EXPOSITORY NOTES

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Gordon Lyons

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# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

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# INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

## AUTHOR

The Gospel writers did not append their names to the books they wrote. However, according to the early church fathers (e.g., Ignatius of Antioch, Origen, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria) and the unanimous testimony of the ancient church, this Gospel was written by Matthew (Levi) the former tax-collector.

Matthew was one of the Lord's disciples or apostles and therefore was able to provide a first-hand account of everything that the Lord Jesus taught and did. (Mark, who was not an apostle, probably derived much of the information for his Gospel from the apostle Peter.)

## PURPOSE

Matthew may have been writing predominantly for Jewish readers—although Gentiles were not excluded. This may be one of the reasons why—with few exceptions—Matthew uses the expression 'the kingdom of heaven' instead of the parallel expression used by Mark and Luke, 'the kingdom of God'. Jews considered the name of God too sacred to pronounce, therefore they would allude to God with such terms as 'LORD', etc.

Matthew's aim was to make known the Lord Jesus as the promised Messiah (or Saviour) of Israel. For the most part, the Jewish people rejected Jesus' claims to Messiahship. However, Matthew seeks to demonstrate from their familiar Old Testament Scriptures that everything written in these Scrolls pointed forward to the Lord Jesus Christ and was fulfilled by the Lord through his life, death, and resurrection. To this end, Matthew quotes extensively from the Old Testament, showing how these passages were fulfilled in Christ.

## DATE

There is some uncertainty over the exact date of this Gospel. Irenaeus says that it was written while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome. Clement of Alexandria states that the Gospels containing the genealogies (Matthew and Luke) were written first. (Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VI, 14) If true, this means that Matthew could not have borrowed from Mark, as has sometimes been supposed. Furthermore, Mark was not an apostle—as was Matthew—therefore Mark is more likely to have obtained his information from others (e.g., Peter) whereas Matthew's information was first-hand. In all cases, however, the primary Author was the Holy Spirit.

It is possible that the Gospel of Matthew was written before the destruction of Jerusalem, sometime between A.D. 60 and A.D. 70.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 1

## JESUS THE PROMISED SEED OF ABRAHAM

***Matthew 1:1***

### MATTHEW 1:1

Matthew begins by describing this as *'the book*[1] *of the genealogy of Jesus Christ*....'

It is not Matthew's intention to describe the entire Gospel as a genealogy. Rather, he is following the recognised custom of his day, where—regardless of length—official and religious documents were referred to as 'books' (or 'scrolls'). Therefore, relatively short documents, such as extracts from longer books or scrolls, contracts, lists, or genealogies, etc., would be referred to as 'books'. *The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ*, therefore, refers either to the genealogical table that follows in the next 17 verses, or to the first two chapters of this Gospel which deal with the genealogy and birth of the Lord Jesus.

Writing mainly for the benefit of Jewish readers, Matthew is about to demonstrate that the Lord Jesus is indeed the long expected Messiah and King of Israel. From the genealogical list, he will show that the Lord Jesus is that son or Descendant of King David whom God promised. (2 Sam. 7:12-16) He will show also that the Lord Jesus is a descendant of Abraham—to whom the promise of the Seed or Messiah was given (Gen. 22:18)—and also of the royal line of Judah. (Gen. 49:10) Therefore, it will be demonstrated that Jesus the Son of God is truly the promised Anointed of God, and the Messiah and King of Israel—as had been prophesied in the Scriptures. (Isa. 9:6-7; 11:1-2; Jer. 23:5-6; 33:15; Ezek. 34:23-25; Dan. 9:25-26; cf. Luke 1:32-33; Rev. 22:16)

**The Genealogy of Joseph**

### MATTHEW 1:2-15

(Luke 3:23-38)

The Jewish people exercised the utmost fastidiousness concerning their genealogical line. This was true particularly in respect of anyone who claimed to be a servant of God, or who claimed that God had sent him—such as the priests and prophets of the Old Testament. However, when it came to a claim to Messiahship or Kingship over Israel, the Jewish rabbis or scribes would search the genealogical tables scrupulously to determine the truth of such a claim. In all previous cases, it was easily proved that claims to Messiahship, etc., had no basis in fact, as the claimants could not show their lineage from David and back to Abraham by the precise paths delineated in Moses and the Prophets.

Thus, from the outset, Matthew sets out to demonstrate the fact that Jesus is the Seed whom God had promised to Adam and Eve (Gen, 3:15), and later to Abraham (Gen. 22:18; Acts 3:25; cf. Gal. 3:16); that

[1] *Book:* (Gk., Βίβλος , book). In the present context, meaning 'record', 'list' or 'catalogue'. '*The book of the generation* [genealogy] signifies no more than the writing contained in the genealogy or pedigree; for the Jews called all writings books.' [Poole's Commentary]

Joseph is a lineal descendant of Abraham, and that Jesus fulfils all the requirements of his position as the Anointed of God in respect of his Messiahship and also in respect of his Prophetic, Kingly, and Priestly offices. In particular, Matthew will deal with the Lord Jesus as the legitimate Messiah (or Anointed) of Israel and also as the Son of David and the King of Israel—concepts of particular relevance to the Jewish people of that day. Thus, Matthew begins his genealogical record with Abraham and works down to Joseph the husband of Mary, whereas—and for a different purpose—Luke works in reverse order from Joseph back to Adam. (Luke 3:23-38)

The Jews recognised Abraham as the forefather of their nation—a nation that the LORD had separated and chosen from all other nations on earth. (Cf. Matt. 3:9; Luke 3:8) They saw in Abraham the one whom the LORD had promised to multiply and bless abundantly (Gen. 12:1-3), and the one through whom the Messiah of Israel would descend. To this end, Matthew traces Abraham's descendants through the son that God had promised to Abraham: i.e., Isaac (not Ishmael). (Gen. 21:12) Then, he traces the line through Jacob (Israel) and Judah (the royal line bearing the sceptre (Gen. 49:8-10)), down to Ruth, Jesse and King David. Thereafter, he follows the line through Solomon down to the time of the Babylonian captivity. (2 Kings 24:14-16) Then, Matthew shows the lineage from Jechoniah down to Matthan, and ultimately to Jacob. This Jacob was the father of Joseph, who was to become the husband of Mary.

In this genealogy, three kings of Judea between Joram and Uzziah are not mentioned. These are Ahaziah, Joash and Amaziah.

Of particular note is the mention of four women in the genealogical list. It was unusual for women to find a place in Jewish genealogies, yet Matthew takes care to include these four ancestors. Tamar was Judah's daughter-in-law, who conceived and bore twins by Judah. (Gen. 38:12ff) Rahab was the Canaanite prostitute who hid the Israelite spies and helped them to escape. (Jos. 2:13; 6:17,23,25) Ruth was a Moabitess and grandmother of King David. Bathsheba, who had been the wife of Uriah the Hittite, became pregnant by King David and bore Solomon. (2 Sam. 11ff; 12ff)

## MATTHEW 1:16

Matthew has now traced the lineage of Joseph all the way down from Abraham, showing indeed that Jesus is a true descendant of Abraham and also a descendant of the royal line of David. Joseph, of course, was not the biological father of Jesus. However, when—in obedience to the angel's instructions—Joseph took Mary as his wife (v.20), he would become the legal father of Jesus; and thus of the promised Messiah according to his human nature. For this reason, it was essential that Joseph's lineage be established beyond doubt from Abraham through King David to himself as Mary's future husband. Therefore, whatever other objections may be lodged by the Jews against the Lord Jesus, they could not object legitimately to his parental lineage (although, of course, they cavilled over the manner of his conception).

To Mary, a virgin then espoused—but not yet married to Joseph—the holy Son of God was born. In his Gospel, Luke will demonstrate from his genealogical record that Mary, too, was a true descendant of Abraham.

Thus, in accordance with the Word of God spoken by the prophets of the Old Testament, the virgin had conceived and had borne a Son. Again, according to the prophetic word, this Son was to be called, Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Immanuel (i.e., God with us). Thus, Isaiah declared:

Isaiah 9:6-7 ESV

(6) For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

(7) Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

## GENEALOGICAL SUMMARY

### MATTHEW 1:17

Matthew records that those listed in the genealogies constituted three sets of fourteen individuals (the first two groups of fourteen taken from the Greek Septuagint (LXX) Version). However, Matthew does not list every single individual that descended from Abraham to Joseph, but three groups of fourteen only. In order to achieve the three fourteens, Matthew has omitted a few names from the full genealogy. However, this omission is not important for his purpose, because these names could be found in the official genealogies of the nation. Matthew is simply summarising the official record, and listing the summary in a three groups of fourteen, possibly to make it easier for his readers to remember or memorise.

It is not my intention here to enter into a discussion over the supposed difficulties between Matthew's genealogy and that of Luke. At the time they were written by their respective authors, they were being written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and therefore cannot be in real conflict. Had any conflict existed over so important a matter as a genealogy relating to the Lord Jesus, the Jews would have been quick to seize upon it and to discredit the Gospels of Matthew and Luke accordingly. This, they manifestly failed to do. Therefore, although they would reject Christ as their Messiah, the Jews must have accepted that these genealogies were accurate; probably, because the Jewish scribes knew far better than we do today how they should have been understood, and whose names were being referred to in these lists. Certain it is that God cannot allow mistakes, discrepancies or errors to be recorded in his Word; i.e., in the original manuscripts.

