesus' reply seems to be insulting. He was referring to the Jews as "children" and to the Gentiles as "dogs." But His statement was not as harsh as it might sound to our ears. Jesus used a special word for "dogs" which means "small, friendly, pet dogs," not the wild, fierce, vicious scavengers that roamed the streets of the cities. Many of the Jewish leaders looked at Gentiles as "dogs"—the wild scavenging kind that roamed the streets. Jesus did not refer to the Canaanite woman as a dangerous scavenging dog, but to a little begging puppy dog that seeks scraps from under the table at meal time.

The Canaanite woman responded with a willingness to accept the position of a dog. She did not claim to be one of the children; all she asked for was some crumbs that fell from the table. She was persistent (verse 25), humble (verse 27), and manifested genuine faith (verse 28). She accepted Jesus on His terms, and that is a mark of true faith. No wonder Jesus answered, "O woman, great is your faith!" (verse 28), and immediately He healed her daughter.

There are a number of lessons to be learned from this incident, but one of them is outstanding: At no place in Scripture do we ever see Jesus, during His earthly ministry, ultimately refusing an earnest, humble, sincere, persistent appeal for help.

(15:29-31) Jesus departed from there, skirted the Sea of Galilee, and went up on the mountain and sat down there. Then great multitudes came to Him, having with them the lame, blind, mute, maimed, and many others; and they laid them down at Jesus' feet, and He healed them. So the multitude marveled when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed made whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel.

We do not know how long Jesus stayed in the region of Tyre and Sidon, but He later returned to the neighborhood of the Sea of Galilee—to the area known as Decapolis, another Gentile region. It was composed of ten cities east of the Sea of Galilee.

The word is *kunariov* which signifies a house dog in contrast to a dog of the streets. The word is used only here and in Mark's parallel account.

When the news spread that Jesus was in the area of Decapolis, many people who were afflicted with handicaps of various kinds were brought, and placed in front of Him for healing (verse 30). Jesus had compassion on them and healed them (verse 31). Those who had not been able to say a word now were talking with excitement. Those with missing arms and legs, now had new limbs. Those who had been crippled and lame, now were walking and leaping with amazement. Those who had been blind were able to see. The healing aroused wonder and amazement in the minds of the people, and caused them to glorify God (verse 31b).

(15:32-39) Now Jesus called His disciples to Himself and said, "I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now continued with Me three days and have nothing to eat. And I do not want to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way." Then His disciples said to Him, "Where could we get enough bread in the wilderness to fill such a great multitude?" Jesus said to them, "How many loaves do you have?" And they said, "Seven, and a few little fish." So He commanded the multitude to sit down on the ground. And He took the seven loaves and the fish and gave thanks, broke them and gave them to His disciples; and the disciples gave to the multitude. So they all ate and were filled, and they took up seven large baskets full of the fragments that were left. Now those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children. And He sent away the multitude, got into the boat, and came to the region of Magdala.

In this passage we read about the crowd of 4,000 men who had been gathered for three days. They had used up their supplies of food. And so Jesus performed another miracle. He multiplied seven small loaves and a few little fish, so that the entire crowd of well over 4,000 people was filled (verse 37). And when they gathered up the fragments, they had seven large basketsful.

The feeding of the 5,000 was in *Jewish* territory. The feeding of the 4,000 was in *Gentile* territory. This miracle demonstrated to the disciples that the Lord's blessing is intended to fall not only on Israel, but also on the Gentiles. Following the miracle, Jesus dismissed the people and took a boat and passed over to Magdala on the other side of the Sea of Galilee (verse 39).

3. About Leaven of Pharisees and Sadducees (16:1-12)

When Jesus reached the other side of the Sea of Galilee, He received another request for a sign. Some of the Pharisees and Sadducees approached Him. They normally were enemies of each other, but they agreed to work together at least for a while in order to try and trap Jesus.

(16:1-4) Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven. 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, 'It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." And He left them and departed.

Verse 1 indicates their demand. They wanted Jesus to produce a sensational sign immediately on the spot. Jesus could have done it, but He knew that their purpose was

insincere, and that they wanted to trap Him—and so He denounced their hypocritical attitudes.

In verses 2 and 3, Jesus chastened them for not being able to interpret the spiritual signs of the times. The Pharisees knew about history, and some of the laws related to the weather, but they were totally ignorant about spiritual matters. Surely they should have sensed that God was at work when Jesus fed the 5,000, and when they saw Him healing the sick and giving sight to the blind. Their *unbelief* was not due to lack of evidence, but to deadness of heart.

Jesus said that no further sign would be given beyond the many miracles which had already been presented, except for "the sign of the prophet Jonah" (verse 4). The "sign of the prophet Jonah" is not explained here with much detail, 77 but suffice it to say that Jonah's experience in the belly of the fish was a picture of the death and resurrection of Christ, as we saw in Matthew 12:38-40. Jesus had in mind the resurrection, which was the greatest of all signs.

(16:5-12) Now when His disciples had come to the other side, they had forgotten to take bread. Then Jesus said to them, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees." And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "It is because we have taken no bread." But Jesus, being aware of it, said to them, "O you of little faith, why do you reason among yourselves because you have brought no bread? Do you not yet understand, or remember the five loaves of the five thousand and how many baskets you took up? Nor the seven loaves of the four thousand and how many large baskets you took up? How is it you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? —but to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

In verses 5-7, Jesus told the disciples to "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." The disciples first thought that Jesus was rebuking them because they forgot to bring food. They did not understand what Jesus meant; they thought He was warning them against accepting bread from these false leaders. Instead, Jesus was rebuking the disciples for their lack of spiritual insight (verse 11). But *the food* was not the issue. It was *the doctrine* of the Pharisees and Sadducees that Jesus had in mind.

What was *the doctrine of the Pharisees*? The Pharisees saw religion in terms of outward ritual,⁷⁸ and said little about the state of a person's heart. What was *the doctrine of the Sadducees*? The Sadducees were deeply involved in worldly materialism, and looked at *political action* as the solution to human problems.

The teachings of both these groups were like yeast (leaven) penetrating the nation and

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For an exposition of the *sign of the prophet Jonah*, see pages 153-154 of this book, where Matthew 12:38-42 is explained and applied.

The early Brethren commentator, L. W. Teeter, says, "The scribes and Pharisees were spiritually blind. They did not comprehend the spiritual or inner man. Their traditions related to outward cleansing only. Hence, in their efforts to keep the outward man pure, they became defiled inwardly" (*The New Testament Commentary*, page 66).

corrupting the minds of the people. Verse 12 says that the disciples finally understood what Jesus was telling them.

Like these early followers of Jesus, we, too, must guard against the corrupting influences of dangerous false teachings. One such teaching is the belief that God's love will not tolerate punishment in Hell. Another is the emphasis which implies that keeping outward forms is the essence of Christianity. Another is the concept that if you give ten percent of your earnings to the Lord, the rest is yours to do with as you please. Another dangerous teaching is the idea that the solution to the world's problems lies in political involvement. Those are all subtle false teachings, and we must beware of getting caught up in them.

4. About the Building of the Church (16:13-23)

Jesus took His disciples into the region of Caesarea Philippi at the foot of Mt. Hermon, located about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. There He tested them to see if they comprehended who He really was. For nearly three years now He had revealed himself as the Messiah—by the example of His life, by the display of miracles, and by His teaching.

(16:13-20) When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ.

In this passage, Jesus asked His disciples two questions. The first is found in verse 13: "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" The answer (in verse 14) reveals that some thought Jesus was *John the Baptist* (because He preached repentance like John did). Some thought Jesus was *Elijah* (because He performed miracles like Elijah did). Some thought Jesus was *Jeremiah* (because He melted in tears when He wept over Jerusalem like Jeremiah did).

Without responding, Jesus went on and asked the second question (recorded in verse 15): "But who do you say that I am?" The important thing is not what others say, but what do you and I personally say about Jesus? Jesus asks every person, "You—what do you think of Me?" We must all answer that question with complete honesty.

Peter had the correct response. He said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (verse 16). Peter often said the wrong things—but not this time! Peter's answer was not some carnal human invention, but a truth which came from God. A right confession about Jesus is essential to eternal life. Romans 10:9 says that if we confess with our mouths the Lord Jesus, and believe in our hearts that God has raised Him from the dead, we shall be saved.

In verse 17, Peter's old name (Simon Bar-Jonah) was mentioned to bring out the distinction between what he was by nature, and what he had become by God's grace. "Simon Bar-Jonah" (the fluttering son of a dove), had now become "Peter" (a sturdy, solid rock). And beginning at verse 18, Jesus proceeded to reveal some further truth to Peter. In essence, Jesus said, "From now on, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church." ⁷⁹

When Jesus said, "On this rock I will build My church," He was not referring to Peter as the foundation rock of the church, but to Himself (the true Messiah, and the Son of God)—as Peter had just confessed Him to be. One teacher describes the statement in verse 18 this way: Jesus pointed to Peter, and said, "You are Peter," and then pointed to Himself, and said, "On this rock I will build My church."

The latter part of verse 18 contains a great promise, "and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." The church is built upon the Son of God, and therefore it can endure all the attacks of Satan. The "gates of Hades" symbolize the organized powers of the enemies of Christ. The sentence either says that the church can endure all the attacks which those organized powers can bring upon it—or, that those powers will not be strong enough to withstand the assaults of the church upon them. The Head of the church (the Lord Jesus), is stronger than Satan, who is the master of this present world.

The church may be small, it may be feeble, it may be ridiculed, it may be opposed, it may have lots of enemies—but the true church is safe! "The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." Nations may rise and fall. Great leaders shine for a while and then sink into the background. Great causes eventually tend to fall by the wayside. But Christ and His church will live on!

The "keys of the kingdom of heaven" (verse 19) were promised to the Apostle Peter. A "key" is a device used to open doors, and Peter was given the privilege of opening "the door of faith" to the Jews at Pentecost (in Acts 2), and to the Gentile household of Cornelius (in Acts 10). The binding and loosing (verse 19) will be studied in Matthew 18.

The charge not to tell anybody that He was the Christ (verse 20), was given to the disciples because Jesus knew that the people were still expecting a political Messiah, and they would not understand the truth He had just stated about the church. But Christians are a part of Christ's body; they have pledged to attend the services of the church, to pray for its members, to obey its laws, to protect its name, to reverence its building, to honor its officers, and to give to its support. We seek not to injure Christ's body, the church.

(16:21-23) From that time Jesus began to show to 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 the third day. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the

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Some think that "this rock" refers to Peter; others think that it is a reference to Christ; and some think it refers to Peter's confession. From the rest of the Scriptures, it is clear that *Jesus Christ* is the foundation rock upon which the church is built. The Old Testament prophets said so (Isaiah 28:16). Jesus himself said so (Matthew 21:42). Peter and the other apostles said so (Acts 4:10-12).

things of men."

Jesus had just clarified who He was, and now He clarifies further what He had come to do. Jesus had earlier given hints about His coming death (in Matthew 9:15 and 12:40), but these were given in a more veiled language. Now He plainly says that He will suffer and die, and that He will be raised from the dead (verse 21b).

Very few Jews really expected a suffering Messiah. They looked for a victorious Conqueror who would get the shackles of Rome off their backs, and so Peter rebuked Jesus, urging Him not to go to Jerusalem and die (verse 22). Peter meant well. He wanted Jesus to be enthroned and honored, not humiliated and put to death.

Jesus rebuked Peter (verse 23), and said in essence, "If you are urging Me to shrink back from death, you are taking sides with the devil's plan." Satan's desire was to keep Christ from the Cross. Satan is the enemy of God, and he did his best to obstruct God's plan for sending Christ to the cross to provide salvation for the human family.

5. Concerning the Cost of Discipleship (16:24-28)

Jesus teaches in this section the basic principles of discipleship. To be a good disciple of Jesus, one must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow the Lord Jesus.

(16:24-28) Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."

To *deny* ourselves means to obliterate self as the dominant principle of life. We often speak of self-denial as doing without something, or giving up something, but true self-denial is much deeper. To *deny self* is to confess with the Apostle Paul as recorded in Romans 7:18, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells." To deny self is to completely disown the sinful, rebellious self which lies at the center of each human heart.

The first of the beatitudes which Jesus taught is to be "poor in spirit"—that is, to sense utter poverty regarding our own goodness and worth and merit. ⁸⁰ Persons who are growing in grace continue to form a lower and lower estimate of themselves. As we grow in the graces of the Spirit, we have a deepening realization of our own nothingness, and an increasing recognition that we are not really worthy of God's mercies. To "deny self" means death to the attitude which says, "I want what I want when I want it, and I am upset if someone stands in the way."

To "take up his cross" means to accept the reproach one must bear because he has taken sides with Jesus. Taking up one's cross is willingness to endure embarrassment, shame,

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The philosophy of the world promoted by secular psychologists, says, "Love yourself, accept yourself, feel good about yourself." Jesus says, "Deny yourself—push away inclinations toward exalting yourself."

rejection, persecution, and even martyrdom—if necessary for the sake of our Lord Jesus. To take up one's cross is to be willing to start out on a death march! The extent of ridicule and suffering varies from time to time and place to place and century to century, but we must not be surprised at "the fiery trial" which may come upon us (1 Peter 4:12-14) because of our stand for Christ.

Some say, "My cross is the sick child for whom I must care." But that is not a cross; that is a responsibility. The "cross" is not a reference to common trials and hardships that we face in life; it is not having an unsaved husband, a nagging wife, or a domineering mother-in-law. One's "cross" is not a physical handicap or an incurable disease. The "cross" represents the suffering which is ours because of our relationship to Christ. It is the reproach we experience because we are children of God, and because we are seeking to live for Him. To "take up one's cross" speaks of the stigma we bear because we have taken sides with Jesus.

The words "and follow Me" mean that we are to practice attitudes and actions which reflect the ways of Christ. It means that we seek to render perfect obedience to Christ. Sometimes as children, we played the game called "Follow the leader." Whatever the leader did—no matter how difficult or how ridiculous it was—we had to copy what the lead person did. The Christian life is a constant following of Jesus, copying the One who is our Leader.

In verse 25, the words "whoever desires to save his life will lose it" refer to the reproach that accompanies living for Christ.⁸¹ Figuratively, if *living* becomes a selfish thing, constantly searching for ease and comfort and material things, we lose all that makes life worthwhile. If we live for self and the things of this world—in the end we are losers. If we die to self and live for God—in the end we are winners.

The Christian life is glorious and wonderful. It is hard to imagine how miserable, how lost, and how hopeless we would be if we were not Christians. But the Christian life is not a bed of roses! The Christian life is a constant battle. The flesh must be crucified, the devil must be resisted, and the world must be overcome daily. It is not an easy thing to live the Christian life as it ought to be lived. No one can sleep his way to Heaven.

In verse 26, Jesus reminds us of the worst bargain a person can ever make: "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" A person can gain all the wealth of the world, all the fame of the world, and all the power and pleasures which the world has to offer—but if in doing so, he loses his soul, he has made a tremendously bad bargain.

In verse 27, Jesus speaks of His second coming, and then says, "He will reward each according to his works." I cannot comprehend all that is included in that statement, but I pray that the Holy Spirit will help each of us to constantly keep in mind that great Day when our works will be judged by Almighty God. Apparently there will be degrees of reward for

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Brethren commentator L. W. Teeter has an incisive comment. "He who refuses to accept the doctrine of Christ through fear of persecution, thinking he will save his natural life, shall lose all life. He who loses the life of his body in trying to serve Christ shall save his soul, and in the resurrection recover his body" (*The New Testament Commentary*, page 46).

believers, and degrees of punishment for those who reject Christ. The final verse of Matthew 16 is a promise that some of the disciples would get a sneak preview of Christ's majesty at the time when He is transfigured (verse 28).

6. Concerning Christ's Future Glory (17:1-13)

There were many great hours in the life of Jesus. It was a great hour, when at the age of twelve, Jesus was able to confound the religious leaders in the Temple. It was a great hour when Jesus was baptized, and the voice of God said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." It was a great hour when Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount. It was a great hour when He fed more than 5,000 hungry people. But one of the greatest hours of all was the time of the Transfiguration. Jesus stood on a high mountain and was transformed like a brilliant light. Moses and Elijah came down to talk with Him about His death—and once again God voiced His approval of Jesus.

(17:1-9) Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. But Jesus came and touched them and said, "Arise, and do not be afraid." When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead."

Three of the twelve disciples (Peter, James, and John) were especially close to Jesus, and one day Jesus took this inner circle of disciples with Him to the top of a high mountain, and as He stood before them, a miracle happened. Jesus was transfigured and no longer appeared as a mere human being. The disciples received a glimpse of His eternal glory and saw Him now as the glorious God that He really is.

The word "transfigured" (*metamorphoo*) means "to change in form or appearance." Jesus' face shone like the sun. His clothes became as white as light. This was especially brilliant because it is implied in Luke's account that the Transfiguration occurred at night time. The eyes of the disciples were heavy with sleep (Luke 9:32).

There on the mountaintop, the three disciples received a preview of Christ in His glorified heavenly body, and verse 3 says that "Moses and Elijah appeared to them." We are not sure about the significance of all this, but there were three categories of people represented on the mountain. Moses and Elijah represented the past; Peter, James, and John represented the present; and Jesus and God the Father represented the eternal future.

The fact that the three disciples recognized Moses and Elijah is a strong indication that we shall know one another in heaven.⁸² God will give to us the same spiritual intuition which

One by one our loved ones are leaving us. We bury their bodies in the ground. We watch their caskets

He gave to Peter, James, and John on that night many years ago. Moses had been dead and buried almost 1500 years. Elijah had been translated 900 years before the events of Matthew 17. Yet, here they were, alive! The disciples saw them and heard them speak.

When Moses and Elijah were about to leave (according to Luke 9:33), Peter attempted to prolong their visit by suggesting that they build some tents, and stay on the mountaintop for a while longer (verse 4). Peter said, "Lord, it is good for us to be here." On the mountain, they were far above the temptations and tensions and troubles of this world, and so Peter wanted to stay there. The company was delightful; the glory was wonderful; the surroundings were peaceful; so why go back to the valley below?

While Peter was still speaking, the Shekinah Glory of God (the "cloud" which had hovered over Israel in the Wilderness), cast a shadow over them, and the voice of God the Father interrupted him. The Lord spoke the same words of approval which He had spoken when Jesus was baptized. God said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!"

Matthew tells how the disciples were overwhelmed by the vision and awed by the voice, and fell on their faces—but Jesus tenderly touched them, and encouraged them to stop being afraid (verses 6-7). And then when the disciples looked up, the heavenly visitors were gone. Jesus had resumed His normal appearance, the cloud had disappeared, and they "saw no one but Jesus only" (verse 8). Christ's admonition to tell no one about this event until after His resurrection was likely intended to protect their privacy from curious crowds until the proper time (verse 9). After our Lord's resurrection, and at the time of His ascension, the disciples then were commanded to go everywhere, preaching the resurrected Christ (Matthew 28:19-20).

What the disciples saw when Jesus was Transfigured was embedded in their memories for a long time. Peter referred to it many years later (2 Peter 1:16-18). The Apostle John spoke of the experience long afterward, recorded in John 1:14. John says, "And we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father."

(17:10-13) And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist.

The mention of Elijah's coming (verses 10-13) was precipitated by the fact that Elijah had just appeared to them on the Mount of Transfiguration. Without going into lots of theological detail, we note three facts named in these verses: 1) Elijah is coming to restore things (Malachi 4:5-6), and this is affirmed by Jesus (verse 11). 2) Elijah came, unrecognized in the person of John the Baptist, and was killed (verse 12). 3) The Son of man faces a like fate (verse 12b).

being lowered into the earth. Shall we ever see them again? Are we to sorrow as others who have no hope? In the biblical account of the Transfiguration, we have strong evidence that the dead will rise again, and that we will recognize those who have gone before.

The disciples seemed to grasp the truth that Elijah was a representation of John the Baptist,⁸³ but they were still blind to the fact that Jesus (the long-looked-for Messiah) must also die. They understood about John the Baptist, but they didn't seem to understand about the Messiah.

What the three disciples saw on the Mount of Transfiguration, all of God's people will see when Christ reigns in His glorious kingdom here on earth. The Transfiguration was a foretaste of that day when the Son of God is going to come "in the glory of His Father with His angels," as we noted in Matthew 16:27-28.

7. About Healing an Epileptic Boy (17:14-21)

The healing of the epileptic boy is a reminder to all of us that while it is nice on occasion to have mountain-top experiences—at the same time multitudes are in the valley of human need. We are told here about a father who brought his sick boy to the nine disciples, begging them to deliver his son from the grip of the demon that was causing the epileptic fits—but they could not cure him.

(17:14-21) And when they had come to the multitude, a man came to Him, kneeling down to Him and saying, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and suffers severely; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. So I brought him to Your disciples, but they could not cure him." Then Jesus answered and said, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him here to Me." And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him; and the child was cured from that very hour. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" So Jesus said to them, "Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."

The word translated "epileptic" (Greek, *seleniazo*) literally means "moonstruck." People in earlier times thought that epilepsy was sometimes caused by moonlight.⁸⁴ Jesus quickly healed the boy (verse 18), expressed concern about the spiritual poverty of the disciples (verse 17), and then declared that faith as a grain of mustard seed is what it takes to move mountains (verse 20).

When Jesus spoke of "faith as a mustard seed," He was talking about removing mountains of real difficulty, especially problems related to getting along well with other people. Luke's account (in Luke 17:6) places the "faith as a mustard seed" statement in the setting of forgiving others. Real faith is the kind of faith that says, "I am going to trust God to give me the grace and humility to forgive time after time after time." Such faith removes the

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The *disciples* understood that Elijah was represented by John the Baptist, but the *scribes* did not understand that, and were likely saying, "How can He be the Messiah, when Elijah (who was to precede the Messiah) is not yet come?"

Leon Morris reminds readers that most Bible students believe the word used here refers to epilepsy, because "in antiquity epileptics were thought to be 'moonstruck,'" (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, page 446). Psalm 121:6 is a related reference: "The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night."

mountains of conflict that often arise between persons. The promise in verse 20b most likely has not so much to do with moving trees and getting rid of piles of dirt, as it does with removing mountains of hostility by learning to forgive.

In verse 21, Jesus says that calling on God to cast out demons and to cure illnesses, requires prayer and fasting. Fasting and prayer go together. One of the purposes for not eating food is to let the hunger pangs be like a bell, which serves as a reminder that we are to pray. Fasting is not mentioned as often as prayer, but when there are intense matters of deep concern—we should be so burdened by the need that we decide to miss a meal or two, and spend additional time in prayer. Fasting is not actually commanded in the New Testament, but it is assumed to be an activity practiced by God's people (Matthew 6:16-18).

8. About Payment of the Temple Tax (17:22-27)

Jesus made a brief statement again about His soon coming death. And then those who collected tribute money for the Temple, came to Peter and asked whether Jesus and His disciples paid the Temple tax.

(17:22-23) Now while they were staying in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him, and the third day He will be raised up." And they were exceedingly sorrowful.

Jesus makes it plain that evil men "will kill Him." He will be facing the end of His life here on earth. But His death will not be the end of the matter, for on "the third day He will be raised up." The passive voice indicates that God the Father will be involved in the action of resurrection. The resurrection is a doctrine lying at the heart of our faith.

(17:24-27) When they had come to Capernaum, those who received the temple tax came to Peter and said, "Does your Teacher not pay the temple tax?" He said, "Yes." And when he had come into the house, Jesus anticipated him, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?" Peter said to Him, "From strangers." Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free. Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money; take that and give it to them for Me and you."

The tax mentioned in this passage was not the tax paid to Rome to help support the emperor. Instead, it was the money spoken of in Exodus 30:11-16, which was a uniform tax levied on all Israelites from age twenty on up—a yearly assessment to pay for the operation of the Jewish Temple. This money went to the Jewish leaders. It was expensive to buy lambs for the daily morning and evening sacrifices, to pay for the incense which was burned on the altar, and to buy the robes which were worn by the Jewish priests.

In verses 25 and 26, Jesus explains that He should be free from paying the Temple assessment, just as a king and his children were free from paying the taxes levied by the civil government. With few exceptions, ancient governments had all the power centered in one individual (the king), and he and his family did not pay taxes. Jesus said in essence, "Since God is the ruler of the universe, and I am the Son of God, I really should not have to pay," but, "lest we offend them," we will pay the assessment (verse 27a). Then Jesus

performed a miracle to provide the money to pay the tax for Peter and Him.

Jesus one time said the corrupt teachers who operated the Temple were operating like a "den of thieves"—but for the sake of a consistent and gracious testimony, He paid the assessment. Thus, He supported the administrative expenses for operating the Jewish Temple, even though He was dissatisfied with the way it operated. This is one reason why we should be willing to give to some ministries with which we may not totally agree. If, in the long run, they are reaching people with the Good News—people who would not otherwise hear it—they may well be worthy of our support.

One additional lesson from Matthew 17:24-27 is this: *Jesus helps us to meet every need*. As we read the Gospel accounts, we learn, for example, that Jesus did much for Peter: He healed Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1:29-34); He helped Peter to catch fish (Luke 5:1-11); He enabled Peter to walk on water (Matthew 14:28-29); He healed an ear which Peter had cut off (Matthew 26:47-56), and He delivered Peter from prison (Acts 12:1-19).

No wonder Peter wrote in later years, "Casting all your care upon Him, for he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). As we look back over life's experiences, we know that He did a lot for us too, and we choose not to disappoint Him by careless and disobedient living.

12. HUMILITY AND FORGIVENESS

Matthew 18:1-35

Matthew 18 centers on those immature, imperfect, childlike qualities that believers sometimes demonstrate as they develop further into the stature of the fullness of Christ. Jesus' disciples wanted to know who would be the greatest in Christ's kingdom, and Jesus responded by using a small child as an object lesson. He told the disciples that in order to enter Heaven, we must be converted and become as little children.

The Bible uses a number of words to identify the people of God, but the word used most often is "children." We are called children of promise, children of the day, children of light, beloved children, dear children, and children of God. Believers in Christ are spiritual *children*, with all the weaknesses that childhood generally implies.

1. The Marks of Childlikeness (18:1-10)

The disciples were discussing who should be the greatest when Jesus sets up His kingdom. In Mark 9:33, Jesus said to them, "What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?" Mark 9:34 says, "They kept silent." And then apparently one of the disciples broke the silence and asked the question stated in Matthew 18:1, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

(18:1-10) At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes! If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire. Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven."

Jesus calls a small child and teaches a much-needed lesson on humility (verse 2). Some think that Peter asked the question, because he was quick to speak, and they were in his home town.⁸⁵

Jewish tradition says that it was Peter's small son that Jesus took and placed in the midst of them. His name according to Jewish oral tradition was Ignatius. He later became a noted writer, and was finally martyred

Jesus says that in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, one must be converted, and must become as a little child (verse 3). The word "converted" means "to turn in the opposite direction." We used to walk away from God; now we honestly seek to follow the instructions of His Word. The phrase "and become as little children" is the opposite of what we usually advise. We are in the habit of calling upon little children to follow the example of those who are older. Jesus did the opposite. He *did not say* to the little child, "Look at Peter; see what a fine fisherman he is; I hope that someday you'll grow up and become like Peter." Instead of pointing to a child and saying, "You ought to become like these older people," Jesus pointed to older people and said, "You must become like that child."

What are some of the characteristics of small children?⁸⁶ These qualities may not be found in every child, but there are some characteristics associated with childhood:

- 1) A trusting spirit—the child instinctively trusts his parents and believes that his needs will be met. When children set out with their parents on a trip, they have no means of paying the fare, no idea how to get to their destination, yet they believe they shall arrive safely.
- 2) Eagerness to learn—most younger children are fascinated with new ideas; they love to learn new facts and to share their knowledge with others.
- 3) Quickness to forgive and forget—small children get into quarrels and squabbles, but minutes later, they play together as if nothing happened. Even if parents treat them unjustly, small children are quick to forgive and forget.

Jesus says that these childlike qualities constitute greatness (verse 4). These attitudes are a pattern for us to follow in our walk with God.

The word "receives" (verse 5) means "to love" or "to treat with kindness." It can be a wearing job to satisfy the needs of a child—to wash clothes, bind up injuries, cook meals, and exercise proper discipline—but it should be done with love and patience.

The phrase "one of these little ones" (verse 6) refers to the small child, but Jesus now begins to blend the concept of the small child with that of a new believer. He uses the child to represent newly converted people who need a lot of patient instruction and good example.

In verses 6-10, Jesus speaks about the seriousness of causing others to stumble. It is bad to sin, but it is even worse to cause another to sin. We can allure others into sin by false teaching, but perhaps most of all by wrong example. If we are critical of the church, permissive regarding sexual morality, or insensitive to the needs and feelings of others—we are setting a poor example before others, and could make it easier for them to sin.

Jesus clearly says that there is a place of unspeakable misery in the world to come (verses 8-9), for those who die without repenting. Hell is an awful place; the last part of verse 8 speaks of it as "everlasting fire," and verse 9 speaks of it as "hell fire." These are the words

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for the cause of Christ.

Brethren writer, L. W. Teeter, says that small children "are humble, unselfish, free of self-exaltation, and simple in their thoughts" (*New Testament Commentary*, page 76).

of Jesus, the kindest man who ever lived.87

"Cutting off the hand" (verse 8) and "plucking out the eye" (verse 9) are statements (known as metaphors) to be taken *figuratively*. Removing a hand would not cure stealing, and removing a foot would not keep a person from going into wrong places. Removing an eye would not prevent a person from being lustful and lascivious. The lessons we are to learn are lessons of the heart: 1) The dearest objects in life, if they cause us to sin, must be cut off (laid aside). 2) We may have to part company even with a close friend, (cut off relationships), in order to avoid compromise and sin. 3) It will be worth any sacrifice (even actually cutting off a hand), to escape the punishment of God. It may not be wrong to cut off a hand; but literally cutting off a hand is not all that Jesus means by the expression.

Jesus says that even the angels become deeply offended, if we mistreat those who are new believers in Christ (verse 10). The Bible teaches that angels are very real, and that for every child, for every believer, for every heir of salvation—there are angels who minister day and night in our behalf (Hebrews 1:14). Angels protected Daniel when he spent a night in the den of lions. Angels delivered Peter when he was locked in a prison cell. And all of us are under the scrutiny of angels (Hebrews 1:13-14). We are in much closer touch with heaven than we often dream. One of the reasons we are to be a good example for little children, and for new believers in Christ—is because the angels are watching.

2. The Marks of Compassion (18:11-20)

Compassion is a sympathetic concern for the needs of others. The genuine Christian tries to understand and enter into the feelings of those who are experiencing hard places in life. A girl in high school whose mother had died, was out of school for a week. When she returned to school for the first time after her mother's death, it was a hard day. She choked back tears almost all day. Another girl (who had been a close friend of hers) was telling her mother that evening how hard it was for Jenny to come back to school again, and how she tried to comfort her. The mother said, "Ann, what did you say to Jenny?" Ann responded, "I didn't say anything; I just cried with her." That is compassion—entering into the feelings of another who is experiencing difficulty along the path of life. In this passage we see a few marks of compassion:

(18:11-14) "For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost. What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

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The Greek word translated "hell fire" here is *Gehenna*, the New Testament word used to describe the place to which unrepentant sinners go. The fires of *Gehenna* are unquenchable and the torment is unending. The place of punishment is described in verse 8 as "everlasting fire." In an age when people are looking for things bright and beautiful, it is important to remember what Jesus says about punishment for unbelievers, in such passages as Matthew 13:49-50, Matthew 25:41, and Mark 9:43-44.

1) Compassion seeks to rescue the lost from the snare of Satan (verses 11-14).

Using the illustration of the lost sheep, Jesus shows the value of each person in the eyes of God. If just one sheep goes astray (verse 12), the shepherd seeks that sheep. Oriental shepherds had small flocks, and they knew each sheep by name. And just so, God deals primarily with individuals. It is not His will that even one should perish. And thus, if we have the love of Jesus in our hearts, we will make an effort to befriend those who are lost and seek to win them for Christ. Jesus is speaking especially in this parable about trying to reclaim those who were once part of the fold, but became wayward and wandered away.

Sheep are typically foolish creatures. They aimlessly wander into all kinds of difficulty, sometimes falling into crevices and caves. Sometimes they get tangled in weeds and underbrush. And so it is with people. But Jesus has a tender compassion for those who go astray, and like a shepherd on the hillsides of Palestine, He rejoices over just one sheep who has gone astray, and is later recovered.

(18:15-20) "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

2) Compassion tries to work harmoniously with other members of the church (verses 15-20).

Jesus knew that conflicts would arise between fellow Christians; in these verses He outlines the procedure for dealing with differences that come between brothers and sisters in the church.⁸⁸ What should Christians do in those cases where another brother or sister wrongs them?

- a) We should go to visit the brother or sister *alone* and attempt to straighten out the matter privately (verse 15). Many hurt feelings among Christians could be avoided, if each of us resolved not to tell others about a wrong done to us until we first honestly and kindly have approached the offending person. It is possible that the brother or sister does not even realize that he or she caused an offense.
- b) If the offending person will not listen, then we are to take one or two others with us, and see that person again (verse 16). Sometimes the entreaty of other Christians will help the offending brother or sister see the seriousness of the conflict (which so far has not been reconciled).

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It has been common practice among the Brethren to give instructions to new applicants for church membership, by explaining the text in Matthew 18:15-18, and asking them to settle conflicts by the method prescribed here.

c) If the offending person still will not listen, then the matter is to be taken to the local church (verse 17). The church as a body should consider the problem—and if the offending brother or sister fails to hear the decision of the larger church—he or she may need to be relieved of member-ship in the local body, and treated as an unbeliever. The excommunicated brother or sister will likely for a while ridicule the action of the church. But if persons are shown love and appropriate respect, there is a strong possibility that they might be led to a penitent frame of mind later on. Surely the instruction "let him be to you like a heathen," is not a command to abandon the person (verse 17). Instead, it is a challenge to show compassion and to win the person with a love that can touch even the most hardened hearts.

In verse 18, our Lord Jesus says that the assembled church is endowed with internal administrative authority, and if a decision is made by the church, with an honest attempt to observe the standards of the Word of God, then *God has already willed* the decision which the church has made.

The word "bind" means "to retain;" the word "loose" means "to let go." The tense of these verbs is *future perfect passive*. In other words, the action taken by the gathered church on earth, after prayerfully seeking the Holy Spirit's direction, *shall have already been the action taken by the Lord* in heaven. It is no light thing to act on the membership status of individuals who comprise the congregation. It must be done prayerfully and carefully, but neither is it a light thing to be put forth from the assembly.

Verse 20 makes it clear that Christ is in the midst of the assembled body, and the decisions of the church, are in effect, the decisions of Christ. Verse 19 relates especially to prayer for wisdom in dealing with matters of discipline. We must not take verse 19 out of its context, and encourage people to believe that they can get anything they want if they simply agree to ask for it. The emphasis in verses 19-20 is simply that *one person all alone* has no right to exercise church discipline. It must be the decision of the gathered assembly of believers. One bishop or elder has no authority to decide, all by himself, who shall be retained and who shall be loosed. That must be done by the assembled body.

Lack of discipline in the church is not compassion. It is a curse to any church. It is the privilege and duty of the local body to teach New Testament principles, and to require that its members apply them in everyday living. And continued violation of God's laws, without repentance, must not be tolerated by the local assembly.

In the eyes of immature church members, such action—the process of exercising discipline and the process of binding and loosing—is considered unloving. But when painful discipline is done in a careful way, it expresses really the deepest kind of love. It helps the erring person correct his ways, and become accountable before God. It supports the integrity of the church, and lets a clear witness in the community. In Matthew 18:11-14, compassion seeks to rescue backsliders from the snare of Satan. In Matthew 18:15-20, compassion tries to work harmoniously with other members of the church.

3. The Marks of Forgiveness (18:21-35)

Beginning at verse 21, the Apostle Peter had a question about the frequency of forgiveness.

He said to Jesus, "How often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?" Forgiveness is one of the highest of human virtues, because it reflects the character of God. God has freely forgiven us, and He expects us to be quick to forgive others. Jesus taught that Christian compassion forgives over and over and over again.

(18:21-35) Then Peter came to Him and said, "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. Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."

In verses 23-35, Jesus told a parable about an unforgiving servant. There was a man who owed a king an enormous sum of money, and when the king demanded that the huge debt be paid, the servant begged for mercy. In response to the man's pleading for mercy, the king forgave his debt. But the servant who was forgiven the large sum, went out and refused to forgive another man who owed him a trifling few dollars. He went to the man who owed the trifling amount and began to choke him, and said, "Pay me what you owe!" (verse 28). The man who owed the trifle got down on his knees and begged for mercy, and promised to pay the debt, but the unforgiving servant threw him into prison "till he should pay the debt" (verse 30).

Jesus clearly condemned this spirit of unforgiveness. All of us have received boundless forgiveness from our heavenly Father. We should never be slow to forgive even the smallest infractions committed against us. There are some clear marks of true forgiveness:

1) Forgiveness should have no limits (verses 21-22). We are to forgive, not merely seven times, but 70 x 7 times. The Jewish practice was to forgive only three times. Rabbi ben-Jehuda said, "If a man commits an offense once, forgive him. If he commits an offense a second time, forgive him. If he commits an offense a third time, forgive him. The fourth time, do not forgive." This concept is based on a statement found in Amos 1:3.

In light of the Jewish practice, Peter thought that forgiving a man seven times was being generous. But Jesus says that there should be no limit to our forgiveness. We are to forgive (even the same person) over and over again. Forgiveness must be a constant attitude.

2) Forgiveness should make us generous toward those who wrong us (verses 28-30).

God has forgiven every one of us a great debt of sin, and therefore we should graciously forgive those who offend us. Ephesians 4:32 says we are to be kind and tender-hearted—and we are to forgive one another even as God has forgiven us. It is this awareness of the tremendous cost of our own forgiveness, which keeps us from acting sassy, and refusing to forgive those who mistreat us.

3) Failure to forgive others will bring terrible consequences (verses 34-35).

In Matthew 6:15, Jesus says, "If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." We can attempt to water down those words if we want, but Jesus plainly says that there will be no forgiveness for unforgiving people.

Every one of us is indebted to God. He forgives when we repent—but only if we practice forgiveness toward others. If we are holding grudges and malice and bitter feelings toward another person, we had better quickly take some steps toward making peace.

To "forgive" is not necessarily "to forget." The truly forgiving person will refuse to dwell on the offense and to keep bringing it up, but sometimes there are reminders that we cannot control. We tend to say, "Forgive and forget." That phrase is not found in the Bible. When a matter is forgiven, then we must not dwell on it—but it is possible that the scars will not soon be forgotten.

To "forgive" does not mean that we excuse the sinful offense. When we forgive another person, it does not mean that we are excusing the sin. Sin is always sin, and true love never tries to make sin anything less than what it is. But forgiveness ends the bitterness, the anger, and the resentment which usually accompanies an offense against us.

Think of all the miseries brought upon the human family because of disputes, quarrels, and lawsuits over what people call "their rights." Many conflicts could be avoided if all of us were willing to forgive.

13. GREAT QUESTIONS OF LIFE

Matthew 19:1-20:34

Almost from the beginning of His ministry, Jesus had been criticized by the Pharisees. Already in chapter 12:14 we are told that they planned to kill Jesus. Now the attacks of the enemy were growing more intense. The Pharisees raised the controversial issue of divorce and remarriage.

The Jewish leaders were filled with envy and hatred toward Jesus, and in order to trap Him, they tried to get Him to contradict the law of Moses. This, they hoped, would cause Him to fail publicly, and His own words could then be used as a weapon against Him.

Jesus left Galilee and traveled toward Jerusalem. This was only a few months before Jesus went to the cross. During the journey toward Jerusalem, Jesus continued to teach His disciples both by word and example.

1. The Issue of Divorce and Remarriage (19:1-12)

There is a war being waged against the family today. The value-systems of people all around us are dramatically changing. The leading moral influence in the typical home in the Western world is television, and more and more people in our churches are choosing to place themselves under its influence. Divorce is no longer an exception; it is becoming a routine practice. Values are changing regarding household leadership styles, child raising practices, sexual attitudes, and marital arrangements.

(19:1-9) Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these sayings, that He departed from Galilee and came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. And great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there. The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?" And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?" He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery."

Divorce among the Jews was quite common in Jesus' day. Josephus, the well known Jewish historian, was divorced. There were two views commonly held, both of which allowed for divorce under certain conditions: One group (followers of Hillel), allowed divorce for almost any reason, including keeping a dirty house or putting too much salt in the soup. The other group (followers of Shammai), allowed divorce *only when* adultery was involved. Hillel allowed remarriage for most any reason; Shammai allowed remarriage only in the

case of adultery. There were a few monastic groups such as the Essenes who insisted that divorce and remarriage was *never* right, but basically there were the two groups.

The Pharisees were trying to get Jesus to choose sides in a theological debate. They said, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?" Jesus responded to their question by referring to what God had said at the very beginning (verses 4-5). God created them male and female, and when two persons marry, "they are no longer two, but one flesh" (verse 6). The husband and wife are no longer two persons, but one person. God decreed it that way at the time of creation. And since that is true, divorce is not only unnatural; it is rebellion against God. In God's plan, marriage is to be permanent. It is to last until the death of one of the spouses. To destroy a marriage is to destroy a creation of the true and living God.

The Pharisees continued their argument by saying in essence, "Why then was divorce commanded under the Law of Moses?" (verse 7). We notice that Moses did not "command" divorce, as the Pharisees said in verse 7; he "permitted" it, as Jesus said in verse 8. Divorce was tolerated in Old Testament times only because of the stubbornness of the people. And then once again Jesus points back to God's plan "from the beginning" (verse 8).