## JESUS BORN TO THE VIRGIN MARY

### MATTHEW 1:18

Having demonstrated Joseph's lineal descent through King David back to Abraham, Matthew now sets down the circumstances of Jesus' birth. To begin with, Matthew explains that Joseph was espoused (or betrothed) to Mary. Espousal was a solemn commitment to marry at a later date, and this commitment involved a much greater obligation to marry than modern engagement does. Indeed, betrothal was a legally binding arrangement, and an espoused person could be released from his or her commitment only by death or by means of formal divorce proceedings. Again, unfaithfulness during betrothal was considered tantamount to adultery and grounds for a writ of divorce.

Thus, Matthew indicates that Joseph and Mary had been formerly pledged to future married life together. However, Matthew emphasises that during their espousals, the partners did not engage in sexual rela-

tions. Indeed, failure to observe complete sexual chastity prior to marriage was considered disgraceful at this time and for many centuries subsequently.

Matthew now declares that Mary found herself pregnant—although not by Joseph or by any other man. To this end, Matthew adds that Mary was *'found to be with child from the Holy Spirit'* (v.18b ESV).

Clearly, Matthew did not expect his sceptical Jewish readers or anyone else to believe that Mary had not engaged in sexual relations with Joseph, or with some other man. However, it was essential that these same readers understand and believe that the Sovereign Lord God is not bound to human means or to operate exclusively by means of natural or biological processes. As the One who created man from the dust of the ground, the Lord is perfectly free to create life in whatever manner he so pleases. In this instance, it pleased the Lord God to choose the virgin Mary—the handmaid of the Lord—to bear his own Son. However, since this was the Holy One of God, who was to become the incarnate Son of God, then Jesus had to be *conceived* without sin and without the sinful nature. Yet, he had to be born as a normal human being.

This could be accomplished only if the Child was conceived directly; i.e., without involving the natural processes of procreation. This was not because procreation was in any way sinful, but rather because Adam's sinful nature was conveyed to all his descendants through procreation. Thus, Jesus had to be conceived without inheriting Adam's sinful nature so that he could remain the holy sinless Son of God.

Thus, when Jesus was conceived in the virgin Mary, the conception was initiated by the direct miraculous intervention of God the Holy Spirit. For this reason, the child that was to be born to Mary would be called, 'holy', 'the Son of God'.

Mary had been made aware of the fact that she would conceive a child by means of the Holy Spirit. According to Luke's account, the angel Gabriel had appeared to her earlier, and had given her this magnificent news:

> Luke 1:26-38 ESV
>
> (26) In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth,
> (27) to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary.
>
> (28) And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!"
>
> (29) But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be.
>
> (30) And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. (31) And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. (32) He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, (33) and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."
>
> (34) And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"
>
> (35) And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. (36) And

behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. (37) For nothing will be impossible with God."

(38) And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

The Virgin Birth[2] is an essential element of Christian doctrine. It is not possible to reject the Virgin Birth (or, rather, the virginal conception) of the Lord Jesus without also rejecting his holy, sinless nature. And if the Lord Jesus was not the incarnate sinless Son of God, then he could never have become the Saviour of sinful men and women. For God required a perfect, holy, sinless or unblemished sacrifice to make atonement for sin. He required that the blood of that perfect sacrifice be shed; for without the shedding of blood is no remission of sin. (Heb. 9:22)

(Some commentators see a difficulty between Jesus' birth (implying a beginning in time) and his eternal pre-existence. However, this concept should present no difficulties. See footnote below.[3])

## MATTHEW 1:19

Somewhat understandably, Joseph was intensely distraught when he found that Mary was expecting a child. Joseph knew that this was not his child. Therefore, he assumed that Mary must have been unfaithful to him, conceiving the child by some other man. Nevertheless, Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man. He did not want to expose Mary to open shame and disgrace by renouncing her publicly as he could have done, if indeed Mary had been guilty of immorality as Joseph had supposed. Thus, he resolved to put her away (i.e., formally to divorce her). By doing so discretely, this would minimise the impact of her supposed unfaithfulness and shame on other people. As we have remarked already (and unlike engagement), betrothal or espousals was a legally binding arrangement, and could be set aside only by formal divorce proceedings.

Joseph, however, had been greatly mistaken in his assumption. Like many people today, he had assumed that no child could be conceived by any woman except through ordinary reproductive processes. Even righteous Joseph had not considered the power of the Lord to intervene in Mary's life and to act above and beyond the realm of nature.

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[2] *Virgin Birth*: The expression 'Virgin Birth' is used to indicate clearly that Jesus was born to Mary while she was still a virgin. In this particular context, 'virgin' means one who has never engaged in sexual relations. However, it is important to understand that the miracle of this event was not associated with Jesus' birth (which was a normal and natural birth) but with his conception (virginal conception). It was the nature of his conception that was miraculous and which could be effected only by the Author or Originator of all life. Thus—operating by his Holy Spirit and by a signal demonstration of his power—the Sovereign and Almighty God initiated the processes that led to the development of this new life in the womb of the virgin Mary.

[3] *Jesus' birth and Jesus' pre-existence*: As the divine Son of God, Jesus has been eternally present with the Father. He has had no beginning of days and will have no end of life. However, when he left heaven's glory to come into this world, the eternal Son of God assumed human nature, being born (without contracting Adam's sin or sinful nature) of the virgin Mary. In this respect only, the incarnate Son of God, or the Son of Man, was born, would live, and would die for the sins of his people—to rise again on the third day and to return to his eternal glory. Therefore, *concerning his divine nature*, Jesus is without beginning or end (the Alpha and the Omega). He is the pre-existent and eternal Son of God and yet fully equal in power, glory and eternity with the Father and the Holy Spirit. However, *concerning his human nature*, Jesus had a beginning in time, he laid aside his glory (but he did not divest himself of his divinity), he made himself of no reputation, and he submitted voluntarily to the will of his Father in heaven.

Yet, God was not about to let Joseph proceed with his plans to put Mary away:

## AN ANGEL APPEARS TO JOSEPH

### MATTHEW 1:20

In great distress, Joseph had been mulling over these events, and had been anguishing over the best course of action. Ultimately, he had decided on divorce, but discretely to protect Mary. As he considered how to proceed with this plan, Joseph fell asleep. While he slept, an angel of the Lord appeared to him.

The angel Gabriel had appeared earlier to Mary, telling her that she would bear a child by means of the Holy Spirit. It is therefore possible that it is Gabriel who now appears to Joseph. (Cf. Luke 1:26)

Firstly, the angel of the Lord addresses Joseph as '*son of David*'. Thereby, the angel of God is placing on record that Joseph is a legitimate descendant of the royal line of David; and, in turn, a descendant of Abraham the patriarch. Secondly, the angel reassures Joseph, assuages his misgivings, and gives him cause to reverse his intended plans. Rather than encouraging Joseph to put away his betrothed, the angel tells him not to fear to take her formally as his wife: That is, he was continue with his original plan and purpose to marry Mary when the period of espousals had expired. In the meantime, Joseph was to consider Mary as his wife. (In the East, it was customary to consider a betrothed virgin as a wife even although the couple were not yet married. The parties continued to live separately, however, and conjugal union did not occur until after they had been formally united in marriage and had completed the wedding ceremonies.)

At this stage, Joseph must still have entertained many doubts and misgivings. He was being told to marry Mary in due course, even although she was carrying a child whom he had not fathered.

Then, the angel of the Lord explains that the Child conceived by Mary had been conceived by the Holy Spirit. In other words, this had been a miraculous conception originating from a divine source: i.e., the almighty power of God the Holy Spirit operating directly on the virgin's body and initiating miraculously the processes of conception.

Joseph must have been utterly amazed at this announcement. Nevertheless, he believed what the angelic messenger had told him. Now, he knew in his heart that his beloved Mary had not at any time proved unfaithful to him. Furthermore, he would be able to share these wonderful things openly with Mary, since Gabriel had made them known to her already. Presumably, she had not mentioned them to Joseph earlier because she was scarcely able to believe the truth of such a profound and far reaching announcement until she knew that she was carrying the Child promised by God through his angel.

### MATTHEW 1:21

Now, the angel tells Joseph that Mary will bear a son. This was to be the promised Seed of the woman, and the Messiah or Anointed (One) sent by God. (Gen. 3:15; cf. Gal. 3:16)

The angel of the Lord tells Joseph to give this child the name 'Jesus'. (Luke 1:31; 2:21) In the Scriptures, this was a common name, occurring in the form of 'Joshua' or one of its variants. Essentially, the name means 'Yahweh (or 'YHWH') Saves' or 'Yahweh is Salvation' (sometimes transliterated as 'Jehovah Saves'

or 'Jehovah is Saviour'). However, only in the Lord Jesus Christ would the meaning of this name be fully realised. Those who bore the name 'Joshua' previously had borne a name that spoke of the saving or delivering power of God Almighty—the very God whom they served and worshipped.

On the contrary, the Child to be born to the virgin[4] Mary would be called 'Jesus' because he would save his people from their sins. In other words, he would come not merely to deliver from earthly slavery, but from moral and spiritual slavery or from slavery to sin, guilt and its consequences. Furthermore, his name, 'Jesus', would not merely reflect the attributes of God as the Saviour and Deliverer of his people, but would indicate that he [Jesus] himself possessed these very attributes: i.e., Jesus the Son is in all respects co-equal with his Father and with the Holy Spirit in power, glory and eternity. His name, 'Jesus', is a complete expression of who he is: i.e., 'Yahweh [is] Saviour'—God (Yahweh) manifest in human form. (John 1:1-2; 10:30; 17:21; Col. 1:15-19; 2:9; Heb. 1:1-14)

Again, the angel reveals to Joseph whom Jesus will come to save: *"...He will save his people from their sins."* The Child to be born and who would be named 'Jesus' would come to save *his people*...from their sins. The Lord Jesus was not coming to save everyone *without exception*. Rather, he was coming to save *his people*... i.e., everyone *without distinction* who called upon the name of the Lord for salvation when convicted and convinced of their sin by the Holy Spirit. This would include 'his people' called by the Spirit of God from among all kinds of people, and from every nation, language, colour, class and creed. (John 6:37-39; 17:2,6-10,12)

## IMMANUEL – 'GOD WITH US'

### MATTHEW 1:22-23

The foregoing account of Jesus' birth was not something unexpected or previously unannounced. The prophet Isaiah had foretold this event centuries before its occurrence. Thus, it is written:

> Isaiah 7:14 ESV
>
> (14) "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."

Speaking by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the prophet Isaiah had announced centuries beforehand the birth of a son to the virgin. This son was to be called 'Immanuel'; i.e., 'God with Us'. Clearly, therefore, Isaiah's prophecy could be fulfilled only in the birth of God the Son, God incarnate, or the Lord Jesus Christ. However, we must consider also the immediate context of Isaiah prophecy.

In its immediate context, the prophecy reads:

> Isaiah 7:10-17 ESV
>
> (10) Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz,
>
> (11) "Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven."

[4] Gk., ἡ παρθένος , lit., *the* (or *this*) *virgin*

(12) But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.”

(13) And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? (14) Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. (15) He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. (16) For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. (17) The LORD will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria."

This is one of the prophetic Scriptures that have a double fulfilment. The LORD tells Ahaz, king of Judah, to ask for a miraculous sign to demonstrate the LORD’s sovereign power over Judah and his ability to deliver Judah from the threatened attack on Jerusalem by Israel and Syria. However, the proud and unbelieving Ahaz rejects God’s gracious invitation—not because he did not want to put the LORD God to the test (as he claimed) but because he wanted to rely on Assyria to aid him against the confederacy of Israel and Syria, rather than on the LORD. (Ironically, it would be Assyria that destroyed Judah only a few years later.)

However, by his very rejection of God’s offer, Ahaz was putting the LORD to the test and despising his grace—‘wearying’ God in the process. Thus, through Isaiah the prophet, the LORD announces that he will provide Ahaz with a sign: The virgin shall conceive. (Clearly, the virgin in question must have been someone known to Ahaz; probably, someone in the royal house). This virgin shall bear a son. His name will be ‘Immanuel’.[5]

Thus, addressing the house of David rather than Ahaz alone (v13), God announces through the prophet that a son would be born to a woman who was then a virgin[6] (lit., ‘*the* virgin'): That is, she was a virgin at the time of Isaiah’s prophecy. The fulfilment of this miraculous sign would be in the birth of this son to the virgin at the precise time spoken of by the LORD, and in the exact timing of the other events prophesied during the subsequent early years of the child. When this son was born, this would be the sign both to King Ahaz and to the house of David of the first steps in the accomplishment of God’s Word for Judah and Jerusalem. However, while explicitly promising deliverance in the short term, Isaiah’s prophecy also contained an implicit assurance that the LORD God would protect and preserve the house of David, and thus the royal line of David, until the Messiah should come. This was the first and limited fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy.[7]

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[5] *Immanuel*: ‘Immanuel’ (‘God with Us’) speaks of the attributes or character of the LORD God. Probably, it was not intended as a personal name. When Isaiah speaks of the virgin, who later gave birth to a son who would be called ‘Immanuel’, this was not the child's personal name or title. Rather, it was an allusion to God’s attributes or character, including his personal presence with or among his people (‘God with us’) and his promise to deliver or to save them from their enemies. However, when it was said of the Lord Jesus that he would be called ‘Immanuel’ this was not merely an allusion to God's presence with his people, but a reflection of the fact that God was literally or actually present with or among his people in the Person of his Son: i.e., 'God with us' to save or deliver us—in this case, from sin, from its penalty, and from the last enemy, which is death.

[6] *then a virgin*: i.e., she was a virgin at the time of the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14. Unlike the situation with Mary, the mother of Jesus, there is no suggestion here that the virgin in Ahaz’s day was still a virgin at the time she conceived a son.

[7] See commentaries on Isaiah for additional and more detailed interpretations of this event.

The second and ultimate fulfilment of this prophecy relates to the actual coming of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. In this occasion, Matthew is using the term 'virgin' in its ultimate sense—as the LORD God intended it to be understood in connection with the conception and birth of the Lord Jesus by the virgin Mary. Jesus was to be conceived and born of Mary *while she was still a virgin* —in the primary sense of the word.

The expression or title 'Immanuel' could not pertain in a personal sense to the son born in the days of King Ahaz. However, the LORD was promising Ahaz that he would preserve the house of David not only during the most immediate threats from Israel and Syria, but also throughout future generations. This was essential, since the promised Messiah was to arise from that royal house.

Thus, the LORD is assuring Ahaz that He will preserve Judah from all her enemies until the day that the prophecy spoken through Isaiah came to pass *in its fullest sense*. This would take place with the appearance of the Son born to *the* virgin (i.e., Mary). This Son would be the true Messiah or Deliverer of God's chosen people, and the promised Descendant of David's royal line. Of course, although Ahaz would witness the fulfilment of God's Word in the local sense involving Israel and Syria, the king would not live to see the complete fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy, as this occurred several centuries later. However, the LORD was calling upon this king to believe his word and to trust him accordingly—especially, in regard to the imminent threat to Jerusalem.

King Ahaz and the people of Judah needed this reassurance, because God would punish that generation for their persistent unbelief and rebellion. In their punishment, the people might believe that God had abandoned them forever. Thus, by proclaiming the coming of the Messiah from the house of David, the LORD is guaranteeing that his people will remain until that day.

## THE BIRTH OF JESUS

### MATTHEW 1:24-25

Greatly comforted and reassured by the angel of God, Joseph awakes from sleep. With complete confidence in the Word and promises of God, Joseph then obeys the Lord by taking Mary as his wife. However, Joseph did not engage in conjugal relations with his wife before the birth of the God's incarnate Son and until after the wedding ceremonies had been completed some time later.

Ultimately, when this promised Son was born, Joseph and Mary named him 'Jesus'—as commanded by the angel of God (v.21). Thus, in fulfilment of Isaiah's prophesy and that of other prophets of God, and in keeping with the promises of God's word elsewhere in the Scriptures, the Messiah was born—Jesus, Immanuel, God with Us; who would take away the sins of his people.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 2

## WISE MEN COME TO WORSHIP JESUS

***Matthew 2:1-2***

### MATTHEW 2:1-2

We are told that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (meaning, *'house of bread'*) of Judea (known in former times as *Bethlehem Ephrathah*). This distinguishes this village from Bethlehem in Zebulun. Bethlehem in Judea was the town near to which Jacob buried Rachel, and where David was born and raised.

In view of what follows in the next few verses, Matthew may be alluding to this prophecy spoken by Balaam:

> Numbers 24:15-17a ESV
>
> (15) And he took up his discourse and said,
>
> "The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is opened, (16) the oracle of him who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down with his eyes uncovered: (17a) I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: *a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel...*" (Emphasis added).

Although the otherwise wicked Balaam was the prophet whom Balak had commanded to curse God's people, God intervened causing Balaam to pronounce a blessing on his people. (Num. 23:1ff) It was Balaam who proclaimed the above prophecy concerning God's people. Some Jewish interpreters understood the star and sceptre (speaking of sovereignty, rule or dominion) of the above prophecy to refer to King David. Others, however, believed it foretold the coming of Messiah—as Matthew may have done also. Whether a connection was intended with the Star and Sceptre of the prophecy—fulfilled by the birth of the Lord Jesus—and the star which led the wise men to his home is uncertain. Perhaps the celestial star was intended to point to the presence, power and glory of the far greater Star—the Star of Israel (or Jacob) and the Bright Morning Star. (Rev. 22:16))

Returning to the events surrounding Jesus' birth, we are told also that this occurred during the days of Herod the king (Herod I or Herod the Great, who was an Idumean (Edomite)). This was to distinguish this Herod from Herod the tetrarch (Matt. 14:1) and from others of that name. Traditionally, Herod the Great reigned from 37 BC and is believed to have died in or near 4 BC.

Some time after his birth in Bethlehem of Judea, magi or wise men[8] from the East came to worship the Lord Jesus. This may not have been immediately after the Lord's birth, since the wise men needed to

[8] *Magi or wise men* (Gk., μάγοι, *magoi*) : Originally, a title given to a priestly caste of Medes who were interpreters of dreams (cf. *Herodotus*). These may also be the same class of sages referred to in Daniel as '*Chaldeans'* (cf. Dan. 2:2-13). Later, the term '*magoi'* was used more generally to refer to those involved in dream interpretation, astrology, magic, and mystical future events. Many of these magoi were imposters and outright deceivers, involving themselves in practises that were forbidden among the people of God. Some among these pagan magoi or sages, however, sought earnestly to learn the truth—and this may have been the case with the individuals spoken of by Mat-

prepare their gifts and then set out on their journey to Jerusalem to begin their search for the Lord Jesus. Furthermore, considering Herod's wicked command to kill all boys two years old and under, this may imply that some months or even a year or two had elapsed between the birth of Jesus and the visit by the wise men. Yet again, the wise men could not have begun their long journey before they had seen the star in the sky proclaiming the birth of the incarnate Son of God.