In verse 9, Jesus says that one who "divorces his wife" and "marries another" *commits adultery*. The only exception to that clear statement is the case where "sexual immorality" is involved.⁸⁹

The real issue in *the exception phrase*, however, is the *location of the phrase* in the sentence. If Jesus had said, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, except for sexual immorality, commits adultery"—*then* the exception would apply *both* to divorce *and* to remarriage. But as it is—the exception phrase *comes after* the verb "divorces" *and modifies* the clause "whoever divorces his wife." It is obvious from the grammatical structure of the sentence, that Jesus placed the phrase in such a way that He wanted to declare that *divorce* is permissible in the case of sexual immorality, but *remarriage* is not permissible. The exception phrase modifies (and applies) *only to* the verb "divorces"—*not to* the words "marries another."

(19:10-12) His disciples said to Him, "If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better

⁸⁹ If the sexual immorality refers to "fornication" (as in the KJV)—that is, to literal sexual activity before the consummation of marriage, then the exception phrase applies to putting away a wife during the betrothal period. According to Jewish custom in New Testament times, there were three stages in courtship that led to marriage. The first stage was the promise to marry. The third stage was the contract by the actual marriage ceremony. Between the promise to marry and the actual ceremony, was a betrothal period that was very binding, and usually lasted one year—to prove that the bride was not expecting a child. The contemplation of Joseph to put away (divorce) Mary (Matthew 1:19), is a possible example of the betrothal view of the exception clause. The betrothal view says that "consummated marriages" should never be broken, but the "betrothal marriage" could be broken if fornication was involved.

See Andrew Cornes, *Divorce and Remarriage*, published by Eerdmans in 1993. Cornes has written the 528-page book to thoroughly discuss the issue of divorce, and the remarriage of divorced persons. He also has helpful chapters on how to deal pastorally with those who are divorced. It is by far the very best resource on the subject. The Matthew 19 passage is treated on pages 209-236.

not to marry." But He said to them, "All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given: For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it."

Regardless of what view one takes regarding the exception clause in verse 9—and there are three commonly held views,⁹¹ Jesus made it absolutely clear that God's plan calls for *the permanence of marriage*. The disciples of Jesus heard His words, and they understood what He meant, for in verse 10, they reasoned *that if* there were absolutely no grounds for divorce, people would be better off never to marry. If a person does not have the liberty of putting away his spouse (if she is displeasing to him, or if she is im-moral)—they said it would be better not to marry.⁹²

The disciples seemed shocked by Jesus' strict position, ⁹³ and concluded that it would be wise not to marry at all, rather than to face a lifetime with an unpleasant partner. ⁹⁴ And Jesus explained in verse 12 that it is better for some not to marry. Some are *sterile from birth*. They have some kind of physical defect, and are born without a normal sexual desire (verse 12a). Some have been *sterilized by men*. This seems strange to us in a Western civilization, but castration was commonly practiced, especially among slaves in the early Roman Empire. Such eunuchs often were servants in the royal courts of women. Some have *controlled their sexual desires* for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. That is, they forego marriage in order to devote themselves more completely to the service of God.

Jesus did not exalt celibacy as a superior way of life, but remaining unmarried has certain advantages for those who are called to places of special service in the Lord's work.

God established marriage, and so *He* has the right to control its character and to set up its laws. There is simply no place in the Bible that gives a right to remarry, except when there is a death of one of the married partners. People who love and honor God, consider the marriage bond to be sacred and binding for life. Not everyone should marry, but those who do marry, must commit themselves to each other *for life*. Happy marriages are not accidents; they are the result of commitment, understanding, love, patience, sacrifice, and

Mennonite writer, J. C. Wenger, says, "But the fact remains that nowhere in the New Testament is it explicitly stated that anyone with a companion still living is freely entitled to remarry" (*Separated unto God*, page 170).

Those views are briefly described in the comments on Matthew 5:32 in this commentary, and are found on pages 69-70.

The Anabaptist position has also been very strict—declaring that anyone who takes the vows of marriage "with the mental reservation that if the union is not perfectly happy, the divorce courts will stand ready to dissolve the union—that attitude is completely unchristian and utterly foreign to the spirit and words of Christ and His apostles" (Herald Press, *Introduction to Theology*, J. C. Wenger, page 227).

⁹⁴ Andrew Cornes says that *the surprise* of the disciples is quite incomprehensible "if Jesus was allowing remarriage after divorce for adultery. He would then be saying nothing revolutionary, but merely expressing views that were entirely in line with the well-known [Jewish] school of Shammai" (*Divorce and Remarriage*, page 221).

repeated forgiveness.

2. The Promise of Eternal Life (19:13-30)

In verses 13-15, Jesus blessed the little children. The disciples rebuked those who brought small children, but Jesus considered children to be important because they are mortal creatures destined to live either in Heaven or Hell.

(19:13-15) Then little children were brought to Him that He might put His hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven." And He laid His hands on them and departed from there.

George MacDonald, the British preacher, said that he placed no value in the Christianity of a person at whose door (or at whose garden gate), children were afraid to play. That is a valid point of view. William Barclay tells of a mother who put her small child to bed at night, and looked down into his face when he was about to go to sleep and said, "My child, have I done well today?" That mother sensed the greatness of her responsibility.

The song, "Jesus loves the little children," is based on clear biblical truth. And parents can be sure of this: In light of Jesus' compassion for children, and in light of God's respect for childhood—when small children die before they reach the age of capable decision—they go into the presence of Christ. They are under the special protection of the King of the universe.

(19:16-22) Now behold, one came and said to Him, "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" So He said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments." He said to Him, "Which ones?" Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and your mother," and, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

In verse 16, the rich young ruler wanted to know what he should do to have eternal life. His question was of supreme importance because it deals with the soul and with eternity. This man believed, as many do today, that salvation came as a result of his own efforts. In verse 17, Jesus responded by telling him to keep the commandments, and then Jesus named six of the Ten Commandments. In verse 20, the young man responded by saying, "All these things I have kept from my youth."

The interesting thing about the young man's answer is that when he said, "All these things I have kept," he said further, "What do I still lack?" Those words indicate the emptiness of his soul. He was outwardly upright, yet he felt like a hollow shell. He knew something was still lacking. He conformed to the externals of the Law, but he sensed that such outward conformity was not enough.

Jesus was quick to sense the source of this man's problem. The young man had allowed riches to become his idol, and so Jesus went right to the root of the problem, and told him

to sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. The Bible says that he went away "sorrowful, for he had great possessions" (verse 22). He was sad at the thought of giving away his material goods.⁹⁵

Jesus is not asking that all of us sell our belongings and become wandering beggars. Peter was not told to sell his fishing equipment and give the proceeds to the poor. But Jesus is asking us to surrender anything that would hinder a more complete dedication to God. If there is some sinful passion; or some worldly craving; or anger toward another person; or something that makes our prayers difficult and our moods irritable—then we must learn to say, "Lord, I will put it into your hands, and I will seek to live by your laws." Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell his possessions and give to the poor, and then come and follow Him (verse 21).

(19:23-30) Then Jesus said to His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you that 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." When His disciples heard it, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Then Peter answered and said to Him, "See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?" So Jesus said to them, "Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

This incident motivated Jesus to deliver a short message on the deceitfulness of riches (verses 23-26). Jesus said, "It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" (verse 23). In fact, He says it is easier for a camel to go through an eye of a needle, than it is for a rich man to be saved (verse 24). But in verse 26, Jesus says that rich people can be saved. It is difficult for wealthy persons to be saved because they seldom sense their personal need. A rich person can be saved in exactly the same manner as a poor person can be saved—by despairing of his own efforts, and throwing himself on God's mercy. But rich persons tend to think they can *buy* their way out of difficulty, and so they are less inclined to cast themselves upon the mercy of God.

When the disciples noticed that the rich young man refused to give up his wealth, Peter was prompted to say, "We have left all and followed You." And then he said, "What shall we have?" (verse 27). These words have a sel-fish, grasping look. Peter says, "We have done what the rich man refused to do; we have left our jobs, our homes and families; what are we going to get out of this?" Jesus did not rebuke Peter for his inferior motives, but promised rewards for faithful discipleship. Jesus promised eternal life (verse 29) to those who have left houses and family for His sake.

The "regeneration" (verse 28) refers to the restoration that will come to society and to all

The rich ruler failed to see that the inmost springs of his heart were fed by the corruption of covetousness. He wanted God, but not at the cost of his gold.

creation when Jesus comes to establish His visible kingdom on earth. It speaks of a renewal of all things. There is coming a time when righteousness will abound and peace will flourish. Jerusalem will be exalted, the animal kingdom will become tame, and creation will be restored to the beauty of the Garden of Eden.

And Jesus says that those who are saved will participate with God in exercising authority over the earth (verse 28). And in verse 29, He says that God's people will experience "a hundredfold" in this world. The reference is to peace of mind and heart, and a conscience relieved of guilt. A hundredfold is 10,000% on the investment in this world. And in addition to that, there will be a home in heaven (verse 29b). At the end of the road there will be joy in the presence of God. Surely that is one of the most beautiful promises in the Bible. Serving Jesus is not a sacrifice! It is an investment!

These are special rewards for service in Christ's kingdom. No person who serves Christ faithfully will be a loser in the long run. The little adage in verse 30, in essence says that those who approach God with simple childlike trust, will be received into the kingdom *ahead of* those who because of their wealth, prestige, education, and position are given a place of prominence now.

3. The Rewards for Faithful Service (20:1-16)

To illustrate the boundless nature of God's grace, Jesus told a parable about the manager of an estate who hired men to labor in the vineyard. Some were hired early in the morning, with the promise of the accepted wage for the day. They wanted a contract and agreed (verse 2) to work for a standard coin. Others were hired at several different intervals throughout the day. The last workers were hired at the eleventh hour (verse 6). That was 5 P.M. They had no contract and were willing to accept whatever the owner thought was right (verse 7).

(20:1-16) "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.' So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.' And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received each a denarius. And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.' But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. 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 my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?' So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."

We must keep in mind the cultural practice of the day. The men were standing in the marketplace, where they came early in the morning. They carried their tools and waited until someone came and hired them. These were not street corner idlers. These men were waiting for work. The fact that some of them stood there until 5 o'clock in the afternoon is proof of how desperately they wanted work.

The custom, in keeping with the law in Leviticus 19:13, was to pay laborers at the end of each day. And the point of this parable is that at the end of the day (about 6 P.M.), the manager began to pay those who had worked that day. He began by paying first those who were hired last (verse 8b). All laborers received the same pay, and when everybody was paid, those who had labored from early in the morning, complained. They said it was unfair to give the same amount to those who had labored only one hour, as was paid to those who labored all day. The *Living Bible* paraphrase says, "Those fellows worked only one hour, and yet you've paid them as much as those of us who worked all day in the scorching heat" (verse 12).

But the manager explained to them that he was paying them in accord with what they had agreed upon, and thus they should be satisfied. He had a right to do with his money what he deemed best. He said, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things?" (verse 15). After all, he had kept the promise he had made to each employee.

The parable is a picture of God who is the estate-owner. Believers are those who work for Him. The lesson could apply to people saved at different stages in life—youth, middle life, and later years. Our Lord's pay is not based on what we deserve; it is a gift of His bountiful favor. This is a parable about God's grace. Our Lord is generous and gracious, and He has given all of us better than we deserve. And as the Giver of eternal life, He has the right to give it in whatever proportions and at whatever times He pleases. God has the right to determine the conditions of salvation.

The thief, for example, who repented only during his dying moments on the cross (Luke 23:40-43) will be in Heaven, as well as those persons who served the Lord faithfully for many years. Should we resent God's grace which was extended to the thief in his dying moments? Should we be jealous of what God has given to another person? Shall we be envious because He may not require as much of some as He does of others? It is only God's grace, His tremendous favor, that has saved us—and if He chooses to save others who served Him for less time and perhaps with less dedication—that is up to Him. God is sovereign, and He will mete out rewards according to what He knows is best. If God had given us what we deserved, we would be destined for Hell, instead of headed for Heaven. So why should we be envious of the blessings others may receive?

The parable illustrates the truth that God will always do right. He will keep every promise, but He will also extend grace, and often will do more than He promised.

4. The Pathway to True Greatness (20:17-34)

In the next section of Matthew 20 Jesus predicts His death and His resurrection.

(20:17-19) Now Jesus, going up to Jerusalem, took the twelve disciples aside on the road and said to them, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed

to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again."

This is the third time Jesus mentions His coming death, and this time He goes into more detail. He would not only be killed, but the Gentiles would mock and scourge and crucify Him (verse 19). Then Jesus added the bright words of hope, "And the third day He will rise again."

(20:20-28) Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom." But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They said to Him, "We are able." So He said to them, "You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father." And when the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased 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 those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him 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."

Shortly after Jesus had made that announcement, Salome, the mother of James and John, approached the Lord Jesus to request that her sons be given the honor of sitting next to Jesus, one on either side of Him in His kingdom.

Evidently, she was an aggressive woman with big ideas for her sons. Parents naturally feel honored when their children are chosen for responsible positions, but any desire for their children's advancement must be held in check. God will place them where He wants them, without any manipulation on their part.

Verse 20 indicates that *the mother* raised the question, but Mark's account makes it clear that James and John themselves⁹⁶ were behind the question (Mark 10:35-45). Jesus did not rebuke His self-seeking disciples, but used the occasion to declare the law of true greatness. Jesus contrasted God's law of greatness with the standards of the world by saying, "Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant." *Service* is the law of greatness in the kingdom of Christ, and Jesus Himself set a great example, in that "the Son of Man did not come to be served, *but to serve*, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Jesus explained in verses 25-27, that officials in human governments force their authority upon inferiors. But in His kingdom, *willingness to serve* is the mark of spiritual greatness. "Let him be your servant" (verse 26).

The word "you" ("You do not know what you ask") in Matthew 20:22 is plural. This would indicate that the request came from more than one person.

Greatness in our Lord's kingdom does not come through ruling, but through serving.⁹⁷ Christians find true fulfillment in lowly service. They follow a Master who took the form of a servant and whose life was a model of humility.

Christians seek to follow the Lord Jesus, and so they are willing to accept even the uncomfortable place and the lonely place. They know that time is short, and eternity is long, and so they are willing to expend energies. They choose to spend and to be spent. They are willing to work hard without becoming proud. They are willing to take criticism without becoming bitter. The key to greatness in God's kingdom is not found in position or power, but in the demonstration of good character and simple service.

Verse 28 explains that the service which Jesus rendered was "to give His life a ransom for many." This speaks of the price He paid to secure our salvation. A ransom was the purchase price paid to secure freedom for slaves. When Jesus gave His life as a substitute for us on the cross, He did it in order that He might free us from slavery to sin, and save us from eternal death. The word phrase "a ransom for many" can be translated "a ransom *in place of* many."

(20:29-34) Now as they went out of Jericho, a great multitude followed Him. And behold, two blind men sitting by the road, when they heard that Jesus was passing by, cried out, saying, "Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!" Then the multitude warned them that they should be quiet; but they cried out all the more, saying, "Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!" So Jesus stood still and called them, and said, "What do you want Me to do for you?" They said to Him, "Lord, that our eyes may be opened." So, Jesus had compassion and touched their eyes. And immediately their eyes received sight, and they followed Him.

The chapter closes as Jesus *served* one more time before going to the cross. This time Jesus healed two blind beggars who were pleading for mercy. The multitudes wanted the men to keep silent and to keep out of the way, but Jesus was too compassionate to be austere toward people in need. Jesus touched their eyes and immediately they were able to see (verse 34). He had just been teaching His disciples the importance of lowly service, and this healing was an example of such service.

The Son of David, as these men addressed Him (verse 30b), still lives. He still hears the humble prayers of those who know their blindness and poverty. His healing the physical blindness of these two men was typical of His more wonderful healing of spiritual blindness. What Jesus did for the blind eyes of the two beggars, He desires to do for blind souls who have been steeped in sin.

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The word is "servant" at the end of verse 26 and the stronger word "slave" at the end of verse 27. The Greek words are *diakonos* (servant—denoting lowly service in general), and *doulos* (slave—denoting the lowest strata of society).

14. JESUS REJECTED BY LEADERS

Matthew 21:1-22:46

It is Passover season, and Jesus walked all the way from Galilee toward Jerusalem with other pilgrims. He rode on a donkey the last few miles to confirm His identity as the Messiah. This is the last week before Jesus' death.

People from all over the land were gathering in Jerusalem for the Passover. The historian Josephus says that between two and three million persons packed into the city of Jerusalem at Passover time. Jesus had just healed blind Bartimaeus in Jericho, and according to John's account, had just raised Lazarus from the dead in the village of Bethany. There was a spirit of excitement in the air. Jesus would soon present Himself as King, but envy on the part of Jewish leaders led to His arrest and crucifixion.

1. Some Examples of Rejection (21:1-27)

Matthew 21 begins the account of Jesus' final week, which culminated with His death at the end of the week, and in His resurrection on the first day of the next week. The first eleven verses describe the Triumphal Entry.

(21:1-11) Now when they drew near Jerusalem, and came to Bethphage, at 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, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them." All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: "Tell the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your King is coming to you, Lowly, and sitting on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey.'" So the disciples went and did as Jesus commanded them. They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their clothes on them, and set Him on them. And a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road; others cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried 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 come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, "Who is this?" So the multitudes said, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee."

Jesus had sent two of His disciples to a nearby village⁹⁸ where they would find a small donkey and a colt which Mark's account says had never been ridden (Mark 11:2). The errand may have seemed strange to the disciples, but those who do little things for Jesus are honored by doing them. The words of verse 6 should be an accurate description of the conduct of all Christians: So the disciples went, and did as Jesus commanded them. The colt was brought. Jesus was placed on the donkey, and vast crowds of people walked

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⁹⁸ Bethphage was a village near the town of Bethany about two miles east of Jerusalem on the south side of the Mount of Olives.

alongside, spreading clothes and palm branches in His path.

As Jesus passed through Jericho (still 20 miles from Jerusalem), crowds were already following Him (Matthew 20:29). As He approached the city of Jerusalem, others joined the throngs about Him—and by the time He entered Jerusalem, Jesus had crowds in front of Him and behind Him. They were placing their cloaks and palm branches on the road. These acts signified great honor to Jesus.

The people shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest" (verse 9). Those words were prayers of appeal to God, asking Him to save Israel, and to deliver the nation from its Roman oppressors.

Jesus was offering Himself to the nation as their King, but their idea of a king was someone riding in a chariot, gathering an army, and driving out the Roman soldiers. The crowds were too blind to understand that Jesus came to Jerusalem to establish *a spiritual kingdom*, and to call *an army of devoted people* who would surrender their lives in loyalty to God. They were spiritually blind. Jesus did not come to set up a political kingdom that would drive out the Romans; He came to "save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21) by dying for them.⁹⁹

Because of the spiritual blindness of the people, it was only a few days until their hosannas were changed into cruel cries of "Away with Him! Let Him be crucified!"

Another evidence of the spiritual blindness of the Jewish leaders is seen in the cleansing of the Temple.

(21:12-17) Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.'" Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were 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 babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise'?" Then He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and He lodged there.

When Jesus came to the Temple area, He was deeply troubled by what He saw. The reading of all four Gospel records shows that cows were over here, and sheep were over there, and doves were being sold. Coins were being changed into Hebrew shekels. People were pushing and shoving. Verse 12 says that Jesus "overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves."

Some of the moneychangers grossly overcharged the people. Alfred Edersheim says it was typical to charge eighty times the real price. They typically charged the equivalent of \$4.00 for a pigeon that was worth only a nickel.

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⁹⁹ Jesus did not enter Jerusalem as a military and political King, riding a stately white horse. He entered the city as a humble servant—a peaceable King on a donkey's colt, just as Zechariah 9:9 had predicted.

A careful reading of all four accounts does not support the idea that Jesus used physical violence on people. Jesus simply made these men (along with their merchandise) leave the sacred area. He took decisive action, but He did not physically harm people.¹⁰⁰

The Temple was intended to be a house of prayer—a place where people could meet God (verse 13). But instead of being a place of quiet reverence, it was filled with the noise of a marketplace and the smell of an animal barnyard. Once again, the people did not seem to grasp God's concern for spiritual devotion. Their worship was cluttered with lots of activity, but it was mostly outward form. They came to Jerusalem and went through the motions of worship, but they were blind to the joys of simple obedience to God's commands.

The theme of Matthew 21 and 22 is that *Jesus is rejected by the Jewish people*. One of the reasons for this rejection was their spiritual blindness. Similar conditions exist today. God's house is to be a place where the Word is proclaimed, where sinners repent, and where the saints have opportunities for spiritual growth. God's house was never intended to be a place for athletic clubs, and bingo games, and bazaars, and whatever else it is that degrades the teaching and preaching ministry of the church. These people came to Jerusalem, and went through the motions of worship, but they were blind to the joys of simply obeying God's commands.

Luke's account says that when Jesus came near on the day of His triumphal entry, "He saw the city and wept over it" (Luke 19:41). Jesus saw human beings with needy hearts. He saw businessmen who were dishonest and greedy, men and women whose lives were scarred by sexual immorality, young people who were given to loose living, etc. Jesus was concerned about the spiritual nurture of people, and we should have that same genuine concern.

Another evidence of spiritual blindness is seen in the passage about the fig tree which had leaves but no fruit. Jesus did an unusual thing. He spoke to the tree and said, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again" (verse 19).