Whatever the time-scale involved, it is clear from the passage that these learned foreigners believed that One was born somewhere in the land of Israel or Judea who was to be King of the Jews. Furthermore, they believed that this was no ordinary king, but a King of exceptionally exalted status—for they had come to worship (Gk., προσκυνῆσαι, *proskunēsai*) him. Granted, this can mean, *'to do him homage'*. However, from the context and from the surrounding circumstances, it is evident that this was not merely an expression of civil homage or obeisance. These wise men may not have realised the full significance of the Lord's divine nature, power and glory. Nevertheless, they believed him to be divine in a sense far superior to the divine-kings (so-called) of Persia, or the divinities of Egypt or of many other nations. It is virtually certain that they would be very familiar with some form of emperor-worship or similar in their own land or in neighbouring countries. However, they recognised in the 'King of the Jews' One whom alone was entitled to (and was worthy of) true worship, praise, honour and glory—and they had come to worship Him.

We may note, too, that the wise men did not say that they had come to worship[9] the One who would *become* King of the Jews, but rather the One who *has been born* King of the Jews (v.2).

Possibly, these wise men had received knowledge of the birth of Jesus by divine revelation. Again, this is not stated. However, in view of the sometimes large Jewish populations in foreign countries, it is also possible that these scholars had become acquainted with the (Old Testament) Scriptures from their Jewish neighbours. From these Scriptures they may have learned of the coming Messiah—He who would be born the King of the Jews. Now, by his providence, and in his love, grace and mercy, God makes known to these wise men that this King has been born. A special star (or star-like body) (Gk., ἀστέρα, *astera*) would lead them to the Saviour.

thew. Frequently, the assumption is made that the magoi of whom Matthew speaks were three in number. However, the number is nowhere stated in Scripture. The three different gifts (or different kinds of gifts) do not necessarily imply only three gift-bearers. Again, the exact nature of these wise men's learning or field of expertise is not stated. As we have noted, they may have been court or priestly counsellors or astrologers, but this cannot be confirmed. Again, on the basis of the words in Psalm 72:10, it is believed sometimes that these wise men were kings from the East ('Kings of the Orient'). However, this psalm was addressed to King Solomon. The psalm may well foreshadow the reign of the Messiah-King, but it is doubtful if verse 10 of the psalm can be equated with the wise men or magi. (GL)

[9] *Worship* (Gk., προσκυνῆσαι, *proskunēsai*): In Revelation 19:10 and 22:8-9 the same word for worship (*προσκυνῆσαι*) is used where John was about to offer divine worship to the holy angel, but was forbidden from doing so when the angel declared, "worship (*προσκύνησον*) God."

## KING HEROD GREATLY ALARMED

***Matthew 2:3-8***

### MATTHEW 2:3-4

Following the unique star, and possibly assuming that a king would be born in or near the capital city, the wise men journeyed toward Jerusalem. On their eventual arrival at this great city, the magi enquired about the whereabouts of the King of the Jews.

When the cruel and ailing King Herod learned of such enquiries, he was greatly alarmed, as were his entourage and other members of the royal court. Herod had been appointed king of Judea by the Roman government and he ruled by Roman authority and consent. Now, however, he had just heard of another 'King of the Jews'—one who would threaten to usurp his position if allowed to pursue his claims. Thus, Herod assembled before him all the religious authorities, including the current and former high priests and other leaders (principally, Sadducees), scribes (experts in, and teachers of the law) and Pharisees (which included scribes among its members, and all of whom constituted the supreme religious court or council—the Sanhedrin). Once these religious experts had been assembled before him, Herod asked them (repeatedly or continuously) where the Christ was to be born.

This question tells us a number of things about King Herod:

- He was aware that the Jewish Scriptures spoke of, and the Jewish people believed in, a coming Messiah or Christ. (Dan. 9:25-26)
- Having heard of the enquiries made by the wise men, Herod had become convinced that this Christ had now been born.
- Herod believed that this Christ was indeed the King of the Jews; otherwise, he would have had no cause for alarm.
- Herod felt his own position as king threatened. He feared that both he and his kingdom would be replaced ultimately by this new King. (Herod would not have realised that the Lord Jesus' kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36)).

Thus, in consternation and confusion, Herod sought desperately to know the birthplace of the Messiah-King.

### MATTHEW 2:5-6

The religious leaders were certain about the birthplace of the Messiah. Therefore, they had no hesitation in informing the paranoid King Herod that the Messiah's birthplace was to be in Bethlehem of Judea. Of this fact they had been assured by the LORD God speaking through the prophet Micah. Thus, Matthew now quotes Micah's prophecy:

> Matthew 2:6 ESV
>
> (6) "'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

In Micah, the prophecy reads as follows:

Micah 5:2-4 ESV

(2) But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

(3) Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel.

(4) And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.

Matthew condenses the quotation, partly because this prophecy has a double application, and partly because he is intent in showing only where the Ruler or Shepherd of Israel was to be born.

This also fulfilled other similar prophecies of the OT Scriptures, including that given in Genesis concerning Judah:

Genesis 49:10 ESV

(10) The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

The birth of the Lord Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea gave ultimate fulfilment to the OT prophecies that out of Judah the Shepherd of Israel would arise: One who would gather the lambs to himself, carry them in his arms, and feed his flock. Thus, Isaiah declares:

Isaiah 40:9-11 ESV

(9) Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!”

(10) Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

(11) He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

Again, the birth of Jesus, the Shepherd and King of Israel, gives complete fulfilment to the Psalmist’s expression, ‘*The LORD is my Shepherd*’ (Ps. 23:1-6), and many others. Furthermore, the fact that Jesus is the Shepherd of his people is expressed most clearly by his own words, ‘*I am the Good Shepherd’* (John 10:11-17) Yet again, the writer to the Hebrews would describe him as ‘*the Great Shepherd of the sheep’* (Heb. 13:20), and the apostle Peter would refer to the Lord Jesus as ‘*the Chief Shepherd’*. (1 Pet. 5:4)

The fact that the expression, 'The Shepherd of Israel' pertains to the LORD God (i.e., God Almighty), can be seen from the Psalmist's use of this phrase:

> Psalms 80:1 ESV
>
> To the choirmaster: according to Lilies. A Testimony. Of Asaph, a Psalm.
>
> Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth. (Cf. Isa. 37:16)

Hence we note from the outset that the Lord Jesus, born as a baby at Bethlehem, is God incarnate.

## MATTHEW 2:7

Once Herod had learned of the Messiah-King's birthplace, he summoned the wise men to appear before him again. However, he did this in private that he might interrogate them more thoroughly.

King Herod desired to find out when they had first seen the star of which they had spoken. By determining when the star had first appeared to the wise men, and by adding the preparation and journey time to his calculations, Herod would be able to ascertain approximately when Christ had been born in Bethlehem, and therefore how old he was at the present time. (This would explain his actions later, when he ordered the death of all boys who were two years old and under.)

## MATTHEW 2:8

Having determined Jesus' approximate age, Herod then commanded the wise men to search diligently for the King of the Jews, and then to return to him with a full report of the Child's whereabouts. Herod made the false pretence of desiring to visit the Lord Jesus in order to worship him. However, this would be the last thing on his mind, and his only concern was how to deal with this person whom he considered to be a threat to himself and to his kingdom.

Had Herod believed genuinely that Jesus was the Christ who would deliver his people from their sins, he would not have been concerned about his own position, nor about any hypothetical threat to his kingdom. Rather, he would have gone to Bethlehem himself—as did the wise men—to worship the Lord Jesus and to fall at his feet in reverence and awe: For the One born in Bethlehem was not only the Shepherd and Saviour of his people. He was also King of kings and Lord of lords. (Rev. 19:16) He was Immanuel—'God with us'.

## MATTHEW 2:9-10

When they had concluded their audience with King Herod, the wise men began their 5-mile journey to Bethlehem. As they proceeded, the star again appeared in the sky to guide them on their way. Verse 10 tells us that they '*rejoiced exceedingly with great joy*' (note the superlatives) at the renewed sight of the star—knowing that God had promised to guide them by means of this star to the place where the King of the Jews was to be found.

As they followed the star, it came to rest over the small town (or village) of Bethlehem. Bethlehem's precise geographic location would be familiar enough to the local population, but probably not to the wise

men. However, the star had led them to the exact location where the Lord Jesus was now living. Remarkably, and at such an early stage, God was about to introduce Gentiles to the Messiah and King of Israel. Ultimately, of course, the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles was to depend on the person and work of the Saviour or Christ.

## MATTHEW 2:11

The wise men had come from afar to meet and worship the King of the Jews. Now, the star had brought them to the very threshold of the door. Entering in—probably, with great apprehension and yet with reverence and awe—they set eyes on the holy child Jesus, together with Mary his mother.

Immediately, these men fell down on the floor of the house, prostrate before the Son of God. Here, we must note that they did not hesitate to acknowledge and worship the young Child as the promised King, and the One to whom the star had led them. Clearly, they would have acknowledged Mary as his mother. However, at no point does the Scripture give the slightest indication that Mary herself was afforded anything other than a very warm cordial greeting, in accordance with eastern custom. She certainly would not have been afforded homage, praise or divine worship. This was reserved for God the Son alone.

We note also that Mary and the Child were living now in a house in Bethlehem. Apparently, a year or more had passed since the birth of the Lord Jesus in a manger or feeding trough in a stable. Mary and her Child were now living in more secure and suitable accommodation. Whether this was temporary accommodation, or that of a relative or friend, is not certain. However, Joseph and Mary did not remain in Bethlehem, as the Scripture tells us that the Lord Jesus was raised in Nazareth of Galilee.

At this point, the wise men opened their very valuable treasures. Three types of gift are mentioned: gold, frankincense and myrrh. It is not necessary to suppose that each gift has a different symbolic meaning. These men simply brought gifts that were most valuable in their esteem and that they considered the most appropriate to present to a king. Nevertheless, we may take note of the following:

- The gold would have been of the purest available, unalloyed and highly refined. This spoke of the pre—eminence and purity of the King of kings.
- Frankincense was a sparkling resin or gum, which produced a very pleasant odour or fragrance when burned. This incense was used as a pleasing offering to God, and therefore is a most fitting symbol of worship here to the Son of God.
- Like frankincense, myrrh came from a tree. It was a preservative and was widely used as an embalming agent, especially in Egypt and Judea. The name ‘myrrh’ means ‘bitterness’. Myrrh was used also as an ingredient in spices, sacred oils or perfumes. Again, it was sometimes added to a drink to act as an anaesthetic. (When offered to him on the cross, the Lord Jesus would refuse such a drink). This spoke of the bitterness (‘the wormwood and the gall’) that the Lord Jesus would endure on behalf of sinners.

## MATTHEW 2:12

With the help of the star, the wise men had located the dwelling place of the child Jesus. They had satisfied themselves that this was the Child that God had made known to them in their own country. Now, they were in a position to return to King Herod in Jerusalem with their report.

However, the God in whose hands is the life and destiny of all mankind was not about to let Herod learn of these facts; for God knew Herod's heart. Instead, the Lord appeared to the wise men in a dream, commanding them to return home by another route. This they did, in obedience to the word of the Lord. They had seen the LORD's Christ. They had presented their gifts to the King of kings. Now, that they had seen the Salvation of the Lord they were content to return home in the manner commanded by the Lord. Perhaps, in due course, their faith would be rewarded as they themselves not only saw but also experienced personally the salvation of the Lord in their hearts and lives. We are not told of this in the Scriptures. However, it seems unlikely that God would guide these Gentiles to the Light of the World without blessing them with the eternal benefits of that Light—salvation and life through repentance toward God and faith in Christ Jesus. (John 8:12)

The Sovereign Lord God would not permit Herod to harm his holy Son, the Lord Jesus. Thus, by his grace and providence, God would arrange circumstances to protect his Messiah Child from the unmitigated fury that Herod was about to vent against the young boys of Bethlehem.

## ESCAPE TO EGYPT

***Matthew 2:13-15***

### MATTHEW 2:13-14

Now, we return to the temporary home of Joseph, Mary and the young child Jesus. While Joseph slept, an angel of the Lord appeared to him. The angel of God commanded Joseph to take Mary and the Child and flee immediately to the land of Egypt.

The verb translated 'to flee' (Gk., feugw, *pheuge*) means 'to flee away' or 'to seek safety in flight'. Joseph was not being commanded to seek safety by hiding his family either nearby or in some other part of Judea or Israel. Rather, he was being commanded to flee altogether from his home country to a land appointed and prepared for them by God, and completely outside the realm and jurisdiction of King Herod.

The long journey to Egypt would prove arduous and tiring, particularly for the young mother and her Child. The distance to the Egyptian border alone was about 75 miles. To add to their difficulty, Joseph, Mary and the young child Jesus were to begin this journey at night. Nevertheless, the omniscient God was fully aware of King Herod's evil machinations toward the Child born to the virgin Mary. Therefore, to protect the Child and his family, God commands Joseph to start out immediately on this long journey. There, in Egypt, Joseph was to remain until the Lord commanded him to return to his native land (vv.19-20). Joseph, Mary and the child Jesus would not feel themselves strangers in Egypt, because there was a settled Jewish community there with which they could associate during their sojourn in that land.

In the dream, the angel of the Lord had advised Joseph what Herod was about to do. Therefore, in obedience to God, Joseph arose in great haste, and—together with the Child and his mother—they started toward Egypt while it was still night.

## MATTHEW 2:15

Joseph, Mary and the child Jesus were to remain in Egypt until commanded to return (vv.19-20). Thus, when the Lord called his Son back to the land of his birth, this would fulfil the prophecy which said, *"Out of Egypt I called my son."*

Thus, Hosea declares:

> Hosea 11:1 ESV
>
> (1) "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son."

Once again, this prophecy had a double fulfilment: In the first instance, it spoke of God calling his 'son' (i.e., Israel, his chosen people (Exod. 4:22)) out of their slavery in Egypt to inherit the Promised Land. However, the fulfilment of this earlier prophecy was a type of the much greater fulfilment yet to be accomplished: That is, out of Egypt God would call his one and only or unique Son—the Lord Jesus Christ. Atonement, redemption, and delivery from slavery in Egypt in the days of Moses, therefore, foreshadowed the much greater Atonement, Redemption and Delivery from slavery to sin and to the world (illustrated by Egypt) which the Lord Jesus would accomplish by fulfilling this and other prophecies of God's Word to their ultimate end.

Thus, God's Son remained in Egypt—but only for a short period. Very soon, Herod the king would die from a horrific and agonising disease. This occurred soon after he had ordered the slaughter of Bethlehem's baby boys.

# THE MASSACRE OF THE BABY BOYS

***Matthew 2:16-18***

## MATTHEW 2:16

Meanwhile, at Herod's palace, the king soon realised that the wise men did not intend to return to him with their report. Enraged by what he considered a wilful deception and trickery of the highest order, the infuriated ruler gave orders for the wholesale murder of every boy in Bethlehem and throughout the surrounding regions who was two years old or under. Herod deduced that the child Jesus could then have been almost two years old by calculating his age from the times and dates provided by the wise men on their earlier interviews with the king.

Thus, 'Herod the Great' achieves the greatest infamy in his life by calling for the destruction of these young lives. Not to be able to exercise restraint over one's temper is evil enough. However, to vent one's fury on children and their families is unforgivable. This is murder of the highest order—pre-meditated and wilful murder. Herod will not stand guiltless on the Day of Judgment for his iniquitous crimes—nor will any other who disregards the life and worth of a child.

Had Herod succeeded in destroying the young child Jesus, then he would have cut off all hope for sinful men and women by exterminating the Saviour. Clearly, King Herod was being manipulated by Satan; for, primarily, it was Satan who sought the destruction of the Lord Jesus. The Evil One knew that the coming of the Lord Jesus into the world would spell judgment and defeat for him and his evil minions, while at

the same time providing eternal salvation for men and women—the very thing that the devil sought at every turn to prevent. Thus, 'the god of this world' or 'the prince of the power of the air' blinds the minds of sinful men and women lest they should see and believe the truth. (2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2) Now, however, since Satan and his emissaries had failed in their evil objectives, the Truth would come; the Light of the World would appear and would shine into the hearts of men and women throughout the world. (John 8:12; 9:5; 14:6; 2 Cor. 4:6)

## MATTHEW 2:17-18

(Cf. Jer. 31:15)

Jeremiah's prophecy did not apply solely or primarily to Nebuzaradan, whom Nebuchadnezzar had sent to besiege Jerusalem and to send the people as captives to Babylon. (Jer. 40:1) Granted, this prophecy did have a local fulfilment. Nevertheless, Jeremiah's prophecy found its ultimate fulfilment in the events just recorded concerning the murder of the children and infants and the great mourning occasioned by their tragic loss.

Matthew is quoting Jeremiah's prophecy as these heartbreaking events fulfilled to the uttermost the overwhelming grief and sorrow that the people now endured over such a cruel loss of their own children. However, this disastrous loss would be shared by the entire community, and not by the parents alone. Hence, the reference to '*Rachel weeping for her children*.'

Rachel, who was buried near Bethlehem, is represented as weeping in Ramah over the loss of her children. Rachel represents Judah; or, collectively, Israel and Judah together. Just as Rachel is portrayed as having lamented the slaughter or captivity of the people of Judah (Jer. 39ff), so too, the entire nation would mourn and lament over the immense loss by the slaughter of these little children in Bethlehem: *'A voice…heard in Ramah'.*

Nothing could assuage the grief, pain or sorrow endured by these mothers in Judea. Their loss would afflict them for a lifetime, and the wickedness of the perpetrator could never be expunged from their memory. Only by the love, grace and mercy of the Lord would they be able to cope with their lives and to turn their experience of heart-rending loss into a compassionate heart for others.

# THE RETURN TO NAZARETH

***Matthew 2:19-23***

## MATTHEW 2:19-21

Shortly after these events, Herod the Great died. According to the Jewish historian, *Josephus*, the king was afflicted by a fatal disease that affected especially his lower body. This disease led to Herod's lingering and agonising demise. (*Jos. Antiq.* 17.168-69)

Now that the king was dead, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in Egypt commanding him to take the Child and his mother back to Israel. Greatly relieved to learn of Herod's death, Joseph obeyed the angel's charge and returned with his family to their native land.