(21:18-22) Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away. And when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither away so soon?" So Jesus answered and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."

Jesus cursed the fig tree, and immediately it began to wither. Mark's account says that the

Guy Hershberger speaks to the issue when he says, "John is the only one of the Gospel writers who mentions the scourge in this scene, and he does not say that Jesus actually used it. Even if it is granted that He did use it, a careful reading of the text makes it clear that He used it only on the sheep and oxen and not on men" (*War, Peace, and Nonresistance*, pages 301-302). Hershberger also says that the 1901 Revised Version is a more faithful translation of the original Greek than is the Authorized King James Version. The Revised Version says, "And he made a scourge of cords and cast all out of the temple, both the sheep and the oxen" (John 2:15).

next morning it was "dried up from the roots" (Mark 11:20). Jesus was not angry at the tree; He simply used the tree to teach some lessons. The main application has to do with Israel. There was outward form in the Jewish religious observances, but no substance and reality. Another word for that is "hypocrisy." The cursing of the unproductive tree was a symbolic warning to Israel that judgment would fall on their privileged nation. Jesus was totally aware that those who were shouting "Hosanna" would soon turn against Him and crucify Him.

And indeed that judgment came. The Jews regained control of Jerusalem in 66 A.D., but four years later (in 70 A.D.) the city was invaded and totally destroyed by the Romans. The Temple was burned, and the intense heat from the fire melted the gold that overlaid the walls. Soldiers pried the huge rocks apart to retrieve the gold, and not one stone was left upon another (Matthew 24:2). The beautiful Temple was destroyed, the people were scattered among the nations, and even today the Jews are still without a Temple.

The cursing of the fig tree is an illustration of what Jesus thinks about "putting on a front" that is not backed up by spiritual reality. The lesson applies not only to Israel, but also to us. We can make a profession without genuine practice; we can attend church services and yet live barren lives; and we can have an outward show of religion without any real faith. In other words, the tree can have lots of leaves but no fruit. There is probably no attitude that God hates more than hypocrisy.

In verses 21-22, Jesus made a sweeping statement about prayer. This is not all that the Bible says about prayer. The promise of Jesus concerning prayer in these verses must be understood in light of *all* that the Bible teaches on the subject. All of these factors are related to the matter of praying effectively.

(21:23-27) Now when He came into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people confronted Him as He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?" But Jesus answered and said to them, "I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell Me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things: The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?" And they reasoned among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' we fear the multitude, for all count John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus and said, "We do not know." And He said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

Verses 23 to 27 relate that as soon as Jesus reached the city, He was attacked by the chief priests and the elders. Members of the Jewish Sanhedrin at Jerusalem were envious of Jesus. The Sanhedrin was a council of 71 members who had administrative authority in religious matters, and also political authority in local matters.

The fig tree, full of leaves but barren of fruit, was a striking emblem of Judaism when Jesus was on earth. It had the temple, the priesthood, the yearly feasts, the Old Testament Scriptures, etc.—but beneath the outward leaves, there was very little spirituality.

In order to pray effectively, we must observe God's principles—willing to forgive those who hurt us (Mark 11:25-26); asking according to God's will (Mark 14:36); being persistent in prayer (Luke 11:5-10); and maintaining harmonious relationships within the family (1 Peter 3:7).

The elders said to Jesus, "By what authority are You doing these things?" (verse 23). "These things" refers to the raising of Lazarus, the cleansing of the Temple, the cursing of the fig tree, etc. Jesus met their question with a counter-question. He said, "The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven or from men?" (verse 25). They could not answer without embarrassment. If John's ministry was from heaven, they should have obeyed his call to repent. But they rejected John. If John's ministry was of men, they would risk the anger of the common people, for they regarded John as a prophet of God. And so the Jewish leaders deliberately said, "We do not know" (verse 27). Yet, deep down within they knew that John the Baptist was sent from God. In the same way, they knew that Jesus was sent from God. And so, in essence, Jesus responded, "I am not going to tell you by what authority I am doing these things" (verse 27).

Why should Jesus waste words telling the Jewish leaders what they already knew, but were unwilling to admit? When we refuse to obey what we already know from the Scriptures, we shut ourselves off from the source of *further* truth and light. Jesus says that in John 7:17. A person must want to practice what he knows, and when he does that, God will reveal more. The promise is this: "If anyone will do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine."

2. Three Parables of Truth (21:28-22:14)

As Jesus faced the last few days before going to the cross, He used some more parables as a method of teaching. All three parables at the end of chapter 21 and the beginning of chapter 22 refer to Israel as a nation. Israel rejected the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

a) Parable of the Two Sons (21:28-32)

(21:28-32) "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go, work today in my vineyard.' He answered and said, 'I will not,' but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, 'I go, sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said to Him, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him."

This parable has to do with a vineyard owner who had two sons. The father had asked both his sons to work in his vineyard. One refused, and then changed his mind and went and did the work. The other agreed to go, but never did perform his duties.

The "father" (verse 31) represents God, who sent John the Baptist (Matthew 21:32) as a forerunner of Christ. The "two sons" (verse 28) represent two major groups of people in the nation—the self-righteous leaders (scribes and Pharisees), and the non-religious crowd (publicans and sinners). Jesus interprets the parable for us in verse 32.

Jesus says the tax-collectors and harlots were like the first son. 103 They did not respond to

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Bishop J. C. Ryle stresses the importance of repentance in this passage. He says, "God...is infinitely willing to receive penitent sinners. It matters nothing what a man has been in time past. Does he repent and come to Christ? Then old things are passed away, and all things are become new. Does he really give

John the Baptist's preaching at first, but eventually, many confessed their sins, and obeyed John's words, and were baptized. *The religious leaders* were like the second son. They listened to John's preaching and showed interest in his work, but they would not repent (Matthew 3:7-10). John called them "a brood of vipers" who claimed salvation because Abraham was their father. Jesus concluded that out-and-out sinners entered into the ark of safety, while most self-satisfied religious leaders remained outside (verse 31). And so Jesus was chiding these Jewish leaders for refusing to believe John the Baptist. And in rejecting John's message, they were rejecting the heavenly Father who sent him.

b) Parable of the Landowner (21:33-46)

(21:33-46) "Hear another parable: There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?" They said to Him, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons." Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder." Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them. But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes, because they took Him for a prophet.

The parable concerns a landowner who planted a vineyard. The landowner provided everything that was necessary for producing a crop. He put the vineyard into the care of hired managers, and then left for a distant land (verse 33b). As the harvest approached, the landowner sent servants to receive the fruits of the vineyard, but instead of giving them the crops, the vinedressers beat one, killed one, and stoned another (verse 35).

Verse 35 pictures Israel's treatment of the prophets in Old Testament times. Jeremiah was subjected to all kinds of ill treatment. The prophet Amos was told to go back home and preach there. As a last resort the parable says, the landowner sent his son. But when the vinedressers recognized who he was, they killed him and hoped to take the inheritance for themselves (verses 37-39). This is a picture of Israel's rejection of Jesus, the Son of God. Instead of receiving Jesus and honoring Him as God's Son, Israel rejected Him, cast Him out, and crucified Him.

In verse 43, Jesus says that the special privileges of God's kingdom will be taken from

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up his sins? If not, his profession is abominable in God's sight, and he himself is still under the curse" (*Ryle's Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Matthew/ Mark*, page 274).

Israel, and given to others who will bring forth fruit for God. Jesus was rejected by Israel, and so new farmers would be given the job of tending the vineyard. This is a picture of the church, made up mostly of Gentiles in the present age.

The passage quoted in verse 44 refers to the two advents of Christ. The text says, "Whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder." In the first part of the verse, the stone is on earth, on the ground. When Jesus was here on earth, people stumbled over the stone and were broken. In the second part of the verse, the stone is descending from heaven. When Jesus comes again, He will descend from heaven in judgment, scattering His enemies like dust.

Verses 45-46 indicate that these parables infuriated the chief priests and Pharisees because they realized Jesus was speaking about them. The opposition to Jesus was mounting fast. The hour was rapidly approaching for the arrest of Jesus, and His crucifixion.

c) Parable of the Wedding Banquet (22:1-14)

(22:1-14) And Jesus answered and spoke to them again by parables and said: "The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son, and sent out his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding; and they were not willing to come. Again, he sent out other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, See, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and fatted cattle are killed, and all things are ready. Come to the wedding.' But they made light of it and went their ways, one to his own farm, another to his business. And the rest seized his servants, treated them spitefully, and killed them. But when the king heard about it, he was furious. And he sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city. Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. Therefore go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding.' So those servants went out into the highways and gathered together all whom they found, both bad and good. And the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who did not have on a wedding garment. So he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

The parable about the father with two sons illustrated Israel's rejection of *God the Father*. The parable about the landowner who put the vineyard into the care of tenant farmers illustrated Israel's rejection of *the Son*. The parable about the wedding banquet illustrates Israel's rejection of *the Holy Spirit*.

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a situation in which a king made a marriage feast for his son, but the guests who were invited refused to come, and gave a variety of excuses. They even mistreated and killed some of the king's messengers who had come to invite them (verse 6). So the king sent out his armies and burned up the city of those who had been invited (verse 7). And then the king's messengers were instructed to go out into the streets, and invite anyone they could find (verse 9). They went out and gathered all they could find, good and bad, and the banquet hall was filled (verse 10).

The king's custom was to provide a special "wedding garment" for each guest. But when the king arrived at the dinner, he noticed a man who was not wearing the wedding garment

(verse 11). The king said, "How did you come in here without a wedding garment?" The man was speechless (verse 12). Apparently, he didn't want to wear the special garment, and simply preferred to wear his regular street clothes. He must have said, "My own robe is good enough; I don't need the one you're offering me." The king told his servants to throw him outside, into the outer darkness. Then Jesus said, "For many are called, but few are chosen" (verse 14).

The parable pictures again God's dealings with Israel. The Holy Spirit came upon the early believers, and they witnessed with great amazement that Jesus was alive. Paul and the other apostles went first to the Jewish synagogues, but most of the Jews despised the call of God's prophets. That is why Stephen, at the time of his stoning said, "You always resist the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7:51). As a result, God gave the Jewish nation up; the city of Jerusalem was totally destroyed, and for nearly two thousand years the good and bad from all over the world have been invited to enter the fold of God. See Acts 13:45-46 and Acts 28:28.

So Israel rejected the appeal of the Father. They rejected Jesus the Son. And they rejected the voice of the Holy Spirit. And thus, the favored nation Israel has been set aside, and despised Gentiles have become guests at the table.

The man "without a wedding garment" represents those who present themselves robed in their own self-righteousness, instead of the righteousness provided by our crucified Savior. Paul prays (in Philippians 3:8b,9) "That I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ."

But the Lord not only *imputes* righteousness; He also *imparts* righteousness. Thus, a child of God's life is more and more characterized by "holiness, without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). The simple teaching in Matthew 22:11-14 is that one who tries to come into the presence of the King on his own terms (or who claims to be a follower of Christ, but is not), will be cast out of the presence of the King into the torments of Hell.

Primarily, these parables refer to the Jews who rejected Jesus and brought about His death. However, they also contain heart-searching lessons for us today. Today the gospel invitation goes out. It is extended to all who are weary and are heavy laden. God offers the forgiveness of sins. He offers to take us into His family. He offers to clothe us with the righteousness of Christ and present us spotless before the throne of God. To reject that offer is a dangerous step.

He says "all things are ready. Come to the wedding" (verse 4b). God is ready to receive us and cleanse us from all our guilt. The Holy Spirit is ready to regenerate and renew us. The church is ready to take us in. The angels are ready to rejoice over us. The Bible is available to instruct us. Heaven is being prepared to become our everlasting home. There is one thing needful. We must be ready to turn from sin and receive the Savior. It is hard to understand why multitudes refuse to accept the offer of pardon.

3. Four Quarrelsome Questions (22:15-46)

The Jewish religious leaders were so furiously angry with Jesus that they would have killed Him at once. But they feared the multitudes, with whom Jesus was popular, and so they

tried to trap Jesus in His teaching, and discredit Him in the eyes of the people. Matthew 22 is primarily a chapter of questions—questions calculated to try and discredit Jesus.

1) Political Question about Paying Taxes (22:15-22)

(22:15-22) Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk. And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, "Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the tax money." So they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" They said to Him, "Caesar's." And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." When they had heard these words, they marveled, and left Him and went their way.

Palestine was an occupied nation, and the poll tax which the Jews had to pay to the Romans reminded them that they were in subjection to a foreign power. After the Pharisees and Herodians insincerely complimented Jesus (verse 16), they asked Him a loaded question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (verse17). No matter which side Jesus took regarding the tax, He would stir up enmity. If He opposed the tax, He would be in trouble with Rome. If He approved the tax, He would be in trouble with the Jews. Jesus saw through their scheme, and He knew their real purpose was to trap Him, and so instead of giving a "yes" or "no" answer, He asked to see a coin (verses 18-19). The coin had Caesar's image on it, so it belonged to Caesar. 104

Human beings bear *God's image*, and so we belong to God. Because we are stamped with God's likeness (Genesis 1:27), human life is to be governed by God's will. Jesus said (in essence), "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God" (verse 21). If God and Caesar issue counter commands, Christians should obey God no matter what the cost (Acts 5:29).

In the simple reply which Jesus gave, there are several important truths: 1) We are to honor and obey human rulers. We are to pay taxes. While our ultimate citizenship is in Heaven, we are still responsible to obey the laws of the land (wearing seat belts, stopping at red lights, cleaning snow off of sidewalks, etc.). 2) Christians must honor and obey God. Christians are bond-slaves, committed to doing what God says—and if there is a conflict between Caesar and God, our first loyalty is always to God.

Notice too that not every question can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." The Pharisees and Herodians wanted a flat "yes" or "no"; they wanted Jesus to take sides. Take, for example, the question, "Have you stopped beating your wife?" Either answer would make one appear guilty. If you say "yes"—the implication is that you did beat her in

whatever Christ said to the Jews on this occasion does not necessarily apply to the Christian."

Evangelical Mennonite pastor, Archie Penner, says that this is "perhaps the most popular text quoted in favor of the Christian serving the state in war" (*The Christian, the State, and the New Testament*, page 49). In the pages that follow the above statement, Penner presents a more detailed application of the text. One unique point found on page 50 is this: "It is clear from the teaching of Christ that He considered the unregenerate Jews as members of the 'world' society and not as members of His kingdom. [And so]

the past. If you say "no"—it means you still are beating her.

As soon as one set of enemies was driven away, another company marched up to attack Jesus. This time it was the Sadducees who tried to trap Him.

2) Doctrinal Question about Resurrection (22:23-33)

(22:23-33) The same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Him and asked Him, saying: "Teacher, Moses said that if a man dies, having no children, his brother shall marry his wife and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were with us seven brothers. The first died after he had married, and having no offspring, left his wife to his brother. Likewise the second also, and the third, even to the seventh. Last of all the woman died also. Therefore, in the resurrection, whose wife of the seven will she be? For they all had her." Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven. But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." And when the multitudes heard this, they were astonished at His teaching.

The Sadducees were the liberal theologians of the day. They denied the resurrection of the body, the existence of angels, and the reality of miracles. Some people try and resist the truth by setting up all sorts of hypothetical problems (unreasonable theories) in order to argue against what the Bible says. That is what the Sadducees did. They asked whose wife a woman will be in the resurrection if she had been married to seven brothers successively.

Their example ¹⁰⁵ was based on the Jewish law of "levirate marriage" described in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. Under the law, if an Israelite died without leaving children, his younger brother was supposed to marry the widow, and the firstborn of this marriage was regarded as a child of the original marriage. This was done to preserve the family name and to keep the inheritance within the family.

The Sadducees were rejecting the concept of the resurrection because they said, "After all, no woman could have seven husbands in the future life." Jesus responds to the insincere question with a scorching reply: "You are dead wrong; you have no idea what you are talking about" (verse 29). And then Jesus reveals some enlightening new truths (verse 30). Those who are resurrected will be like angels; they will be immortal; there will not be any death, and so there will not be any need to marry and to bear offspring.

In verses 31-32, Jesus quotes the words of God as recorded in Exodus 3 where God says, "I am the God...of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6). Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had been dead for many years, yet God uses the present tense and says "I am" the God of Abraham (and of Isaac and Jacob). He did not say "I was" the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Those words show that there is still an existing relationship between God and the patriarchs

The word "levirate" comes from the Latin word "levir" which means "a husband's brother." It has nothing at all to do with the tribe of Levi. Israelite custom was that a man, upon the death of his brother, would marry his brother's widow and raise up children for his brother.

of Israel.

Just so, there is still an existing relationship between God and our friends who have died in Christ. Just because there is no marriage relationship in Heaven does not mean that the dearest of earthly relationships will be forgotten in the life to come. It only means that the intimate physical relationship will be irrelevant, since death and birth will not exist. Just how our relationships will be affected, Jesus does not say, but the entire New Testament supports the view that Heaven will be a place of blessedness and of perfect knowledge. There will be no disappointments in Heaven.

3) Ethical Question about the Mosaic Law (22:34-40)

(22:34-40) But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

The third question was posed by one of the Pharisees. It seemed more sincere, yet it was intended also to test Jesus. The Pharisees had developed a complicated set of 613 rules and regulations (365 negative and 248 positive), and the experts had divided the commandments into "light" and "heavy" categories. In other words, in their minds, some laws were not as important as others.

There was a major disagreement over which laws were most important. Some said, for example, that the commandment to wear fringes on their garments was most important; others disagreed. Now Jesus was to give His opinion. Jesus declared that the essence of God's law can be embodied in one word, the word "love," which must be exercised in two directions—first toward God, and then toward human beings.

We are to love God with all that we have—heart, soul, and mind (verse 37). Mark adds "strength" (Mark 12:33). We are to love God with the totality of our being—our emotions, our will, our intellect, and all the physical strength we can muster. To love God is not merely to have good feelings about Him, but to be surrendered to Him so sincerely that we are eager to obey Him. If we really love God, we will not have problems with His commandments.

If we really love God we will delight to do His will. We will not find His commandments burdensome. We will find it a pleasure to try to keep His instructions, and we will mourn when we transgress them.

Then Jesus added that our second responsibility is to love neighbors as ourselves (verse 39). The word "neighbor" is used here of any fellow human being, starting with one's wife and children, fellow Christians, people of other ethnic backgrounds, and persons we meet anywhere. Think of how much activity and care centers around meeting our own needs, and then try and imagine what it would be like if we showered so much love on our neighbors.

Those who really love their neighbors will not do them willful harm—not in person, property, or character. They will seek to lighten the sorrows and increase the joys of their fellow

human beings.

The entire Old Testament may be summed up in the two commandments concerning God and man (verse 40). The first commandment is found in Deuteronomy 6:5. The second commandment is found in Leviticus 19:18. Love may not make the world go around, but practicing genuine love surely makes the trip more pleasant!

4) Personal Question about the Messiah (22:41-46)

(22:41-46) While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is He?" They said to Him, "The Son of David." He said to them, "How then does David in the Spirit call Him 'Lord,' saying: 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool'? If David then calls Him 'Lord,' how is He his Son?" And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare question Him anymore.

Jesus had answered all the questions that were put to Him. Now it was His turn to propose a question to those who had wanted to examine Him. Jesus said, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is He?" (verse 42). They answered correctly, "The son of David," but it was only part of the true answer. Jesus quoted Psalm 110:1 to show that He is both God and man (verses 43-45). As *God*, He is David's "Lord." As *man*, He is David's "son." Or, as the book of Revelation says, Jesus is both "the Root and the Offspring of David" (Revelation 22:16). For Christians, the answer is clear. The solution lies in the fact of the Incarnation.

Verse 46 indicates that the enemies of Jesus finally were silent, and they did not ask any more questions—not because they believed the truth, but because they were afraid to face the truth.

The four questions in Matthew 22 are of great importance:

- 1) What is my duty toward government? (Render to Caesar what is Caesar's).
- 2) If I die shall I live again? (Yes, but in a form more glorious than now).
- 3) What shall I render to God, for all His benefits to me? (Love Him with heart, soul, mind, and strength).
- 4) What is my opinion of Jesus Christ? (Jesus is the Messiah and He is the Son of God, the Savior of all those who come to Him).

One of the beautiful and practical points in Matthew 22 is the brief reference to Heaven (verses 23-33). We do not know much about Heaven, but we derive great comfort when learning about things *that will not be there*: no sickness, no pain, no disease, no death; no marriages, no family problems, no debts to pay, and no tears in Heaven. Jesus says we will be like the angels. Like them, we will serve God joyfully. Like them, we will delight to do His will. Like them, we shall ever be in God's presence.

In light of these promises, we need to resolve to make a new effort to get in practice now—doing His will, praising His name, and serving Him joyfully.

15. JESUS DENOUNCES FALSE RELIGION

Matthew 23:1-39

In Matthew 23 the last recorded sermon of Jesus is given. It was not a sermon on salvation or on the principles for living the Christian life. It was a condemnation of false teachers. The true opponents of Jesus were not the common people, but the Jewish leaders.