## MATTHEW 2:22-23

When Joseph arrived in Judea, he learned that Archelaus, the eldest of Herod's sons, was now reigning as ethnarch over Judea (and also over Samaria and Idumea) in his father's place. As events would show, Archelaus resembled his evil father in many respects and exercised a similar degree of wanton cruelty toward people. He ordered the destruction of almost 3,000 worshippers who had come to attend a Jewish Passover *(Josephus)*. With good reason, therefore, Joseph was afraid to return to the Judean area; and, being warned in a dream, he continued northward until he reached the province of Galilee.

Antipas—King Herod's youngest son—was governor or tetrarch[10] of Galilee and Perea. Although not without a vicious disposition of his own, Antipas was considered to be less vindictive (comparatively) than Archelaus—his older brother in Judea. Furthermore, Antipas and Archelaus were in a state of enmity toward each other.

Once in the region of Galilee, Joseph, Mary and the young Jesus took up residence in the town of Nazareth. This had been Joseph and Mary's former home town. However, while they were there—and in accordance with God's express plan and purposes—Caesar Augustus had issued a decree that everyone must return to the town of their birth so that a census could be taken. (Luke 1:26-27; 2:39) It was this decree that had brought Joseph and Mary to the village of Bethlehem, where the Lord Jesus was born in fulfilment of prophecy. (Luke 2:1-7)

Now, however, Joseph and Mary had returned to the town of Nazareth. There, the Lord Jesus would be brought up, and there he would learn his trade—instructed by Joseph in carpentry. Apart from visits to Jerusalem for the Jewish festivals, Jesus would remain in Nazareth and the Galilean area until the time came for him to begin his public ministry almost 30 years later. From his upbringing here, he would become known as 'Jesus the Nazarene'.

Anyone belonging to Nazareth was considered by certain other Jews to be of a lower class or standing than mainstream Jewish society; and, in course of time, Nazarenes were belittled and despised for their place of origin. Thus, when told that they had found the Messiah, Nathanael asked disparagingly, *"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"* (John 1:46)

Ultimately, Jesus would be referred to (inaccurately) as a 'Nazarene'—an expression that was intended to convey insult, or to give offence. Jesus, the holy, harmless, sinless Son of God, would be despised—for our sakes.

[10] *tetrarch*: Lit., the governor of a fourth part of a country, but applied more generally to anyone who governed a Roman province, irrespective of allocation or size.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 3

## JOHN THE BAPTIST

***Matthew 3:1-12***

*(Mark 1:3-8; Luke 3:1-17; John 1:6-8,19-28)*

### MATTHEW 3:1

Matthew does not provide us with an account of John the Baptist's background. However, these details are given by Luke in his Gospel. (Luke 3:1-18; cf. John 1:6-8,19-28)

Baptism was not unknown to the Jews. Indeed, baptism by immersion was commonly practised whenever a Gentile proselyte was admitted into the Jewish faith. However, this kind of baptism was not practised among Jews.

The ministry of John the Baptist had been prophesied in the OT Scriptures. (Isa. 40:3-6; cf. Luke 1:17,76; John 1:23) Indeed, the people had been told that when this prophet arose in Judea, this would signal the imminent arrival of their Messiah. Thus, Malachi had prophesied:

> Malachi 3:1 ESV
>
> (1) "Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts." (Cf. 1:17)

Again, Malachi had declared:

> Malachi 4:5-6 ESV
>
> (5) "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. (6) And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction." (Cf. Matt. 10:34-36)

That John the Baptist came in the spirit and power of Elijah is confirmed by the Lord himself in the following passage:

> Matthew 17:10-13 ESV
>
> (10) And the disciples asked him, "Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?"
>
> (11) He answered, "Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. (12) But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands."
>
> (13) Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

In the two passages above from the book of Malachi, the prophet clearly foretells the coming of a messenger to prepare the way of the Lord. This messenger was John the Baptist. Shortly after John began preaching a baptism of repentance the Lord himself would appear on the scene—'*the Lord whom you*

*seek'*, according to Malachi's prophecy (3:1). This is the Messenger of the Covenant, or the LORD's Christ.

Matthew tells us that John preached in the desert area of Judea. In this case, the 'desert' was not an empty wilderness, but an area of rough untilled pastureland with few if any inhabitants. John did not choose this area so that he could avoid preaching in the city of Jerusalem or the surrounding towns and villages, but so that he could more easily baptise the large numbers of people who repented of their sins. Although a desert area, it was not too remote from the towns and villages near Jerusalem and it lay beside the Jordan River.

## MATTHEW 3:2

John the Baptist proclaims one very simple but essential message: *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* (Cf. Dan. 2:44; Matt. 4:17,23)

The forerunner or herald of the LORD's Christ does not hesitate to call the people to repentance for their sins—as God required him to do. However, John does not merely *invite* the people to repent. Rather, he *commands* them to repent. (Gk., μετανοεῖτε, *metanoeite*). This is in keeping with Paul's words in Acts 17, where it says that God *"commands all people everyone to repent because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed…"* (Acts 17:30-31a ESV)

John the Baptist, however, was not preaching some new theme to the people. For centuries past, the prophets of both Israel and Judah had been preaching repentance from sin and obedient trust in God. Nevertheless, for the most part, the people had ignored the prophets' calls to repentance and had continued in their sinful way of life. Ultimately, God had disciplined or punished them by sending them into captivity.

For the past 400 years, however, the prophetic word from God had ceased. Thus, when John the Baptist arrived on the scene preaching repentance, this theme and this kind of preaching would be new to that entire generation. Nevertheless, although they had not heard the prophetic voice until the days of John the Baptist, the people were without excuse. The Scriptures were read and taught regularly in their synagogues and temple. Thus, they knew what God required. (Deut. 10:12; Mic. 6:8)

John follows the command to repent with the phrase, "…*for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*."

The Jews knew very well what this meant. It was the time when the Lord would set up his sovereign rule among them in the person of his Messiah. However, they had misunderstood the nature of this rule or kingdom. The Jews believed that their Messiah would come to set up an earthly kingdom—like that of King David from whom the Messiah was to descend according to his human nature. Mistakenly, they believed that—when he appeared—the Messiah would rule on earth, that he would overthrow all their enemies (at this time, the Romans), and that he would rule over his kingdom in peace and righteousness.

However, the very expression, 'kingdom of heaven' (or 'kingdom of God',[11] as it is called by Mark and Luke, and as 'eternal life' by John) should have told them that Messiah's kingdom was not of this world:

[11] *kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God:* Although some commentators see a distinction between these two expressions, this distinction is not recognised by the writers of Scripture (including Mark and Luke) who use the alternative term to refer to the same events as Matthew.

i.e., it was not an earthly or political kingdom. Rather, it was a spiritual and heavenly kingdom. In its then imminent and now current phase, it was a rule that Christ would exercise—not on earth—but in the hearts and lives of his redeemed people: For the kingdom of heaven (or the kingdom of God) would be within them. (Luke 17:21) In his subsequent teaching, the Lord Jesus was to make these points very clear to the people.

From this, we learn that—when he came to earth—the Lord Jesus initiated or inaugurated the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 4:17; 10:7; 12:28; Mark 1:15; Luke 9:11; 11:20; 21:31) At his Second Coming, the glorified Lord Jesus will consummate that kingdom. (Cf. Matt. 6:10; 26:64)

Now, however, the Lord's forerunner—John the Baptist—declares fearlessly to all the people: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*."

## MATTHEW 3:3

Having introduced us to John the Baptist, Matthew now explains where John fits into the prophetic office of the Scriptures. He does this by referring to the words of the prophet, Isaiah. In chapter 43 of this book, Isaiah had prophesied through the Spirit of the Lord:

> Isaiah 40:3-5, 10-11 ESV
>
> (3) A voice cries:
>
> "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. (4) Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. (5) And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken...."
>
> (10) Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. (11) He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.
>
> (Cf. Isa. 62:10-12; cf. also Luke 1:17,76; John 1:23)

Matthew condenses Isaiah's prophecy. However, it is evident from verse 3 that the prophet is speaking of one who would appear in the wilderness to prepare the way of the LORD. This was speaking of the prophet that would appear before the LORD himself—viz., John the Baptist.

Perhaps we should note that the word translated LORD in this passage is a word referring to the Sovereign Lord God himself (i.e., Yahweh). Thus, in the Old Testament, it is evident that the LORD God himself would come, and that he would tend his flock like a shepherd and gather the lambs in his arms (v.11). These were the very offices that were to be fulfilled by the Lord Jesus Christ, or God the Son.

## MATTHEW 3:4

Matthew now tells us something about John's clothing. In common with Elijah and other Old Testament prophets, John wore a rough garment made from camel's hair. Around his waist, he wore a leather belt. This was the clothing commonly associated with the prophets of God, and was worn for several reasons:

- It demonstrated the submissive nature of the messenger and of his desire to serve and please only the One who had sent him.
- It reminded the people of the torn garments and with the sackcloth and ashes normally associated with grief, repentance and fasting.
- In complete contrast to the heralds of the royal courts on earth, John's spartan clothing and meagre lifestyle spoke of a forerunner who did not occupy an elevated position at court, but who was humble and lowly; who associated and identified with the common people, and who would prepare the way for the One above all others who was humble and lowly; who identified with the common people, and yet who was King of king and Lord of lords—the Sovereign God incarnate.

John's basic diet tells us simply that—although he was the appointed herald of the King of kings and the Messiah of Israel—yet he did not feast sumptuously at the banquets held in the royal courts. Rather, he lived on a subsistence diet; yet, it was a diet sufficient to meet his daily needs.

Some commentators believe that the locusts mentioned in the text were not literal locusts, but some other food called by that name, such as a variety of fish or fruit. However, there is no reason to suppose that John did not eat locusts or grasshoppers, since these insects had been declared clean foods. (Lev. 11:22) Again, John was free to eat honey from the wild bees—although possibly not the wild bees themselves.

## MATTHEW 3:5-6

We see from verse 5 that large numbers of people came from the city of Jerusalem, from the surrounding towns and villages of Judea, and from further afield to see and hear John the Baptist. Many of those who came to John the Baptist would be religious people; nominally, at least. They would be accustomed to attending the synagogue and to hearing the reading of the Law (Torah). However, the majority may never have repented of their sins or sought forgiveness from God. Thus, when they heard the message preached through John the Baptist, where God commanded people to repent, large numbers of these people acknowledged their sins and professed repentance before the Lord.

Clearly, while preaching repentance, the Baptist would have explained to these people why repentance toward God, together with forgiveness of sins, and baptism were essential.

Following their confession and repentance, John and his disciples then baptised each of these individuals in the Jordan River, typifying the cleansing inwardly (i.e., morally and spiritually) of their 'hearts' or minds, or the 'washing away' of their sins. Later, when the Lord Jesus made atonement for sin, the sins of all his people would be purged, cleansed or washed away forever through his once-for-all sacrifice of atonement effected by his shed blood. When baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, this would symbolise their rising again with him spiritually, and their being elevated with him spiritually to the heavenly realms. (Eph. 2:6)

As we shall see shortly, not everyone who came to hear John preach was baptised by him or by his disciples. John baptised only those who showed genuine signs of repentance toward God and who acknowledged and confessed their sins to God. Many of those who came to the Baptist thought they had no need of repentance. Hence, these individuals were not baptised. Thus, because they had not acknowledged their sins to God, nor repented of their evil deeds, God did not forgive them. Although many of these

people were religious leaders within the Jewish community, they were still in their sins. Examples of these people can be seen in the verses that follow.

## MATTHEW 3:7-8

Among those who came to hear John and to seek his baptism were a number of Pharisees and Sadducees. Among the Pharisees would be scribes or legal experts or teachers of the (OT) law. Predominant among the Sadducees would be Jewish priests.

Clearly, however, neither the Pharisees nor Sadducees had come to repent of their sins. They would never have embarrassed themselves by confessing their sins openly before the large gathering of ordinary people who had come to hear John. The common people of the land considered the Pharisees and Sadducees to be the epitome of holiness and righteousness. Indeed, it was the priests (members of the Sadducees) who stood daily in the temple to make atonement for the sins of the people.

Thus, since these religious leaders were not seeking to repent, it must be assumed that they were seeking baptism to give the impression to the people that they too had been the recipients of God's mercy and blessing, and that they too were among the forgiven and favoured people of God. Thus, it becomes clear that the Pharisees and Sadducees were seeking only to deceive gullible people, leading them to believe that their religious leaders were doing everything that God required.

Nevertheless, John the Baptist recognised immediately the rank hypocrisy of these leaders. Turning toward them, he proclaims fearlessly, *"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"* (v.7) (cf. Mal. 3:2-5)

Nothing could have been more grossly offensive or insulting to these religious leaders than to be equated with a brood of vipers. Did not such a remark place them on the same level as Satan—the serpent? And did not this same serpent lie and deceive our first parents, causing them to disbelieve and despise the word of God, and turning them away from the holy commandment? (Cf. 2 Cor. 11:3) Now, here was John the Baptist likening them to the serpent and father of lies himself. Yet, it was not only John the Baptist who spoke such dreadful words. Later, the Lord Jesus Christ himself—who knew the hearts of all men—would speak very similar words when he declared more generally to some hypocritical Jewish hearers:

> John 8:43-44 ESV
>
> (43) "Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word.
> (44) You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

Essentially, then—and in typically prophetic mode—John the Baptist is warning the Pharisees and Sadducees that God knows their hearts. Like Satan, their hearts are filled with pride, selfish ambition, hypocrisy, deceit, lies and other kindred evils. Outwardly, they appeared to be the most holy of men. Inwardly, however, they were corrupt—'full of dead men's bones', as the Lord says elsewhere. (Matt. 23:27)

Baptism demonstrating repentance is wholly inappropriate for anyone who continues in the practise of sin. Baptism presupposes prior acknowledgement, genuine heartfelt repentance and confession of sin to God. Such repentance is always followed by good fruit—fruit unto God. However, John knew that the

religious leaders lacked repentance and therefore were incapable or producing the evidences or fruits of repentance that God required. Thus, he absolutely refused to baptise these religious leaders, since this would have made a mockery of this holy ordinance.

John had demanded of them: *"…Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"* (v.7)

By making this remark, John the Baptist is showing beyond all doubt where these Pharisees and Sadducees stood in relation to God. They claimed to be pious and holy practitioners of God's law; and the people believed them to be so. However, John's declaration exposes the fallacy of their claim. If it was necessary for them to flee from the wrath to come, then clearly they must have been abiding under the wrath of God at the time John spoke. (John 3:36; Rom. 1:18) In other words, they were still in their sins. Ultimately, if they remained unrepentant and unforgiven, the wrath of God would be poured out upon them in full measure at the last day—the Day of Judgment.

How, then, could these highly respected religious leaders escape God's present and future wrath on impenitent mankind? By acknowledging and repenting of their sins—in response to the Baptist's message—and by seeking the mercy of the Lord. However, these religious leaders had no intention of confessing their sins to God. Indeed, they were not looking inwardly at their sinful state and lost condition but outwardly at their lineage or descent from the patriarch Abraham. They believed that their connection with Abraham guaranteed their acceptance by God. Thus, they had an answer ready for John's denunciation of their hypocritical lifestyle. However, the Baptist had already anticipated their proud and arrogant response.

## MATTHEW 3:9

John the Baptist supposed that these religious professors and experts in religious history were on the verge of raising a very powerful objection to his forthright denunciation of them and to his refusal to acknowledge them (effectively) as God's people. Thus, the Baptist answers their argument before they can put it to him, by saying:

(9a) "And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father…'"

Spiritual pride and arrogance can be one of the most offensive sins among religious people. Had not John anticipated their response, they would have put this argument themselves *…"We have Abraham as our Father…"* In other words,

> 'We cannot be certain about your (i.e., John's) lineage or pedigree. However, we are Jews of pure descent. We are Abraham's children, and we can prove this. Furthermore, (they would argue), God made an inviolable promise to and covenant with Abraham to preserve and bless his descendants and to reserve them as his own chosen people throughout their generations. Since, therefore, we are true Jews and true descendants of Abraham, we must inherit the blessing and promises made by God to our forefather. We must be his chosen people—his children. Therefore, we do not need to be told by you (John the Baptist) that we are not God's children when you accuse us of being a brood of vipers; and, by direct implication, the children or offspring of the evil one.'

However, having anticipated this very argument, John the Baptist thunders forth to these proud and arrogant men, "…*for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham*."

In their supposed argument with John the Baptist these religious leaders had laid claim to their descent from Abraham, and by implication, to their inheritance in the covenant blessings and benefits bestowed on Abraham by the LORD. However, had they been given the opportunity to present their argument, it would have become abundantly clear that their argument was fatally flawed. Yes, they were natural descendants of Abraham. But the covenant that God had made with Abraham was conditional on obedience to his word and faith in his promises. In other words, disobedience or unfaithfulness could result in suspension or loss of these blessings and God's punishment of the people.

This is precisely what happened. Because of their persistent rebellion, disobedience and unbelief over many centuries, God disciplined these people; sometimes sending them into captivity. Ultimately, after many generations, only a relatively small number remained faithful to God and continued to trust in his word (the remnant). These alone were now the true people of God. The vast majority of people now in the land were no longer God's chosen people—and this included many of the Pharisees and Sadducees. They had lost their connection with Abraham, and therefore they had lost their claim on God's covenant promises to Abraham and to his descendants—for they were not of the elect remnant.

Thus, John asserts emphatically, "…*for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham*."

God's promises to Abraham cannot be invalidated, nor can they fail to be fulfilled. God had promised to Abraham a seed. However, because of their spiritual torpor, the Pharisees and Sadducees had failed utterly to grasp another important aspect of the covenant promise that God made with Abraham. When God had promised to make of Abraham a great nation and had established a covenant with him and with his seed or offspring after him, this covenant was not intended merely or principally for the *natural* descendants of Abraham, but for his *spiritual* descendants. In other words, those would be the children of Abraham who exercised faith like Abraham. Thus, Abraham's children were to be all true believers—of whatever race or nationality—from around the world. (Rom. 4:16; Gal. 3:7-8) Yes, the Lord God could have raised up Abraham's true children from *lifeless stones*—had this been necessary, and such was the extent of the Sovereign Creator's power. However, the children of Abraham that God did raise up were to become *living stones* in the building of which Christ was to become Head—the Church. (1 Pet. 2:5)

## MATTHEW 3:10

Before these austere religious guides and experts in the law could protest, John continued his denunciation against them: For, in faithfulness to God, the Baptist is treating these men as false prophets and is proclaiming the word of the Lord against these false prophets or false teachers. Thus, John uses an unmistakable analogy of God's impending judgment drawn from arboriculture or tree husbandry.

Cultivated orchard trees are planted for a specific purpose—to produce fruit. These trees are tended regularly by the husbandman or vinedresser so that they bring forth increasing amounts of fruit each season. The fruit produced is of benefit to the planter and to many others to whom the fruit is distributed.