The scribes and Pharisees were religious leaders who held high offices of spiritual leadership, but in most cases, their hearts were far from God. Most put on a pious appearance, but pride and selfish ambition filled their hearts. The *scribes* were men learned in the Scriptures who taught the law. The *Pharisees* were not necessarily teachers, but were people who took their religion seriously.

Many people look at the Pharisees as a group of cranky old men trying to burden Israel with their many rules and regulations. The fact is, the Pharisees were right on many points of doctrine. They believed in the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the body, the existence of angels, and rewards and punishments in the future life. The Sadducees denied these things. The Pharisees were the conservatives; they kept alive the hope of a coming Messiah; they believed in separation from the pagan Greek culture.

Not all Pharisees (at all times) were condemned by Jesus. Some Pharisees were genuine God-fearing men. They really and truly loved God. They found their delight in obeying the laws of God. They were desperately earnest about their religion. They produced men of notable character—Gamaliel, Paul, Josephus, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea—but many of the Pharisees made one tragic mistake. They externalized religion. They were pious on the outside, but corrupt on the inside.

1. The Warning against Pharisaism (23:1-12)

In the first section of Matthew 23, Jesus explained the basic flaws in the religion of the Pharisees.

a) They had a false concept of righteousness (23:1-4)

(23:1-4) Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers."

Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, and said that the scribes and Pharisees preach but do not practice. They say one thing but do another (verse 3).

The laws and rules of the Pharisees were not all bad. Many of the rules were beneficial, and Jesus did not condemn most of their beliefs. But to the Pharisees, righteousness (right living) meant outward conformity to the rules. Not much attention was given to the inward

condition of the heart. They did not care so much about *being* holy, but they tried awfully hard to *look* holy. One of the facts of life is that there is a little bit of the Pharisee in everyone.

The Pharisees imposed petty rules upon the people—regulations about washing the hands, observing the Sabbath, tithing the herbs of the garden, etc. The regulations became an almost unbearable burden (verse 4). The Pharisee was to bend his back when he walked so he would have the appearance of being humble. He was not allowed to pull out a gray hair on the Sabbath because that would be reaping. He could swallow vinegar to relieve a sore throat, but he was not allowed to gargle with it on the Sabbath. He was not allowed to eat an egg that was laid on the Sabbath.

Even today, every orthodox Jew is expected to keep 613 laws (365 negative laws and 248 positive laws). The Pharisees followed the right ceremonies outwardly, but they often did not inwardly really obey the law. The Bible says that God desires "truth in the inward parts" (Psalm 51:6).

b) They had a false concept of greatness (23:5-12)

(23:5-12) "But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi,' But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The Pharisees loved to be seen of men; they enlarged the borders of their garments. They loved the best places at their feasts, and the best seats in the synagogues. They were eager to have people call them "Rabbi" (meaning "a great one") in the marketplaces. But Jesus says we are not to be called by titles that have become terms of flattery. In Christ's kingdom, greatness is measured by service. The way up is to step down. Jesus condemns pride and self-seeking.

The Pharisees used their religion to attract attention to themselves. Their use of phylacteries was an example (verse 5). God had commanded Israel to bind His Word as a sign upon their hands, and as frontlets between their eyes (Deuteronomy 6:8). God simply meant that His law should be continually before them, guiding their activities. But they reduced this spiritual command to a literal physical thing, and made little boxes with some Scripture verses inside, and strapped them on their arms or their foreheads.

Some Pharisees made these little boxes larger in order to try and prove that they had greater piety. The same thing happened with the fringes on their garments. For them, religion was something external—something to put on parade before others. They loved to stand on street corners to pray. They were interested more in prestige than in holiness.

The admonition against calling men "father" (verse 9) is not to be taken to mean that it is wrong to speak of your dad as father. God commanded us to honor father and mother. The prohibition is against using honorary titles to address spiritual leaders. Human teachers of God's truth are to be appreciated and loved and highly esteemed, but we are all brothers,

and none of us is so superior spiritually that we should be called "abbot" or "pope" or "father" or "reverend." The Apostle Paul referred to himself as a spiritual "father" to the people of Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:15), but he never asked the Corinthians to use that term as a title when addressing him.

2. Speaking Woes against the Pharisees (23:13-36)

Beginning at verse 13, Jesus turned to the Pharisees (who were standing with the multitude), and exposed them as hypocrites, blind guides, insincere people, and leaders who led others astray.

Eight times Jesus said "woe to you." Seven times He called them "hypocrites." Two times He called them "blind guides." And twice He called them "serpents" (or "a brood of vipers"). In this section Jesus publicly denounced the major errors of the scribes and Pharisees in scathing terms.

(23:13-15) "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves."

The words "woe to you" can better be translated "alas for you." The words were not really curses on the Pharisees, but expressions of sorrow at their fate.

The *first two woes* in the list were directed against the systematic opposition of the scribes and Pharisees to the progress of the gospel (verses 13-14). The Pharisees were to be concerned about the spiritual well-being of the people, but instead, they had rejected the voice of John the Baptist; they refused to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah; they actually discouraged people from following Jesus. Their inconsistencies stood in the way of others who might otherwise have entered the fold. The Pharisees could verbalize long prayers, and fool people into believing that they were real pious religious leaders. At the same time they thought nothing of taking advantage of widows, and getting them to sign over their property to the church. Their inconsistencies hindered others from coming into the kingdom.

The *third woe* (verse 15) is directed against the zeal of the scribes and Pharisees. In their attempts to reach people for their own brand of religion, they traveled far and near—all over the countryside trying to win one convert, and when they succeeded, the individual whom they reached was twofold more a child of Hell. How can that be?

New converts often zealously follow the teachings of their leaders, and if they get caught up with a group that denies (for example, the reality of eternal punishment), they are really

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The Annual Meeting of the Brethren spoke to this issue already in 1867. The query asked, "Is it consistent with the gospel to apply the term reverend to ministers of other denominations, or to our own brethren, either in speaking or writing?" The answer: "We consider it not right to do so, since it is applied in the Bible alone to God" (*Annual Meeting Minutes, 1778-1909*, page 265).

worse off than before. In their former unconverted way of living, superstitions often caused them to fear Hell, and to some degree restrained them. But now they are with a group that teaches them that God is so loving that everybody in the end will get to Heaven—and so they are tempted to include to the full in their wickedness. Thus they are worse off now than before they embraced the false teaching.

(23:16-24) "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.' Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.' Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a came!!"

The *fourth woe* relates to the teaching about taking oaths. The Pharisees drew some subtle distinctions between one kind of oath and another. If a person swore by the Temple, the oath was not valid; but if he swore by the gold that lined the Temple walls, then according to the Pharisees, the oath was binding. And so if one made a promise (vouching for it by the Temple), it was nothing. On the other hand, if he made a vow (guaranteeing it by the gold of the Temple), then he would be bound by that promise.

The Pharisees had developed a whole system of regulations regarding oath-taking. Some oaths were binding and some were not. Many of the poor and the uneducated people did not know which were binding and which were not, and so it was easy to take advantage of people. The Pharisees were greedy for financial gain. The use of the term "Corban," illustrated in Mark 7, permitted the religious teachers to rob others and still maintain their reputations as "holy" leaders. The followers of Jesus are not to swear oaths at all. They are to tell the truth at all times, without using an oath to guarantee the validity of what is being said.

The *fifth woe* is directed against the scribes and Pharisees regarding their practice of exalting trifles in religion above more serious matters (verses 23-24). The Pharisees majored on minors. They had rules for nearly every area of life, while at the same time they forgot about some important things. The Pharisees were extremely careful about paying their tithes. They even counted their seeds, and took out one-in-ten for the Lord.

The "mint and anise and cummin" were ordinary garden herbs, all used in cooking. The Pharisees carefully tithed all these, but at the same time, they ignored the big issues. They failed to obey the hard-to-fulfill commandments of the Law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness—things like integrity, kindness, and honesty in dealing with others.

The Pharisees had no problem condemning Jesus to death, yet they would not go into Pilate's judgment hall the morning before, lest they be defiled before the Passover meal. The Pharisees were unfair, unjust, unmerciful, brutal, unforgiving, unkind, and greedy, but were very careful to give a tenth, even of their tiny seeds, to support the Levites for their

work in the Temple.

The Pharisees strained their drinking water to be sure they did not swallow even the smallest insect—yet with obvious humor, Jesus says that they "swallow a camel!" (verse 24). They were overly concerned about insignificant things (tiny gnats), but were blind to enormous sins like hypocrisy (saying and not doing), dishonesty (devouring widows' houses), and cruelty (plotting the crucifixion of Jesus).

There was nothing wrong with tithing the small things and even straining their water, but they neglected weightier matters which were much more important. It is easy for Christians to do exactly the same thing. There are those who will wear the right clothes to a church service, and will put money in the offerings, and will never miss a communion service—but think nothing of wasting time on the job, being bossy and bad-tempered toward family members, and spending money carelessly for material goods that are totally unnecessary.

(23:25-28) "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

The next two woes denounce the scribes and Pharisees for setting *outward* purity and decency above *inward* sanctification and purity of heart.

It is dangerous to be outwardly religious, and at the same time, not self-disciplined on the inside. It is easy to appear proper on the outside, but we must take great pains to see that our inward condition matches what we profess outwardly. Things like regular Bible reading, carefully disciplining eating habits, setting a watch over the door of the lips—these are areas on which all of us must work.

We must guard against other sins like lukewarmness, stubbornness, and self-pity. Otherwise we become like a dish that is clean on the outside but dirty and scummy on the inside, or like a grave-site that appears clean and trimmed, attractive to the eye—but within is filled with rotting bones and decaying flesh. The Pharisees did what they did because they hoped to impress others, not necessarily because deep down within they thought it was right. We must be careful not to follow their example.

(23:29-36) "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypo-crites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.' Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt. Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, 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 on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation."

In the *final woe* pronounced against the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus censured them for honoring the memory of ancient prophets, but then persecuting God's spokesmen in their own day (verses 29-36). The Jewish religious leaders were building tombs and decorating the graves of the Old Testament prophets—and they were quick to say that if they had lived in the time of the Old Testament saints, they would never have shed the blood of those righteous men, yet Jesus knew that while they were saying these very words, *they were plotting to kill Him.*

Jesus says that the religious leaders were as wicked as their forefathers, because they were planning to crucify the Son of God. It is easy to say nice things about our godly forefathers, but if a man of God comes along today and preaches essentially the same things as they preached—he is ridiculed and classified as an old-fogy and told that he had better catch up with the times.

In verse 33 Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees "serpents" and "a brood of vipers" who were headed for Hell.

3. Sorrowing over the City of Jerusalem (23:37-39)

Matthew 23 closes with a lament over Jerusalem. It is almost word for word the same as Luke 13:34-35. These are the last words Jesus ever spoke as a public teacher.

(23:37-39) "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Jesus had blasted the Pharisees with appalling sternness; now He foretells their judgment with intense pity. Jesus was about to abandon the Temple, and the people of Israel would soon come to judgment. Jesus wept because He knew that the Romans would soon besiege the city of Jerusalem, kill the people, and destroy the Temple. And indeed, less than forty years after Jesus spoke these words, the Temple was burned and the city was leveled to the ground. A date which every Christian should try and keep in mind is 70 A.D.

The words of verse 37b tell about the concern Jesus has for the spiritual welfare of people. Jesus essentially says, "I wanted to shelter you and care for you, but because of your spiritual blindness you rejected me. And so instead of being sheltered, you will be forsaken."

But Jesus knew that someday the blindness of Israel will be removed, and then they will recognize and honor Him as their Messiah. And so in verse 39 Jesus says, "You shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" This is a reference to the second coming of Jesus, when a believing portion of Israel will accept Him as their Messiah-king (Romans 11:25-27; Zechariah 12:10).

There are some important lessons for us to learn by reading the blistering woes which were pronounced against the Pharisees.

1) We cannot read this chapter (with its severe denunciations), without marveling at the patience of God. Jerusalem and her self-centered leaders had stoned the prophets, and

yet God had not cast them off.

- 2) We are to show proper respect for teachers and leaders, but we are not to copy their example if their conduct is not according to the law of God.
- 3) We are not to seek human honors, nor are we to give flattering titles to those who teach us. We are to show appreciation, but not use titles.
- 4) It is terribly dangerous to be an unfaithful minister or teacher. It is bad enough to be blind ourselves, but it is a thousand times worse to be a blind guide of other people. The Apostle James says that spiritual teachers will receive a "stricter judgment" (James 3:1).
- 5) The day will come when the mercy of God will be gone forever, and the forbearance of God will be exhausted.

We need to learn from the teaching in Matthew 23 the tremendous danger of being inconsistent in our testimony for Christ. The Pharisees were not charged with being thieves or murderers, but they were hypocrites to the very core. Whatever else our weakness might be—believers must resolve never to wear a cloak. It is no use to try and cover up our real character; it will eventually come to the surface anyhow. Matthew 23 should impress upon readers the folly of trying to justify faults, and should therefore make us daily more faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

16. JESUS REVEALS FUTURE EVENTS

Matthew 24:1-25:46

Matthew 24 contains a conversation between Jesus and His disciples as they left the Temple, and began their walk back to Bethany where they were spending their nights.

The Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was one of the more outstanding sights in the ancient world. It was built of white marble and parts of it were plated with gold. Josephus, the Jewish historian, says that the Temple shone so brilliantly in the sunlight that a person could not look at it for a long time on a bright day. The Temple was a massive structure. Some of the stones in the Temple platform were forty feet long and weighed 100 tons each.

1. The Beginning of Birth Pains (24:1-14)

Jesus and His disciples had just left the Temple area, walked down into the Kidron Valley, and up the slopes of the Mount of Olives.

(24:1-2) Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down."

The disciples were calling Jesus' attention to the magnificence of the Temple structure (verses 1-2), and then Jesus astounded them with the prediction that it would all be destroyed! Later, several of the disciples came to Jesus privately and asked several questions (verse 3). In essence, the questions were these: "When will the Temple be destroyed?" And, "What will be the sign of Your coming?"

The content of Matthew 24 and 25 (the Olivet Discourse) is the answer Jesus gave to those two questions. Sometimes what Jesus says in these chapters, refers to the first question (the coming judgment on Jerusalem which occurred in 70 A.D.). Sometimes what Jesus says refers to the second question (His return to earth, and the judgment at the end of the age). Some of what Jesus says can apply equally well to both periods of time, and it is difficult to know to which period He precisely refers.

The Olivet Discourse *is partly concerned with the destruction of Jerusalem*. In verse 2, Jesus was looking at the Temple and said that the time would come when every stone of the Temple would be thrown down. Those stones, which were so secure, and the building which was so magnificent, were destroyed by the Roman armies in 70 A.D., less than forty years after Jesus spoke the words. The Romans burned the city, and the flames melted the gold of the Temple until it ran into the crevices of the rocks. They pried the huge stones apart one by one in order to get the gold. And so, indeed, not one stone was left upon another!

But the Olivet Discourse also speaks of the coming of Christ and the end of the age. In verses 29-30, we read that after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened and

the moon will not give its light. The stars will fall from heaven and the Son of Man will come in the clouds of heaven with power. There will also be a judgment of the nations. Matthew 24 refers not only to the destruction of Jerusalem, but also to events at the end of the age.

Any discussion of future events calls for humility and caution on the part of Bible students. Jesus Himself chose not to know the day or the hour of His return. Surely none of us should presume to know all the details about future events. In essence, Jesus says that we should be less concerned with knowing the exact date, and more concerned with occupying faithfully and being prepared for His coming. Living consistently for Christ day after day is extremely important. Then it does not really matter so much when Jesus comes.

(24:3-14) Now as He sat 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?" And Jesus answered and said to them: "Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines, pestilences, and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come."

The disciples had asked the question, "When will these things be?" And, "What will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (verse 3). They were seeking to know when the stones of the Temple would be torn down, and how they could know when Jesus was coming again. In verses 3-14, Jesus describes some of the characteristics of the age in which we live, and urges His followers to be watchful.

There will be false teachers and false christs (verses 4-5). Today, our world is filled with deceptive cults and false teachers. More than 200 major cults have been started in the past 150 years. Those who study the cults say that hundreds of cult groups have emerged in the past century, and that 1,100 persons have actually claimed to be Jesus Christ—including men like David Koresh in more recent times.

There will be wars and related calamities (verses 6-7). Wars and famines usually go together. More than forty wars are currently being fought in various parts of the world. There are massacres in Asia and Africa, tribal wars in Central America, and ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. As the years roll on, the conflicts will appear in other places. Until Jesus returns, wars will continue.

Verse 7 indicates that famines and pestilences and earthquakes will be pronounced signs of the nearness of our Lord's return. Famines and pestilences and earthquakes have occurred on occasion throughout human history, but the fact that they will occur in "various places" at the same time is a new phenomenon.

There will be persecution of the Lord's people (verse 9). Christians do their best to love God and their neighbors, and yet we are often made the butt of ridicule and the objects of

hatred. God's way cuts across the world's way, and as a result, unregenerate people are often bothered by the presence of those who seek to live for the Lord—and so sometimes they ridicule and harass and try to aggravate us.

There will be hatred, increased iniquity, and a waning devotion to the Lord (verses 10-12). A major full-length article in *Newsweek* magazine (January 4, 1993) was entitled "Hate Thy Neighbor." It shows gruesome pictures of the evidences of hatred in all parts of the world during 1992. The time that has followed the year 1992 has not been any less violent. Our waning devotion to the Lord ("the love of many will grow cold," verse 12b) is best expressed by J. I. Packer when he describes Christianity in the United States of America. He says, "It spans the country from Maine to California; it is 3,000 miles wide but often it appears to be only a half-inch deep."

The wars and rumors of war, the earthquakes and pestilences, the hatred between individuals—all these things have occurred throughout the church age, and were present even before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. But as we approach the time of the end, they will increase in frequency and intensity. Verse 10 says "many will be offended." Verse 11 says "many false prophets will rise up." Verse 5 says "many will come in My name saying, "I am the Christ." Verse 12 says "the love of many will grow cold." In verse 8, Jesus says that these things are "the beginning of sorrows." They are like the early birth-pangs that accompany the birth of a child; those pains signal the coming birth.

The severity of the end time judgments is described in more detail in the book of Revelation. Jesus says that those who endure to the end shall be saved (verse13). That promise is similar to the promises found in Revelation 2 and 3. For example, Revelation 2:7 promises that those who overcome will be privileged to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.

2. Events Symbolizing the End Times (24:15-31)

In this section, the Lord Jesus continues to respond to the disciples' questions, but deals for a little while especially on the destruction of Jerusalem. That devastation was soon to take place.

(24:15-22) "Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place" (whoever reads, let him understand), "then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take anything out of his house. And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened.

The fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. was one sharp birth pain already in the first century which foreshadowed the tribulation of the end-times. The siege of Jerusalem was one of the most terrible sieges in all history. The city was defended by religious fanatics, the Zealots, who stubbornly refused to surrender to the Romans. Titus, the Roman army officer, decided to starve the inhabitants of Jerusalem. When the siege came, instead of fleeing to the moun-

tains, most of the people crowded within the walls of the city. They thought it would be safer inside the walls. The famine became so severe *that when* Jerusalem finally fell to the Romans, the Roman soldiers found houses full of women and children who had died of starvation; the lanes of the city were littered with the dead bodies of aged people; young men were wandering about the market places like ghostly shadows, as a result of their hunger. Some of the Jewish women actually killed and roasted their children's bodies to provide food to keep the rest of the family alive.

The Jewish historian, Josephus, says that the devastation of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. was so great that nothing was left to make those who came there afterwards, believe that the place had ever been inhabited. One million people perished in the massacre; one hundred thousand additional people were sold into slavery; only 73 people escaped and found refuge on a small mountain south of Jerusalem (known as The Masada).

In verses 15-22 Jesus gave instructions related to the fall of Jerusalem. In verse 15 He urged the people to watch out for the desolation of the Holy Place in the Temple. Two hundred years earlier, Antiochus Epiphanes, the Syrian king, had sacrificed a pig on the altar of the Temple. During the Roman siege of Jerusalem, the Temple altar would be desecrated again, when Titus placed an idol on the altar. And in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, the Apostle Paul says that the antichrist of the end-times will set up a statue of himself in the Temple area, and demand that people worship him—an abomination of the holy place.

In verse 16 Jesus instructed the people of Judea to flee to the mountains, and in verse 17 He said the flight would be *so urgent* that a person who was on a flat housetop was not to go into the house for anything, but rather, was to flee down the outside stairway and head for the hills! In verse 18, people working in the fields were told not to run back to the house to get anything. And in verses 19-20, Jesus expressed pity for expectant mothers (for whom the flight would be hard). Also, the times would be hard for strict Sabbath keepers, who were only to travel one-half mile on the Sabbath. And Jesus says that they should pray that it will not happen in winter when the nights are cold, and the rainy season arrives, and the waters of the Jordan River are swelled. The siege and fall of Jerusalem was one of the most devastating battles in all human history. If God had not cut those days short, none would have survived.

(24:23-28) "Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. Therefore if they say to you, 'Look, He is in the desert!' do not go out; or 'Look, He is in the inner rooms!' do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together."

As the end times approach, there will be more and more false prophets. The disciples of Jesus are not to be deceived even by spectacular signs and miracles (verses 24-26). The "elect" (verse 24) is a term used to describe *God's very own people*. The miracles of the false messiahs will be convincing and deceptive.

The coming of the Son of Man will not be some secret thing. Nobody needs to be told where the lightning is; when lightning flashes, the whole sky lights up from one end of the sky to

the other, and one cannot miss it. The coming of Christ will be sudden—like the flash of lightning (verse 27). The majestic appearance of the Lord Jesus will mean deliverance for the people of God. Verse 28 illustrates the concept of judgment¹⁰⁷ for those who have rejected the Lord.

(24:29-31) "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

All the devastation and destruction surrounding the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. foreshadows a terrible time of judgment which is still to occur in the future. The destruction of Jerusalem is a picture of how God will deal with the earth in judgment during the tribulation period at the end of the age. ¹⁰⁸ The devastation of Jerusalem was only a mild example of the kinds of judgment that are still to come in the future.

Verses 29-30 say that not only will the heavenly bodies fall out of place, but the Son of God will appear. There will be deep mourning on the part of unbelievers (verse 30), who will suddenly realize that they have chosen to serve the wrong master. But verse 31 indicates that the appearance of the King will spell deliverance for the people of God; He will send His angels to gather up the saints "from the four winds"—that is, from every part of the earth. No one can be certain just where all these events fit into the outline described in the book of Revelation.

3. Illustrations of Christ's Coming (24:32-51)

Jesus at this point turns from signs that will precede Christ's coming, to illustrations which further clarify what it means to be ready for His return. He also reminds believers how to live until He comes.

a) The illustration of the fig tree (24:32-35)

(24:32-35) "Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near—at the doors! Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but

The expression "wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together"—is likely a proverbial saying. The reference to eating a carcass is generally assigned to vultures which, unlike eagles, eat dead, decaying flesh. The thought is that the spiritually dead will attract God's judgment.

Dale Stoffer speaks about early Brethren views on eschatology, by saying that "though the Brethren generally expected the soon return of Christ, they were not caught up in detailed speculations about the time He would return...the primary concern of the Brethren related to the demonstration of the Christ-like life" (*Background and Development of Brethren Doctrines: 1650-1987*, page 112). Stoffer also says that Elder Peter Nead (in 1833) predicted the return of the Jews to their homeland as a sign of Christ's coming (page 129).

My words will by no means pass away."

The fig tree has been used frequently in Scripture as a symbol of Israel. Just as the inhabitants of Palestine knew when summer was coming by the appearance of leaves on the fig trees (they were the first to come out), so we can know that the Lord's coming is near by the evidences of stirrings in the land of Israel. The purpose of the illustration is to confirm in our minds the fact that Israel as a nation will never cease to exist.

For hundreds of years after 70 A.D., Israel had been dormant—with no government, no land, no temple, and no sign of life. The people were scattered among many nations, but in 1948 Israel became a nation with its own flag, its own capital city, and its own boundaries. The return of the Jews to Palestine, and the building of the nation Israel, has happened exactly as it was prophesied to happen. This event alone should be enough to convince any unbeliever of the power of God and of the accuracy of the Bible.

The word "generation" (verse 34) can mean "race" or "family." In essence, it says that the Jewish race will not be exterminated, in spite of the terrible persecution, until Christ comes. The survival of the Jewish people is one of the great miracles of all times. Jeremiah spoke God's message to the people of Israel, when he said, "Though I make a full end of all nations where I have scattered you, yet I will not make a complete end of you" (Jeremiah 30:11). There were other powerful nations in Bible times—the Amorites, Edomites, Moabites, Canaanites, Philistines, etc. These people all disappeared, absorbed by enemy nations—but Israel still survives. "This generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place" (verse 34).

b) The illustration of the days of Noah (24:36-44)

(24:36-44) "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left. Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

The illustration in these verses confirms the fact that Christ's coming will be sudden, and thus should motivate us to *always* be prepared. At the time of Christ's coming, the moral conditions on earth will be similar to those that existed in the days of Noah (verses 37-38). The primary emphasis here is upon the suddenness and unexpectedness of Christ's coming. The people "did not know until the flood came, and took them all away; so also will the coming of the Son of Man be" (verse 39). There won't be any chance to bargain or to repent at the last minute when Jesus comes.

In verses 40-41, we learn that there will be a division when Christ comes. Two men will be in the field: "one will be taken and the other left." Two women will be grinding at the mill: "one will be taken and the other left."

In verse 42 we are given the keynote of the entire Olivet Discourse. "Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming." And then verses 43 and 44 comprise a brief parable which says that because we don't know when Jesus may come, we must always be ready.

c) The faithful and unfaithful followers (24:45-51)

(24:45-51) "Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

The illustration is intended to stimulate us to use the time between now and the Lord's return, to help promote God's work here on earth. We are not merely *to wait eagerly* for the Lord's return and do nothing; we are to conduct ourselves as faithful followers of Christ. There are duties to be discharged and there is work for us to do.

Readiness for Christ's coming means that we are to be about His business with enthusiastic dedication. The "faithful and wise servant" (verse 45) gives food to his household; he provides generously for his family. There will be a special reward for his faithfulness (verse 47). The "evil servant" (verse 48) says in his heart that it will be a long time until the master comes back—and so he carouses and mistreats many of his fellow human beings (verse 49). The punishment for loose and careless living is very severe (verses 50-51). The phrase "will cut him in two" is obviously a metaphor¹⁰⁹ illustrating severe punishment.

Jesus is asking us to spend the time between now and His second coming, faithfully doing His work. We are not to sit back and wait and do nothing. We are not to carouse and seek after selfish worldly pleasures. We are not to sit around trying to discover precise calculations about the exact time when Jesus will come. If we knew exactly when Jesus would come back, we would probably have a list of "Things to do" as the time draws closer. The list would probably be something like this: write letters, pay back money owed, apologize for wrongs done, pray for unsaved family members, smash the television set, etc. The best way to prepare for Christ's return is to do those very things—like the faithful and wise servant of verse 45.

4. The Wise and Foolish Virgins (25:1-13)

In chapter 25, Jesus continues with three additional illustrations related to Christ's coming. The parable in verses 1-13 stresses the importance of constant readiness for the Son of Man's coming again.

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Leon Morris has a meaningful note here. He says, "This cannot be meant literally (The man is still alive in the next clause), but clearly stands for severe punishment" (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, page 617).

(Matthew 25:1-13) "Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight a cry was heard: 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!' Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.' And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us!' But he answered and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming."

The Parable of the Ten Virgins is intended to further clarify the importance of being ready for Christ's return, and to illustrate how we are to live until He comes back.

The ten virgins represent the true and the false within Christendom during this church age. Jesus told about ten girls who had hoped to participate in a parade, escorting the groom and his bride to a wedding feast at the groom's home. No one was quite sure just when the wedding party would arrive. Finally, at midnight, the cry went out—"Behold, the bridegroom is coming." But five of the girls were unable to light their lamps because at the last minute they discovered that they had no oil. ¹¹⁰

This is a parable (not an allegory), and so there is no need to fill in all the details. The lesson of the parable is obvious. When Jesus returns, there will be two classes of people—those who are ready, and those who are not. There will be those who are wise and watchful, and those who are foolish and careless. Jesus emphasizes the important lesson of watchfulness again and again in these chapters.

Three of the saddest sayings of the Bible are found in these verses. The first sad saying is, "Our lamps are going out" (verse 8b). The second sad expression is, "And the door was shut" (verse 10). The final distressing sentence is, "I do not know you" (verse 12).

5. The Parable of the Talents (25:14-30)

The parable in this section continues the theme of readiness for the coming of the Lord Jesus.

(25:14-30) "For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he

Sometimes the question is asked why those who had sufficient oil did not share with those whose oil was about gone. The answer may lie in the fact that there are some things one person cannot impart to another. One person cannot impart the Holy Spirit to another. No individual can impart to another a relationship with God. No one can impart to others a good character.

who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money. After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.' But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. Therefore take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents. For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

The parable teaches that God gives abilities according to His good pleasure, and emphasizes the extreme importance of using our gifts to further God's cause. The talents were units of money (approximately \$1,000 each), which represent opportunities to use our abilities.

God assigns work and opportunities each "according to his own ability" (verse 15b). In the parable one man received five talents, and another man received two talents. The third man received one talent. The five-talented man and the two-talented man represent faithful servants, seeking to advance the interests of the Master. They took their talents and put them to work for the Lord (verses 16-17). They were rewarded in two ways—"Enter into the joy of your Lord," and, "I will make you ruler over many things" (25:21,23). The one-talented man was a false servant (a hypocrite, a pretender), interested in saving his own skin, and not in promoting his master's cause. He was thoroughly condemned and reprimanded for being wicked and lazy (verse 26), and was to be cast into outer darkness (verse 30). He had no sense of duty to his master. He didn't do anything wrong; he just didn't do anything! He figured it was enough to simply "hang in there" and wait for the end to come. for the Lord is not something static. The Lord expects us to use our gifts (large or small) to further promote the cause of Christ. We do not all have equal abilities, nor do we have equal opportunities. Most of us are only tiny cogs in the machinery of life, but all of us can venture out and do the simple things like those described in verses 35 and 36. We can give a hungry person a meal, welcome a stranger, cheer someone who is sick, and visit a prisoner. These are things almost anyone can do; no special training is needed. These are routine day-to-day kindnesses which help to meet the needs of others. The parable of the talents teaches the importance of serving God and our fellow human beings by using the abilities God has given us.

6. The Judgment of the Nations (25:31-46)

This account is at least a partial description of what will happen on the Judgment Day. It is a reminder that God will separate obedient followers from pretenders and unbelievers, and assign appropriate rewards and punishment.

(25:31-46) "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was 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? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.' Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as 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 everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

The words of verse 31 clearly state that the Son of Man will come in His glory, accompanied by a multitude of angels; verse 32 says that all the nations shall be gathered before Him. This is not a judgment of national groups such as Germany, Russia, the United States, and Argentina—but rather, a judgment of individuals within the nations. On the Judgment Day, individuals will be separated into two groups: *One group will be the sheep (verses 34-40)* who had been kind to Christ's "brethren." These will be placed on the right hand of the King, and will be richly rewarded. They will inherit the kingdom (verse 34). *The other group will be the goats (verse 41-46)* who had seen Christ's "brethren" in trouble, but failed to minister to them. These will be placed on the left hand of the King, and will be punished. They will experience everlasting fire (verse 41).

There has been considerable discussion about what is meant by "My brethren" (verse 40) and about "one of the least of these" (verse 45). Some hold that the account in verses 31-46 refers to the Jews, and that the Gentile nations are being judged here on the basis of their treatment of God's chosen people. According to this view, the judgment is a decision that will determine which nations go into the millennium. One of the problems with this view is that the outcome of the judgment is to determine whether one goes into eternal life or everlasting punishment (verse 46), not who goes into the millennium. Another problem with the view is that *all the nations* will be judged (verse 32), but if the "brethren" refers to Israel, then at least *that nation* would not be included. Another problem is that there has never

been a nation composed wholly of "sheep" (those who do well).

A more obvious understanding of the phrase "My brethren" is that they represent suffering humanity in general. The words "inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me"—certainly include our attitudes and actions toward the needy, the hungry, the imprisoned, and the poor. Jesus demands personal involve-ment in caring for the desperate needs of others. Isaiah 58:7 says that we are to share food with the hungry, bring the helpless into our homes, and clothe those who are cold. We must actively participate in ministries of relief—supplying food, clothing, medicine, agricultural development—if we really claim to be New Testament Christians.

We should aim like the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 to serve *any truly needy person* we can serve. Such practical love for others glorifies God, because in doing it for them we are really doing it for the Lord Jesus. When Paul persecuted the early Christians, Jesus impled, "You are persecuting *Me*" (Acts 9:4). And Jesus said, "Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me" (Matthew 18:5). None of us can read these words of Jesus and believe that a Christian may be unconcerned and inactive regarding the needs of our suffering fellow human beings.

Some are surprised by the emphasis at the time of judgment on meeting the *material* needs of others. The King approves things like food, water, clothes, and friendship. We might be inclined to think that judgment would center on *spiritual* matters like fasting, Bible reading, and tract distribution. Our response to human needs is really service to Christ Himself.¹¹¹

Some believe that the judgment of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25 is equivalent to the Great White Throne Judgment described in Revelation 20. Others view this Judgment as the Lord's decision about the way Gentile nations have treated the people of Israel. Regardless of the extent or limitations of this judgment, there are certain principles and truths taught in these verses (verses 31-46).

- 1) What we do for fellow human beings, the Lord feels too. The Scriptures spell out this truth in a number of places. Isaiah 63:9 says, "In all their affliction, He was afflicted." Zechariah 2:8 says, "He who touches you touches the apple of His eye." In Matthew 10:40, we read, "He who receives you receives Me." And Proverbs 19:17 says, "He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord."
- 2) Sins of omission are as deadly as sins of commission. The "goats" in this account had not tortured or murdered anyone. They simply withheld the love and help they might have been able to give to the hungry, the stranger, the prisoner, and the helpless. We seem to have the impression that a sin of doing is much worse than a sin of not doing. Yet, to do nothing may be even worse than doing wrong. To refuse to warn the occupants of a burning house, may be as bad as setting fire to the house.
- 3) Judgment will be accompanied by great surprises. The faithful ones will not remember

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A ministry of relief, providing food and clothing and medicine and agricultural development are proper actions to take in order to make a more effective witness for the gospel. People will not be quick to hear about the message of salvation if poverty abounds and their stomachs are empty.

their feeding and clothing the stranger and those who are needy. The surprise of the sheep is a sure sign that they did not feed the hungry and minister to strangers, in order to merit salvation. They did these things because they loved the Lord. It is our duty to run the race, and not to bother keeping the score!

4) This picture is not the full account of everything that has to do with salvation. These verses deal with the evidences by which people will be judged, not with the cause of salvation or damnation. Over and over again the Bible teaches that we are saved by grace, but it also teaches that we are judged by works.

Salvation is by the grace of God—the undeserved, unmerited, and unearned kindness of God. The *judgment based on works* is described in Matthew 16:27, where Jesus will reward according to works. The Apostle Paul speaks of appearing before the judgment seat of Christ, to receive for what we have done, "whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10). Those who do wrong shall receive for the wrong they have done (Colossians 3:25).

Our names will either be in the Lamb's Book of Life or in the Judge's Book of Death. Matthew 25:46 speaks of everlasting punishment and also of eternal life. The word "eternal" and the word "everlasting" (in verse 46) are both the same in the original Greek. Those who believe in eternal bliss must also believe in eternal Hell. If Heaven lasts forever, then Hell also lasts forever.

We must not become lazy and careless, but instead warn people about everlasting punishment, and assure the saints of everlasting life. When Jesus comes, it may be at morn when the day is awaking; it may be at mid-day; it may be at twilight; it may be during the blackness of midnight. See Mark 13:35-37. One thing certain, we will not know the hour of His coming.

One of the most dangerous attitudes in connection with our Lord's return is the one which says that there is plenty of time. We should never say, "There is plenty of time to put things right; there is no need to think of His return for a long time yet." There is a fable which describes three apprentice demons who were coming to earth to finish their apprenticeship. They talked to Satan, the chief of demons, about their plans to tempt and ruin human beings. The first said, "I'll tell them there is no God." But Satan said, "They seem to know that there is a God." The second said, "I'll tell them there is no Hell." But Satan said, "They know that sin ought to be punished." The third said, "I'll tell them there is no hurry." "Oh yes," Satan said, "that will work; go and deceive them by the thousands."

17. JESUS CRUCIFIED AND BURIED

Matthew 26:1-27:66

We come now to the climax of the ministry of Jesus. Matthew tells about God's sovereign control over the events surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection. He describes the voluntary nature of Christ's death, and lifts up the victory of Jesus over His opponents. The hour of Jesus' death is close.

1. Jesus Predicts His Coming Death (26:1-16)

Matthew 26 opens with the fourth and final statement from Jesus which clearly predicts His death. In fact, in verse 2, Jesus says that the Passover is only two days away, and during that festival, the Son of man will be handed over to be crucified.

(26:1-5) Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished all these sayings, that He said to His disciples, "You know that after two days is the Passover, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified." Then the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders of the people assembled at the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and plotted to take Jesus by trickery and kill Him. But they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people."

Verses 3-5 indicate that even while Jesus was uttering those words, the chief religious leaders were gathering to map out strategy for arresting Jesus and putting Him to death. The chief priests, scribes, and elders of the people (verse 3) were primarily members of the Sanhedrin at Jerusalem. They were the judicial body of the Jewish nation, but to plot the execution of a man who had not yet been tried was a violation of Jewish law (John 7:51).

(26:6-13) And when Jesus was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to Him having an alabaster flask of very costly fragrant oil, and she poured it on His head as He sat at the table. But when His disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? For this fragrant oil might have been sold for much and given to the poor." But when Jesus was aware of it, He said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a good work for Me. For you have the poor with you always, but Me you do not have always. For in pouring this fragrant oil on My body, she did it for My burial. Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her."

About the same time as Jesus announced His death, He was in Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper, ¹¹³ and a woman came in and anointed Jesus' head with an expensive perfume. John's account of the same event (John 12:2-8), gives added details, and we

The earlier references to Jesus' coming death are found in Matthew 16:21, Matthew 17:22, and Matthew 20:18.

Simon the leper may have been a man who had been healed by Jesus, and may have been the father of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

learn that the woman who anointed Jesus' head (and feet) was Mary, the sister of Martha. Mary is the one who sat at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10:39), and listened intently to His teaching. Thus, because she listened to Jesus more carefully, she probably understood His mission more fully than anyone else did.

Some of the disciples were indignant over what they called "this waste." They suggested that the ointment could have been sold for a good price and the proceeds given to the poor (verse 9). The little alabaster box, according to John's account, was very costly (John 12:3), but Jesus came to the woman's defense, and said she had done this in view of "My burial" (verse 12). Mary understood that Jesus had to die and be buried, and Jesus approved her act as "a good work." The record of her honorable deed has found a place in the Bible and thus has become known world-wide.

There are two lessons we can learn from this incident. One practical lesson is that when we do the best we can do, and we do it from the purest of motives, our friends will not always approve our actions. But the Lord Jesus will come to our defense (like He came to the defense of Mary), and will explain that it was done to honor Him. Another lesson is this: *This Mary* was not at the tomb on the resurrection morning when the other women brought their ointments and spices to perform their last rites on the Lord's body. Mary teaches us to show our affection while our loved ones are still alive. Flowers on the casket are no substitute for acts of encouragement done before our loved ones are gone.

(26:14-16) Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What are you willing to give me if I deliver Him to you?" And they counted out to him thirty pieces of silver. So from that time he sought opportunity to betray Him.

In these verses we learn how Judas bargained with the chief priests to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, the price of a slave (Exodus 21:32). We do not know if Judas had motives other than greed (compare John 12:6).

2. Jesus and the Upper Room Supper (26:17-35)

In this section, we come to the observance of the Lord's Supper on the evening before the crucifixion of Jesus. One of the last things Jesus did with His disciples before His death was to institute the Lord's Supper and the Communion service.

(26:17-30) Now on the first day of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying to Him, "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 will keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.'" So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover. When evening had come, He sat down with the twelve. Now as they were eating, He said, "Assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me." And they were exceedingly sorrowful, and each of them began to say to Him, "Lord, is it I?" He answered and said, "He who dipped his hand with Me in the dish will betray Me. The Son of Man indeed goes 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." Then Judas, who was betraying Him, answered and said, "Rabbi, is it I?" He said to him, "You have said it." And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of

the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission 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 when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Verses 17-20 describe what is called "the preparation of the Passover." Jesus instructed the disciples, telling them exactly what to do. They were to prepare the Passover at a certain house in the city, which they did, and then as darkness settled in, Jesus and the twelve disciples sat down to partake of the meal (verse 20). We note that while the disciples are said to have "prepared the Passover" (verse 19b), the meal (after this point) was never again called the *Passover* in the New Testament. John's account makes it clear that the feet-washing, the meal, and the trials later that night were all completed *before* the time of the Passover. See John 13:1, 13:29, and 18:28. These bits of information were given by the Apostle John to help clarify ambiguous points in the events described by Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

As Jesus and the disciples were eating the meal, Jesus stated that one of them was going to betray Him. The disciples were extremely sad at this announcement, and one by one they asked Him, "Lord, is it I?" (verse 22). The original Greek indicates that a negative answer was expected. Literally, the question was, "Lord, it is not I, is it?"

Jesus gave them a sign (verse 23) indicating which disciple it was, and said, "Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed!" (verse 24). Think of it: Judas was with Jesus for several years. He saw all of His miracles and heard all of His sermons. He was a fellowworker with Peter, James, and John. Yet Judas never changed on the inside; he was a sinner right down to the end. This teaches us that one can come to church services, and associate with Christians, and hear good preaching—and yet be lost. Judas went "to his own place" (Acts 1:25).

Then, as the group continued eating, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to His disciples, saying, "Take, eat: this is My body" (verse 26). Just as the piece of bread was broken, so the body of Jesus would be torn by thorns, nails, and a spear. Then Jesus took the cup, gave thanks, and said, "Drink from it, all of you" (verse 27). In verse 28, Jesus explains *why* we are to partake of the cup. The cup represents a new covenant (or promise)—that God will forgive our sins on the basis of the blood which Jesus shed on the cross. It is well to note that the indefinite "for many" (verse 28) is the equivalent of the phrase "for all," as the Apostle Paul makes absolutely clear in 1 Timothy 2:6. The bread and the cup of the communion service symbolize the death of Jesus to pay for the sins of guilty human beings. We are to remember His death until He comes.

In 26:30 we learn that when they had sung a hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives. Even though Jesus knew He was going (from there) to Gethsemane, and then on to Golgo-

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The eating of the Lord's Supper on the evening *before* the Passover is another indication that the meal eaten in the Upper Room *was not the Jewish Passover* (even though Jesus had used that term in telling the disciples to prepare for the event). Numbers 9:12-13 explains that there was a penalty of death for not eating the Passover at the appointed time.

tha, He was able to go with a song on His lips.

(26:31-35) Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the Shepherd, And the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter answered and said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble." Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" And so said all the disciples.

In verses 31-35 we are given a brief description of the conversation between Jesus and the disciples on the way to Gethsemane. Matthew records only a small part of that conversation. Much more detail is recorded in John's account in chapters 13 through 17. The discussion, according to John, included a lesson on abiding in Christ, additional teaching about the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and instructions about unity among Christians.

Matthew says that Jesus simply predicted that the disciples would forsake Him before the night was over (verse 31). And then he tells how Peter boasted that even if he had to die, he would never forsake Jesus (verse 35). The other disciples said the same thing. Peter was not alone in his boast. Unfortunately, Peter did not know his own weakness, because later that same night he denied that he was with Jesus. It would have been much wiser for him simply to ask for strength to meet the test. It is easy to sit down at the communion table with brothers and sisters in Christ, and sing, "Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe." It is more difficult to stand up boldly for Him when fellow employees at work make fun of our faith.

3. Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (26:36-56)

Later, on the night of the Last Supper, Jesus and the disciples arrived at Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives.

(26:36-46) Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, "Sit here while I go and pray over there." And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me." He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will." Then He came to the disciples and found them asleep, and said to Peter, "What? Could you not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done." And He came and found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy. So He left them, went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. Then He came to His disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going. See, My betrayer is at hand."

Jesus left eight of the eleven disciples at the Garden gate, and took only Peter, James, and John with Him inside the gate, and told them, "Stay here and watch with Me" (verse 38). Then He went on a bit farther alone and fell on His face and prayed a beautiful prayer: "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (verse 39). That prayer is always the prayer of an honest and consecrated soul. The

word "cup" refers to God's punishment for human sin. The "cup" (from which Jesus shrank) is the cup of God's wrath against sin.

We notice that Jesus "fell on His face" when He prayed in Gethsemane. Often we see pictures of Him praying in Gethsemane, and He is kneeling, and leaning against a rock, praying in a comfortable position. But the Bible implies that He lay flat on the ground and prayed. Did you ever pray in such agony of soul that you fell on your face before God?

Jesus shrank from the cross, not because He dreaded the pain, but because He recoiled from the horrible experience of bearing upon His being the weight of the sins of the whole world. It was the awful weight of *our* sin that was pressing down upon Him with a crushing force. Jesus was about to "taste death" for every human being (Hebrews 2:9b). Jesus (as God) was able to perceive the horror of sin in a way that we cannot.

Jesus then returned to the disciples, and found them asleep. Instead of watching with Him, and praying, they fell asleep. Jesus gently rebuked them—especially reproving Peter (verse 40).¹¹⁵ Jesus then said, "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (verse 41). These words are an admonition which every Christian needs to heed every hour of every day. We need to *watch* because the devil goes about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). We need to *pray* because we need the strength that only God can give, and He often gives it in response to our prayers. After this, Jesus prayed twice again, "saying the same words" (verse 44).¹¹⁶ And when Jesus finally returned to the disciples, He said, "Are you still sleeping and resting?" (verse 45)—and then He said "the hour is at hand." Perhaps He already saw the torches and heard the noises of the approaching mob.

(26:47-56) And while He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, with a great multitude with swords and clubs, came from the chief priests and elders of the people. Now His betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "Whomever I kiss, He is the One; seize Him." Immediately he went up to Jesus and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed Him. But Jesus said to him, "Friend, why have you come?" Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and took Him. And suddenly, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword, struck the servant of the high priest, and cut off his ear. But Jesus said to him, "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels? How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?" In that hour Jesus said to the multitudes, "Have you come out, as against a robber, with swords and clubs to take Me? I sat daily with you, teaching in the temple, and you did not seize Me. But all this was done that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples forsook Him and fled.

At that point Judas arrived with a large company of persons, a band of soldiers, armed with swords and clubs—and Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss (verses 47-49). The need for

We notice that Jesus used repetition in prayer. He prayed, "saying the same words." Even though His prayer had the same words, it was not *vain* repetition.

Peter, we remember, had boldly proclaimed that he would stand by Jesus even though all others would flee.

pointing out the right man was important, not only because it was dark, but also because before the days of photographs, the faces even of celebrities were not so widely known as they are today. And so Judas used a kiss to indicate to the soldiers which one was Jesus.

The armed mob seized Jesus (verse 50b). When Peter saw what was happening, he drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus rebuked Peter, and Luke's account says that Jesus touched the man's ear and healed him (Luke 22:51). The latter part of verse 56 says that "all the disciples forsook Him and fled." That is exactly what Jesus predicted back in verse 31.

4. Jesus Is Tried by the Jews (26:57-75)

Jesus was taken to Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest, to be tried. Verse 58 says that Peter followed "at a distance." Peter should be given credit at least for following—even if he was fearful and ashamed to stand up for Jesus.

(26:57-68) And those who had laid hold of Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled. But Peter followed Him at a distance to the high priest's courtyard. And he went in and sat with the servants to see the end. Now the chief priests, the elders, and all the council sought false testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, but found none. Even though many false witnesses came forward, they found none. But at last two false witnesses came forward and said, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days." And the high priest arose and said to Him, "Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?" But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, "I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!" Jesus said to him, "It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his clothes, saying, "He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, now you have heard His blasphemy! What do you think?" They answered and said, "He is deserving of death." Then they spat in His face and beat Him; and others struck Him with the palms of their hands, saying, "Prophesy to us, Christ! Who is the one who struck You?"

The scribes and elders tried to drum up a case against Jesus, but the charges were so vague and so inconsistent that they could not even find the required two witnesses (Deuteronomy 17:6) who agreed with each other about what Jesus had done wrong. Finally, a pair of false witnesses were found who said that Jesus threatened to "destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days" (verse 61). John clearly explains that Jesus spoke these words regarding the temple of His body (John 2:19-21).

Jesus was misquoted and His statement was misapplied, yet He remained silent (verses 62-63a). But when the high priest said, "Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!"—Jesus answered, "It is as you said" (verse 64a). And then Jesus said to the high priest, "Hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (verse 64). God is often said to be powerful, but only a few times in Scripture is He spoken of as *the Power*. This is one of the approximately 300 names for God used in the Bible.

The best explanation for verse 64 is that those who were accusing Jesus, would in the future see Him, not as a criminal standing before an earthly judge—but as the undisputed

Messiah who will sit at the right hand of God. Then, every knee shall bow before Him and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Verses 65-68 describe the definite rejection of Jesus by the Jewish leaders. They rejected Him as king; they labeled Him a blasphemer; they insisted that He ought to be put to death. Verses 67 and 68 tell how they spat in His face and struck Him and slapped Him with the palms of their hands. The *official* reason for seeking the death penalty for Jesus was blasphemy. The *real* reason for seeking His death was envy (Matthew 27:18).

(26:69-75) Now Peter sat outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came to him, saying, "You also were with Jesus of Galilee." But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you are saying." And when he had gone out to the gateway, another girl saw him and said to those who were there, "This fellow also was with Jesus of Nazareth." But again he denied with an oath, "I do not know the Man!" And a little later those who stood by came up and said to Peter, "Surely you also are one of them, for your speech betrays you." Then he began to curse and swear, saying, "I do not know the Man!" Immediately a rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the word of Jesus who had said to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." So he went out and wept bitterly.

While the unjust trial was taking place *inside* the high priest's palace, other events were taking place *outside* in the courtyard. When the little girl said to Peter, "You also were with Jesus of Galilee" (verse 69), Peter denied it before the whole crowd of bystanders. In verse 71, another servant girl accused him of having been with Jesus, and in verse 73, the crowd (those who stood by) said that the accent of his speech indicated that he was a Galilean. Peter denied Jesus a second time, and a third time—and began to curse and swear. Just then the rooster crowed, and Peter remembered the words of Jesus recorded in verse 34, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times."

When Peter said that he would never deny Jesus, he was sincere, but he failed to take into account *the depths of the depravity* of his own heart. The beautiful part of this account is that Peter repented, and went out and wept bitterly over his failure to stand up for Jesus (verse 75). It is good to remember that Jesus (after His resurrection) met privately with Peter and restored him to favor (John 21:15-19). Peter who denied the Lord, is the same Peter, who when he was reinstated, preached a sermon eight weeks later (at Pentecost) that led to the conversion of three thousand people!

Peter's denial of the Lord is usually looked upon as a tragedy, but when we look at it in light of his repentance, and God's forgiveness—we can receive great encouragement. Peter's denial of our Lord is a sobering reminder of the weakness of the flesh, but it is also a testimony to the power of God's grace. Every Christian at times has come before the Lord, broken by the awareness of his own sinfulness. One who has never had such an experience is either very cold spiritually or is not a Christian at all.

There are several practical lessons we can learn from Peter's denials. We learn that even the best of saints are only men at the best; that there is need for constant humility; and that we are to be charitable toward erring Christians. We must not write off our brothers or sisters in Christ just because they have stumbled.

5. Jesus Is Tried by the Romans (27:1-26)

The Jewish trial took place during the night while it was still dark. When morning came, they made an official pronouncement of Jesus' guilt, bound Him with chains, and took Him to Pilate (the Roman governor of Judea).

(27:1-10) When morning came, all the chief priests and elders of the people plotted against Jesus to put Him to death. And when they had bound Him, they led Him away and delivered Him to Pontius Pilate the governor. Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." And they said, "What is that to us? You see to it!" Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself. But the chief priests took the silver pieces and said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, because they are the price of blood." And they consulted together and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in. Therefore that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of Him who was priced, whom they of the children of Israel priced, and gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me."

The meeting of the Sanhedrin at night was illegal, so the Court met at daylight to pass the official sentence on Jesus (verses 1-2). At this point, Judas regretted his betrayal of the Lord. He brought the money back to the Jewish leaders, confessed to them that he had sinned in betraying the innocent Jesus, and then threw the money down, and went out and committed suicide (verses 3-5). The original Greek word (*metameletheis*) translated "remorseful" (verse 3) simply means "to regret" or "to experience remorse." It is not the key word that is used for a genuine change of heart.

The Jewish leaders gave a callous response to Judas. They said, "What is that to us?" (verse 4). It *should have been* something to them—for they were condemning an innocent Person. The chief priests would not put the money Judas returned into the treasury because it was tainted blood money (verse 6), yet all the while they were plotting to murder Jesus. This is an example of straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel (Matthew 23:24).

(27:11-14) Now Jesus stood before the governor. And the governor asked Him, saying, "Are You the King of the Jews?" So Jesus said to him, "It is as you say." And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He answered nothing. Then Pilate said to Him, "Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?" But He answered him not one word, so that the governor marveled greatly.

In the meantime, Jesus was standing before Pilate the Roman governor of Judea, and the chief priests began to make their accusations. Jesus knew their charges were not true, but He chose not to utter a word. When Pilate asked Jesus, "Are You the King of the Jews?" (verse 11), Jesus answered in the affirmative. But when the chief priests and elders accused Him again, He remained silent. This is in keeping with Isaiah 53:7, "As a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not his mouth."

(27:15-26) Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to releasing to the multitude one prisoner whom they wished. And at that time they had a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. Therefore, when they had gathered together, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to

release to you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" For he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy. While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, "Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him." But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitudes that they should ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. The governor answered and said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" They said, "Barabbas!" Pilate said to them, "What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said to him, "Let Him be crucified!" Then the governor said, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they cried out all the more, saying, "Let Him be crucified!" When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it." And all the people answered and said, "His blood be on us and on our children." Then he released Barabbas to them; and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered Him to be crucified.

At Passover time it was the Roman governor's custom to release one prisoner to the Jews as a gesture of good will. Pilate offered to release to the Jews either Barabbas or Jesus. Barabbas was a wicked man. Mark's account says he was a murderer (Mark 15:7). Barabbas was being held in prison by the Romans.

Pilate was in a difficult position. He knew the Jewish leaders were envious of Jesus, and were determined to see Him die, and his wife had warned him to have nothing to do with harming Jesus, for He was a "just Man" (verse 19). But Pilate was a coward, and left the choice to the multitudes. The crowd chose Barabbas. It is almost unbelievable that they would choose a character like Barabbas rather than the good and gracious Son of God, but such is the iniquity of wicked human hearts.

In verse 22 Pilate asked the sobering question: "What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" The answer came back in no uncertain terms: "Let Him be crucified!" Over the years some have ignored Him; some have tried to be neutral; some have openly rejected Him; and others have knelt before Him. The question for each human being is, "What are you doing with Jesus?" When Pilate asked the people to specify the crime that Jesus had committed, they simply insisted all the more that He be crucified (verse 23). A blind, unreasoning hate had taken possession of the people, and in verse 24 we see that the mob was getting out of hand—and Pilate quailed before the crowd. He took water, washed his hands, and said in essence, "I am innocent of the blood of this just Person; the responsibility is yours." Pilate tried to free himself of all blame in connection with the death of Jesus by washing his hands in water. But Pilate needed something much stronger than water to wash the blood of the innocent Jesus off his hands!

When Pilate declared that he was innocent of taking Jesus' blood, the crowd responded with a statement which meant little to them at the time—but the words of the response have been fulfilled with remarkable accuracy throughout the centuries. They said, "His blood be on us, and on our children" (verse 25). This may very well be *the most frightening prayer* recorded in the history of the human race. The destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the

The song says, "What will you do with Jesus? Neutral you cannot be; someday your heart will be asking, 'What will he do with me?'"

holocaust in the 1940s, the anti-Semitism and the massacre of millions of Jews down through the centuries—are just a few examples of Christ's blood on those who demanded that He be crucified, and on their offspring.

In verse 26 we learn that Pilate not only released Barabbas to the Jews, but he also subjected Jesus to the ordeal of scourging. Scourging involved the use of a whip that was embedded with pieces of metal or bone. The lash was brought down with terrible force on His bare back. Jewish law required that there be a limit of forty lashes, but Roman practice did not have any limits. These are the stripes by which we are healed (1 Peter 2:24). Yet the scourging described in verse 26 was only the beginning of what Jesus would endure when He was crucified.

6. Jesus Is Crucified and Buried (27:27-66)

The death of Jesus Christ is one of the great central truths of the Christian faith. Other religions base their claim for existence on the *teachings* of their founders. Christianity bases its claim for existence upon the *death* of its founder.

(27:27-36) Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole garrison around Him. And they stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. When they had twisted a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand. And they bowed the knee before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" Then they spat on Him, and took the reed and struck Him on the head. And when they had mocked Him, they took the robe off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him away to be crucified. Now as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. Him they compelled to bear His cross. And when they had come to a place called Golgotha, that is to say, Place of a Skull, they gave Him sour wine mingled with gall to drink. But when He had tasted it, He would not drink. Then they crucified Him, and divided His garments, casting lots, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet: "They divided My garments among them, And for My clothing they cast lots." Sitting down, they kept watch over Him there.

When Jesus spoke of His reason for coming into the world, He said that it was for the purpose of dying for the sins of humanity (Matthew 20:28). The day of the crucifixion of Jesus was one of the most unique days the world has ever known. It was a day of great sorrow for Jesus. It was a day which has provided great hope for those who long for salvation and Heaven.

Jesus had been awake all night. He had been scourged. His body was weak and exhausted. Then the soldiers decided to amuse themselves by "paying homage" to the "King." Nothing torments a person in pain more than mockery. If people are in pain and someone is making fun of them—that is hard to accept graciously.

The soldiers stripped Jesus and put a scarlet robe on Him (verse 28). They twisted some thorny twigs into a crown and put it on His head (verse 29a). They put a reed in His right hand, and bowed down before Him and mocked Him, and said, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

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The prisoner was stripped to the waist, tied by his hands to a pillar, and forced to bend over.

Then they spat on Him and struck Him on the head with the rod which they had earlier put in His hand (verse 30). First Peter 2:19-23 says that Jesus took all this humiliation and pain without speaking a word. And we are to follow His example!

After the mockery, verse 31 says that they put His own clothes back on Him, and led Him away to be crucified. Jesus started out carrying His own cross, but He was exhausted, and when He staggered under the weight of the cross, a passerby (a man named Simon, from North Africa) was compelled to carry the cross. They went outside the wall of the city of Jerusalem to a place called Golgotha—a small hill shaped like a skull (verse 33), and there they offered Jesus a drink. It was a mixture of vinegar and cheap wine. The purpose was to deaden the pain, but Jesus refused to drink it (verse 34). Jesus chose to suffer the punishment for human sins with all His faculties alert. He bore the full load of our sins without any alleviation of the pain. Jesus refused to accept any drugs to deaden the pain.

Crucifixion is the cruelest form of death ever devised by man. The criminal was nailed to a cross after his body was lacerated and bleeding from the scourging. There the accused hung until he died of hunger and thirst and exposure to the elements. The gnats and flies settled on his bleeding wounds. It is not a pretty picture. But it is that kind of suffering that Jesus willingly underwent for us.

Matthew describes the crucifixion with a few simple words. Without any emotion he simply says, "Then they crucified him" (verse 35). 119 The thing that matters is that Jesus died—and in doing so, He dealt with our sins. The sordid details do not really matter! The crucifixion was followed by the dividing of His clothing. John's account says that the soldiers gambled to see which of them would keep His outer robe as a souvenir (John 19:23-24).

(27:37-44) And they put up over His head the accusation written against Him: THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS. Then two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left. And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, "You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross." Likewise the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'" Even the robbers who were crucified with Him reviled Him with the same thing.

The actual crucifixion was followed by more mockery. Those who passed by taunted Him and said, "You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (verse 40). The chief priests and the elders joined in the mockery. They made light of His claims to be King of Israel, and they also challenged Him to come down from the cross (verses 41-42). And even the robbers participated for a while in the mockery (verse 44), although Luke's account indicates that one of the thieves later repented.

Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, depicts the crucifixion by adding many details to what the Bible says. The believer has a profound faith in the veracity of the Scriptures and does not need to see the violent scenes portrayed in the film in order to appreciate Christ's substitutionary death.

Mark's account gives the most precise information about *the time schedule* on the day of crucifixion. Jesus was crucified at the third hour which was 9 A.M. (Mark 15:25). Jesus died at the ninth hour which was 3 P.M. (Mark 15:34). So Jesus suffered on the cross for six hours. From nine in the morning until twelve noon, Calvary had been a very busy place. Soldiers had performed their task. Passersby had blasphemed. Chief priests and scribes had scoffed at Jesus. The robbers had mocked Jesus. Jesus by this time had uttered the first three sentences from the cross.

(27:45-50) Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, Iama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Some of those who stood there, when they heard that, said, "This Man is calling for Elijah!" Immediately one of them ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink. The rest said, "Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to save Him." And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit.

It was at high noon that the land suddenly became dark (verse 45). It was during this period of darkness that God's wrath fell upon Jesus, and He suffered intense agony and terrible isolation. It was during these hours that the prophecy of Isaiah 53:6 was actually fulfilled: "The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." And finally, at 3 P.M., Jesus cried with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" (verse 46). Some thought Jesus was calling for Elijah to come and save Him (verse 47). Another ran for vinegar and offered Jesus something to drink (verse 48). At the time when Jesus cried out "Why have You forsaken Me?"—God the Father withdrew from the Son, and Jesus was forsaken by God. It was then that God looked down and saw our sins placed upon the sinless Substitute.

We cannot entirely comprehend what took place on the cross, but when Jesus endured this separation from God, He paid the price and finished the work necessary for our salvation. Jesus was, by the grace of God, tasting death for every human being (Hebrews 2:9). Jesus was, in His own body, bearing *our* sins on the tree (1 Peter 2:24).

And then in verse 50, we read that Jesus "yielded up" His spirit. In John 10:17-18, Jesus said, "I lay down my life...no one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself." The fact that Jesus "yielded up" His spirit distinguishes His death from all others. We die because we have to; Jesus died because He chose to.

(27:51-56) Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many. So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, "Truly this was the Son of God!" And many women who followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him, were there looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.

The death of God's Son was attended by three major miracles. The Temple curtain was torn from top to bottom. An earthquake opened the tombs. Some saints, who previously had died, arose from the graves.

There was a rending of the veil of the Temple. The veil (verse 51) was a curtain that separated the Most Holy Place from the rest of the Temple. The Jewish high priest was the only person who could go behind the veil, and that happened only on one day during the year—the Day of Atonement. The veil symbolized the barrier that stood between a holy God and a guilty sinner. Now that Christ had died, and with His blood paid the price for our sins, that barrier was removed—making it possible for us to go directly into the very presence of God "by a new and living way"—and that is through Jesus Christ (Hebrews 10:20).

The way into the Holy Place (the place where God promised to dwell), was opened by the death of Jesus, and no longer was there any need for priests and altars and the shedding of the blood of bulls and goats. A new dispensation of grace was ushered in—and a way of access to God was opened for every sinner who trusts in Christ's atoning sacrifice.

There was a powerful earthquake which opened graves. Matthew is the only one who records this miracle (verses 51b-52a). Rock tombs were not like the graves in most cemeteries where bodies are buried under mounds of earth. Tombs were above the ground, and when the earth quaked, many of the tombs broke open. It is possible that Matthew felt the earth quake—a symbol of God's judgment.

Many of the saints, who had previously died, arose. The only explanation is that this was a supernatural event. We do not know many details. The one thing we do learn from this miracle is that Jesus is Lord both of the living and the dead. The tombs broke open on Friday, but Jews did not go near a cemetery at Passover time, and so it seems the risen saints were unnoticed until they appeared in Jerusalem on Sunday. It was only after Christ's resurrection that they were noticed, according to verse 53.

The Roman officer in charge of the soldiers who had nailed Jesus to the cross saw these things, and was terrified. He said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (verse 54).

Many of the women from Galilee, who had followed Jesus, were watching at a distance (verse 55-56). It really was not very safe for the women to be close to the site of the execution, but their courage and devotion kept them there to the very end.

(27:57-61) Now when evening had come, 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 commanded the body to be given to him. When Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his new tomb which he had hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb, and departed. And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the tomb.

The body of Jesus was buried; it was not cremated. Cremation cannot really be called a sin, but surely disciples of Jesus will want to follow His example—not only in life, but also in death—and so most dedicated believers in Christ prefer to have their bodies buried rather than cremated.

When the evening of the day of crucifixion arrived, Joseph of Arimathea came and begged Pilate for the body of Jesus (verses 57-58). Joseph was a man of wealth, and a secret disciple of Jesus. He was most likely a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. Luke's account says that he had not given consent to have Jesus crucified (Luke 23:50-51).

Joseph was a man who displayed great courage. Can you imagine the surprise to Pilate, and the provocation to the Jews, that a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin would come and want to give Jesus a decent burial? It was the Sanhedrin that had insisted on His death. The Jewish elders had undoubtedly planned to throw His body to the dogs in the Valley of Hinnom, but the prophecy of Isaiah 53:9 had to be fulfilled. He was "with the rich at His death."

Joseph took the Lord's body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own tomb— a tomb carved out of a huge rock (verses 59-60). He rolled a large stone against the mouth of the sepulcher and went away, leaving Mary Magdalene and the other Mary seated nearby. For a while, they kept vigil over the tomb (verses 60-61). The women were the last to leave our Lord's resting place, and the first to return to it when the Sabbath was over. This says something about their dedication to Christ.

(27:62-66) On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate, saying, "Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise.' Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead.' So the last deception will be worse than the first." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard.

The day after the crucifixion, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate and asked him to take steps to make sure that the disciples would not come by night and steal the body of Jesus, and try to get the people to believe that "He has risen from the dead" (verses 62-64). According to verses 65-66, along with verse 12 of the next chapter, Pilate provided a group of soldiers to guard the tomb—and so the Jewish leaders went along to the sepulcher with the soldiers, and sealed the stone. The seal was likely a kind of pliable rope stuffed into the crevices. The Jewish leaders, and the Roman government, by doing this, joined forces with each other to provide more strong proof for the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the grave. The seal and the guard of soldiers offered indisputable proof of Christ's resurrection, because Jesus came out of the tomb without disturbing the seal.

As we come to the end of Matthew 27, the body of Jesus had been placed in Joseph's tomb. A large flat stone shaped like a disc was rolled in the groove to close the tomb. And Roman soldiers sealed the stone and pledged to stand by—to see that the tomb stayed closed.

The death of Jesus on the cross is the focus and the center of God's plan for the salvation of sinners. We cannot fathom all that was involved in Christ's death, but by faith we can believe the gospel story, and we can thank God for His marvelous grace. The Apostle Paul says that we know "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

We all have friends that will help us out in a pinch, but who (other than Jesus) will become poor so that we might become rich?

18. THE RESURRECTION AND COMMISSION

Matthew 28:1-20

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the central fact of Christian history. The "holy" writings of other religions have strong ethical systems and refer to the after-life, but they have no *living* Savior.

The last verses of Matthew 27 tell about the attempts to seal the tomb of Jesus and to secure it. Jesus had been crucified and His body was buried. A guard of Roman soldiers was placed by the tomb *to be sure* that no one would disturb the body. They did everything humanly possible to keep the body of Jesus in the tomb, but human schemes cannot hinder the plan of God.

Sometime early on Sunday morning, Jesus was raised from the dead. John's account indicates that Jesus had passed through the grave clothes, and left them behind as evidence that He was indeed alive (John 20:5-7). The clothes lay there like an empty cocoon. There was no sign of struggle. The garments were not disturbed. Even the wrappings which covered Jesus' face were folded carefully in a place by themselves.

All of this seems to have been a surprise to the disciples. It is clear from the Gospel accounts that despite all the announcements given by Jesus, His followers still did not really expect that He would rise from the dead. Matthew 28 tells the story of that first resurrection morning.

1. The Miraculous Resurrection of Jesus (28:1-10)

News of the resurrection came early on Sunday morning when the two Mary's came to the tomb to continue their vigil. Mark's more detailed account says that Salome was with them, and that they came to anoint the body of Jesus (Mark 16:1). Mark 16:3 says that they were concerned about the large heavy stone which covered the door of the tomb.

(28:1-10) Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. But the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you." So, they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word. And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, "Rejoice!" So, they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me."

Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" and Salome had returned to the tomb to keep a

reverent watch just before dawn on Sunday morning. And as they walked toward the city, they were concerned about the stone. But as they neared the sepulcher they noticed that the huge stone was no longer over the door. It had been rolled aside. The stone was rolled away, not to let Jesus out, but to let witnesses in. In this way, they could verify the resurrection and see with their own eyes that the tomb was empty.

Matthew 28:2 is not a description of the resurrection itself. No such description is given anywhere in the New Testament. Jesus came out of the tomb without any witnesses; no human eye had seen it, and no human pen has described it. The resurrection was a supernatural event accomplished by the intervention and activity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. See Acts 2:24, John 2:19, and 1 Peter 3:18. Verse 2 says that there was a great earthquake. An earthquake had occurred also at our Lord's crucifixion. These are acts which God uses to tell the world to stop and listen; important events are taking place.

In verses 3-4 the angel of verse 2 is described further. The angel was attired in snow-white garments, and his appearance was brilliant. The shock of the supernatural brilliance, and of the unusual earthquake, scared the soldiers who were on guard duty. They were stricken with fear and became helpless, almost like dead men. It took an unusual event to scare hardened Roman soldiers, but the bright flashing countenance of this angel paralyzed them with fear. The soldiers were prepared to face *human attempts* to remove the body of Jesus, but when *a heavenly visitor* came and moved the heavy stone with ease, they were terrified.

The women also apparently were frightened, but unlike the soldiers, they were told by the angel not to be afraid. The angel reassured the women that there was nothing to fear, and then invited the women to come and see (verse 6). The angel did not tell the soldiers not to fear. They shook with fear and went limp like dead men. But to the faithful women the angel said, "Do not be afraid" (verse 5). And then in tenderness, the angel said, "I know that you seek Jesus." This was followed by words of triumph: "He is not here; for He is risen" (verse 6).

The clause "He is risen" is just one word in the original Greek.¹²⁰ If this one word is not true, then the whole Christian message comes crashing down and there is no hope for surviving death. Then there is no genuine purpose in life.

The angel directed the women to go and tell the disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and that He would meet them up in Galilee (verse 7). Verse 8 says that the women ran with joy and with a sense of reverence to tell this great news to the disciples. And on the way, Jesus met them, and addressed them with the words, "Rejoice!" Some translations say, "Greetings." Verse 9 says the women fell prostrate before Him and worshiped Him. The phrase "held Him by the feet" (verse 9) was an act of homage. It was customary for subjects to kiss the king's feet. Jesus accepted their worship, and with words of comfort, He told them not to be afraid—and to tell His disciples to go to Galilee, and there He would meet with them (verse 10).

The base Greek word is *egerthen* which means "to excite, to arouse, to awaken, to raise from the dead."

Matthew is the only one of the four Gospel writers who tells us that Jesus Himself appeared to the women as they went on their way. The women were obeying the instructions the angel had given them in verse 7. The lesson for us is this: *Believers who run in the path of obedience, are the ones who most likely will be met by Jesus.*

It is interesting to note that the women were the first to see the empty tomb. Women were first to see the risen Lord and women were first to tell the joyful news to the disciples. God often uses women, with their more tender emotions, to bring people to the Lord Jesus.

2. The Silencing of the Soldiers (28:11-15)

The resurrection of Jesus was beginning to cause a great stir in Jerusalem. As the women went on their way to deliver the joyous news to the disciples, some of the soldiers who had been guarding the tomb were getting uneasy. They regained consciousness and fled to the city of Jerusalem, and reported to the Jewish religious leaders the things that had happened (verse 11).

(28:11-15) Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, "Tell them, 'His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will appease him and make you secure." So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.

The soldiers who guarded the tomb realized that they were in a desperate plight. The seal had been broken; the stone had been rolled away; and the body was not in the tomb. The Jewish Sanhedrin met, and they voted a handsome bribe to be given to the soldiers if they would tell this story: "Tell them, 'His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept'" (verse 13).

The suggestion of the Sanhedrin was really an outrageous story, but since they absolutely refused to believe the truth, it was about the best story they could come up with. It was unreasonable from several points of view, but the most obvious flaw is this: If the soldiers were asleep, how could they know what had happened? If a witness in court said he was asleep when something occurred, his testimony would be dismissed at once. How could sleeping people know what happened?

It must have taken a good bit of persuading to get the soldiers to say that they had slept on the job. It was a federal offense for a guard to sleep on the job, and most Roman soldiers would have committed suicide rather than admit that they had slept on the job. But these soldiers took the money and did as they were told to do (verse 15). In verse 14 we learn that the Jewish leaders tried to reassure the guards by saying in essence that if this comes to the governor's ears, and Pilate hears about the disappearance of Jesus' body from the tomb, they will bribe him so that he overlooks it.

Any sincere person who studies the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, must conclude that the resurrection of Jesus is an historic fact, and that it cannot be refuted. Jesus appeared to several hundred people after the resurrection. The grave clothes were

undisturbed, and the lives of His followers were radically changed. But perhaps the most significant evidence for Christ's resurrection is the fact that neither the Jews, nor anyone else, could produce the body of Jesus. All they would have had to do to disprove the resurrection was to bring the dead body of Jesus to the officials. But they could not do that because Jesus Christ was alive!

3. The Commission to the Disciples (28:16-20)

Apparently, the women faithfully gave the eleven disciples the message which Jesus and the angel at the tomb had conveyed to them. Verse 16 says that the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had directed them.

(28:16-20) Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. And Jesus came 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 of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

On the mountain in Galilee Jesus appeared to the disciples, and when they saw Him, they worshiped Him (verse 17). However, some doubted, and we learn from John 20:24-29 that one of those who doubted was Thomas. The doubting of Thomas may not have been on this occasion. Note that according to John's account, the disciples first were hiding behind closed doors and Jesus met them there, but later He met them in Galilee. See John 20:19 and Luke 24:36 for additional details.

When Jesus met the disciples in Galilee, He told them that all power (authority) was given to Him, in heaven and on earth (verse 18). The limitations to Christ's deity, which He voluntarily accepted during His earthly sojourn, no longer applied. Just a few days earlier, Jesus was stricken, smitten of God, a man of sorrows, hanging on a cross. But now He has been given all authority over the spiritual powers in the heavenlies, as well as over the social and economic and political powers on earth. Jesus Christ, since His death and resurrection, is ruler even over the kings of the earth (Revelation 1:5).

And then Jesus, Who has victoriously conquered sin and death, gave His disciples the commission for world-wide evangelism (verses 19-20).

a) Jesus says we should "go" (verse 19).

We are not to wait for others to come to us; we are to go to others; we are to go to people even in other nations. This is a call for soul-winning, and for nurturing new believers in the faith. It is a clear New Testament command. It is the New Testament basis for supporting gospel missions.

b) Jesus says we should "make disciples" (verse 19).

The verb "make disciples" means "to carefully teach and model God's truth." The command is not merely to make a quick little raid into another country—but to go and live with the people—and take time to teach, and to work carefully with people, and to bring them along gently in the faith. The task is not only to evangelize and bring people to Christ, but then to

carefully instruct and train those who decide to embrace Christ as Saviour. It is not only a matter of passing out tracts and inviting people to church services. ("Making disciples" involves living alongside, working with, visiting, and modeling the Christian life.)

c) Jesus says we should "baptize" (verse 19).

Those who believe the Gospel message should be taught the necessity of baptism and of church membership. Baptism symbolically unites believers with Jesus Christ in their death to sin and their resurrection to new life. Baptism symbolizes submission to Christ and a willingness to live in God's way. Baptism becomes a means of identifying with God's people. Those who read all the New Testament references to baptism with an unbiased mind will conclude that baptism by immersion in water most clearly describes the practice of the New Testament church.¹²¹

d) Jesus says we should teach believers to obey (verse 20). When people are baptized, that is not the end of the conversion experience. It is only the beginning of an ongoing walk with the Lord. One of the weaknesses of much present-day evangelism is failure to teach obedience to the Word of God. And we are to obey "all things" which Jesus commanded—what He commanded in person, and what He commanded through the New Testament apostles.

Our obedience is to be without reservation. We are not to select from Jesus' teachings what pleases us, and neglect the rest. We must accept what Jesus said about divorce, as well as what He said about love to others. We must accept what Jesus said about Hell, as well as what He said about Heaven. We must accept what Jesus said about carnal lusting, as well as what He said about genuine teaching. Obedience involves a lifetime of learning, so that we become more and more conformed to the image of Christ. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) means not only bringing people to Christ, but also teaching converts to follow Christ.

After Jesus charged the disciples with the task of taking the gospel into the entire world, He gave them the assurance of His presence with them—even to the end of the age. Jesus promises that we need not go forth alone, or without His help. Jesus will empower us, and will be a Companion with us as we go about the task of proclaiming the gospel and seeking to live by biblical standards. Jesus is not only with us when we gather together for worship. He has also promised to be with us as we scatter to be about our daily work and witness.

When the Norwegian explorer, Fridtjof Nansen, went on his long trip to search out the North Pole, he took a number of tape recordings along with him. On the tapes, his wife had

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The Brethren historically "have used the Great Commission text (Matt. 28:19-20) more for justifying the practice of trine immersion baptism than for sending God's people into all the world" (Merle Crouse, *Church of the Brethren: Yesterday and Today*, page 135). Brethren writer, R. H. Miller, referred to Matthew 28:19 declaring that the verse "is a formula for trine immersion" (*Doctrine of the Brethren Defended*, page 147). J. H. Moore (*New Testament Doctrines*, page 37) uses Matthew 28:19 to support the mode of baptism. Mennonite writer, Daniel Kauffman, in his chapter on baptism, argues for pouring as the Bible mode of baptism, and refers only briefly to Matthew 28:19, saying that "the exact manner of applying the water is nowhere stated in describing apostolic baptisms" (*Doctrines of the Bible*, page 390).

recorded some songs which she herself sang, and she also recorded the chatter of their little baby boy. In the loneliness of the Arctic midnight as he was being pulled along on a dog-sled, Nansen listened to the voices of those whom he loved—and he was inspired and encouraged to go on. Just so, when we are tossed by the waves of life, and when the night grows dark, and when our hope seems dim—we can listen to a sweeter voice. We can hear the Lord Jesus say, "My child, whatever comes your way, be of good cheer. I will be with you right down to the end of the way."

It is hard to conceive of any words that would be more comforting than the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 28:20—"and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Sometimes we may seem like we are alone in a cold, unkind world—but as disciples of Christ we are not deserted. The Lord Jesus is with us daily to pardon and forgive, to sanctify and strengthen, and to defend and keep.

Matthew 28:20, with its promise of our Lord's continual presence, is the conclusion of the story as far as Matthew is concerned. Mark and Luke tell us about His ascension into heaven (Mark 16:19; Luke 24:51). We learn in the book of Acts that Jesus will return again just as the apostles saw Him go into heaven (Acts 1:11).

Matthew closes with the promise that the Lord Jesus *will be with us* as an unfailing Friend. It is the writer's prayer that believers will resolve to become instruments of peace, and that where there is hatred, our ever-present Lord Jesus will help us to sow love. Our prayer too is that where there is doubt, the Lord Jesus will help us to sow faith, and where there is despair, He will help us to sow hope.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

The Book of Matthew

- 1. What was Joseph's initial reaction when he learned about Mary's pregnancy (1:18-25), and what does this indicate about him?
- 2. What do we learn about Herod from the description found in (2:13-18)?
- 3. What was the twofold message that John the Baptist preached? What was the message which his clothing and his diet conveyed to others (3:1-15)?
- 4. The early disciples of Jesus had the same occupation. What was the occupation, and why was their call to serve as disciples of Jesus especially appropriate (4:18-25)?
- 5. What was the purpose of an oath? Why do you think that Jesus forbade our taking oaths? What kinds of statements are we to make instead (5:33-42)?
- 6. How can we possibly be perfect, if perfection means to be absolutely without flaw (5:48)?
- 7. What do you think Jesus meant by the expression, "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (6:3)?
- 8. What are the benefits Jesus promised in the Matthew 6:33 passage? What are ways by which we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness?
- 9. What kind of judgment does Jesus call for in Matthew 7:6? What is the nature of the judgment which Jesus forbids in Matthew 7:1?
- 10. Suggest at least two situations in which we might apply the principle of the Golden Rule (7:12)?
- 11. What do we learn about Jesus from His healing of the man stricken with leprosy (8:1-4)?
- 12. What did Jesus require of the two blind men before He was willing to heal them (9:27-31)?
- 13. What do you think the Bible means when it speaks of fearing God (10:28)?
- 14. What do you think Jesus means when He talks about "taking up one's cross" (10:38)?
- 15. Why did the Pharisees ask Jesus (12:10) the question, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"
- 16. In the Parable of the Tares (13:24-30; 36-43), what does "the good seed" symbolize? Who is "the enemy"? Who are "the tares"?
- 17. When the disciples who were out in the storm on the Sea of Galilee saw Jesus coming toward them, how did they react? Why? And what did Jesus say to them? (14:22-33).
- 18. What did the Canaanite woman ask Jesus to do? How do you explain Jesus' response to her? (15:21-28).
- 19. What does Jesus require of those who set out to follow Him? What does He offer them in return (16:24-28)?
- 20. Describe in your own words what actually happened on the Mount of Transfiguration (17:1-8).
- 21. When problems arise between Christians, how should they be handled? Describe the steps that are to be taken to bring about reconciliation (18:15-20).
- 22. In the third step (18:17-19), if the offender refuses to listen to the church, what is to be

- done? What is the purpose of this procedure? How might reconciliation be achieved?
- 23. What, if any, are the reasons why a husband and wife sometimes think it is necessary to live separately? How would you explain "the exception clause" in (19:9)?
- 24. Why did Jesus drive the merchants and money changers out of the temple (21:12-17)?
- 25. What is the attitude that God's people should take toward the payment of taxes (22:15-22)?
- 26. Make a list of some of the terms Jesus used in describing the Pharisees (23:3-33).
- 27. Make a list of some things that will characterize the age just before Jesus returns to earth (24:1-14).
- 28. To what period in history does Jesus liken the time of His Second Coming? In what ways will things be like that earlier time (24:37-51)?
- 29. The familiar parable of the wise and foolish virgins has been interpreted in several ways. What is the main point of the parable (25:1-13)?
- 30. Had the disciples of Jesus literally fed, clothed, housed, and visited Christ? For whom had they done these things (25:31-40)?
- 31. How would you explain the difference between the remorse of Judas (27:3) and the repentance of Peter (26:75)? (See also 2 Corinthians 7:9-10 on Peter's repentance.)
- 32. Why do you think only four words are used to describe the actual crucifixion of Jesus (27:35)? What are some aspects of that cruel event that are unknown to us?
- 33. What evidences of the bodily resurrection of Jesus do you find in the Matthew 28:1-10 passage?
- 34. What are the reasons Brethren usually give for the trine immersion mode of baptism (28:19)? Are there some valid arguments for pouring as a mode of baptism?
- 35. Disciples are people who believe the gospel and whose faith motivates them to obey all that Jesus commanded (28:19-20). How does the concept of being a *disciple* of Jesus contradict *the easy believism* prevalent today?

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