However, if a given tree or shrub fails consistently to produce fruit, even after selective pruning—and perhaps because it is diseased—that tree must be cut down. It is of no profit to its owner. Furthermore, if it is a diseased tree, it is highly likely that other good trees will become contaminated and diseased themselves. Thus, the owner cuts the tree to the ground with his axe, uproots the stump from the ground (or otherwise destroys the stump), and burns the branches in the fire to prevent the spread of disease.

In like manner, God appointed people among the congregation of Israel to teach his people and to lead or shepherd his flock. However, many claimed to be teachers of God's law and God's ways whom the Lord had not appointed. These were the false shepherds and the false prophets spoken of in the Old Testament. These individuals may have achieved great learning and a considerable intellectual knowledge of God's law and of the Scriptures—but they did not know the God of the Scriptures. They were imposters.

Such were large numbers of the religious leaders in the days of John the Baptist. There were a few notable exceptions—men who sought to learn and know the truth about God such as Nicodemus. However, many others were wolves in sheep's clothing; and it is to such that John issues this stern warning. If they did not repent immediately of their spiritually unfruitful lives and of their hypocrisy and pretended faith in God, then God would act in judgment. Like unfruitful trees, he would bring them down from their exalted office. And like diseased trees, the Lord would judge them as their works deserved, ultimately consigning them to the eternal fire lest their corrupt lives and teaching should contaminate others. (Cf. Matt. 23:27-36)

As we shall see, the next few verses continue the theme of repentance and baptism, and also judgment on the finally impenitent.

## MATTHEW 3:11

(Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:26,33; Acts 1:5; 2:3)

John the Baptist, of course, was merely the herald or forerunner of the much greater One to come. John preached the message of repentance from sin, and he baptised all those who acknowledged and confessed their sins and sought the Lord's mercy and forgiveness. However, as John pointed out, he baptised with (or in) water. In and of itself, water does not effect inward cleansing or purification of the soul. It is a very important ordinance, but it is a *typical* ordinance: i.e., it points to or signifies another means or element through which internal cleansing (cleansing of the heart, mind or soul) is *actually* effected. This other means or element of cleansing or inward sanctification is the Holy Spirit.

He who baptised with the Holy Spirit was even then about to appear—the Messiah of God—He who was (and is) pre-eminent before and above all others. (Col. 1:18) Thus, John declared that he—the Lord's herald—was wholly unworthy to stand before him. Indeed, the Baptist considered himself unworthy even to stoop down at the Lord's feet to loose his sandals or to carry them. (Mark 1:7; Luke 3:16)

However, not only was the Lord immeasurably higher in status than John the Baptist, he also was immeasurably more powerful—for he was God incarnate. (John 1:1-3) As the Son of God (or God the Son), the Lord Jesus possessed all the attributes of God Almighty. (Col. 1:15-19; 2:9) John could baptise with water *typifying* the cleansing of the soul, but the Lord Jesus could baptise with the Holy Spirit *effecting* the cleansing of the soul. Only God could do this, for only God could forgive sin—the necessary prerequisite to the cleansing of the soul and the purging of an evil conscience. (Heb. 10:22)

(Of course, John was alluding to the Holy Spirit's work in effectual calling, regeneration and sanctification culminating in glorification. This, in turn, was based on the substitutionary, atoning and finished work of Christ on earth at Calvary, and his subsequent death, resurrection and exaltation to glory. However, we will cover these essential truths more fully later in this Gospel and elsewhere in this series.)

Thus, those baptised with the Holy Spirit are those whom the Holy Spirit calls to repentance and faith in Christ and whom he regenerates unto newness of life. They are those who receive the Spirit of grace and of holiness. They are those whom the Spirit of God seals and sanctifies. They are those whom the Holy Spirit purges or cleanses inwardly (morally and spiritually) like refiner's fire purifying the gold and consuming the dross.

However, there is an additional meaning for the word 'fire' in this verse, as we shall see in the verse that follows.

## MATTHEW 3:12

(Cf. Matt. 13:30,41-42; Luke 3:17)

John immediately followed his remarks on the Lord's work in grace with the Lord's work in judgment. Undoubtedly, this is a reference to the judgment at the last day, or the Final Judgment. The same Lord who baptises with the Holy Spirit unto repentance and life will come also to judge the world in righteousness. (Acts 17:31)

John declares that he (the Messiah) will come with his winnowing fork: That is, he is coming with the 'implements' that will enable him to sift the crop and to separate the wheat from the chaff. On the threshing floor (representing the place of judgment or dividing), he will separate the true from the false and the good from the bad. Having separated them into two distinct categories, he then will gather the wheat or good crop into his barn (representing heaven). However, the chaff or bad contents among the crop he will burn with unquenchable fire (representing hell).

This verse, however, is not intended to be relevant only to the events of the last day or the Day of Judgment. The Scriptures clearly assert, and the Lord Jesus has affirmed positively, that, at present, those who reject him are abiding under the wrath and judgment of God, even while they live. (John 3:36) Furthermore, the Lord has declared emphatically that those who reject Moses' words (essentially, the Word of God) will find that this same Word condemns them on the Day of Judgment. (John 5:45-47) Thus, all those who refuse to repent and seek the forgiveness of the Lord, are abiding under God's holy and righteous wrath and judgment. Only by turning to God in true repentance and genuine faith in his Son can they escape the final expression of God's wrath yet to come.

We must remember the context in which these words were spoken—viz., John's address to the Pharisees and Sadducees. It is to these religious leaders particularly—although by no means exclusively—that these present words are addressed. Essentially, the Baptist is warning them—and, by extension, the entire nation of Israel—that the Lord will judge them; that he will separate the good from the bad, or the spiritually fruitful and profitable from the spiritually unfruitful and worthless. Regardless of their profession before men, those religious leaders who proved spiritually worthless will be treated like the chaff—and burned like the chaff in unquenchable fire.

This, of course, is true not only of hypocritical Jewish religious leaders but also of Christian religious leaders (so-called) who are unworthy, unfruitful, or otherwise unfaithful to God and to the truth. Those among them who are unfaithful, but nevertheless were genuine believers, will be saved—but only as one escaping through the flames. (1 Cor. 3:15) They will forfeit some or all of their reward in heaven. However, those among them who did not belong to Christ, but who were imposters and false professors within the church, will be condemned and sentenced to the eternal fire.

In passing, we might observe that—like the Lord Jesus—John qualifies the noun 'fire' with the adjective, 'unquenchable' (Gk., ἀσβέστῳ, *asbestō*). This is not intended to add dramatic effect to the seriousness of the Final Judgment or of the subsequent punishment, but to emphasise that this punishment is eternal. It will not cease throughout the everlasting ages. However, unlike their souls which are immortal and incapable of perishing, the bodies of those consigned to that place of torments will be so adapted that they cannot be destroyed or annihilated by the flames: i.e., by the intensity or searing nature of God's righteous and everlasting punishment on them. (Cf. Mark 9:48)

## JESUS BAPTISED

***Matthew 3:13-17***

*(Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:31-34)*

### MATTHEW 3:13-14

While John continued to Baptise at the Jordan River, the Lord Jesus left Galilee and travelled down to the area where John was preaching. Now, the One of whom John had been speaking appeared. The very Son of God and Messiah of Israel was standing now in John's presence.

The Baptist must have been very apprehensive to find the Lord Jesus standing before him. Although John may have known Jesus from childhood, the Baptist was not aware as yet that Jesus was God's Anointed—the promised Messiah. (John 1:31) However, God had revealed to John how he would be able to recognise the Messiah when he came.

However, it soon becomes evident that Jesus desired John to baptise him. This must have left John perplexed. His was a baptism of repentance, and he baptised willingly all those who acknowledged and repented of their sins and confessed them to God. However, although he was not yet sure of Jesus' real identity, he suspected that this august, dignified and majestic Person now standing before him had no need of repentance. Indeed, since by his very demeanour, the Lord Jesus gave the distinct impression that he was far above all others, John considered that Jesus should be baptising him unto repentance. Thus, John's remarks: *"I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?"*

### MATTHEW 3:15

The Lord provides John with an answer and a reason for his baptism. The Lord had not come to set aside or to invalidate the law of God (as his accusers would say), but to fulfil it. However, fulfilling the law of God was not to be limited to obeying and fulfilling only the law of commandments—important as these were. The Lord Jesus had come to fulfil everything in the Scriptures that spoke of him, whether by the word of commands, or by ordinances, types or sacrifices: Everything given by God to the people, from the times of Adam, Abraham and Moses to that of John the Baptist, had to achieve its ultimate fulfilment in Christ.

The ordinance of baptism had been given by God to John to administer to the people upon their repentance. Therefore, although the Lord Jesus had no sins of which to repent—since he was perfectly holy and righteous—yet, he needed to fulfil this ordinance. This is because God had instituted this rite and had given it to John to administer not only as a sign of repentance, but also as a sign of faith in God and

obedience to God. It was this latter element that was applicable to the Lord Jesus. Hence the reason he declared that it was fitting to fulfil all righteousness—here, exemplified in obedience to his Father in heaven. Thus, John consented to baptise the Lord Jesus. (Cf. Ps. 40:7-8)

Of course, this was just a single example of the Lord's perfect or unwavering obedience to God. Throughout his life, he would demonstrate the same steadfast obedience to the will of his Father that he might fulfil all righteousness not only on his own behalf but also on behalf of all those whom he had come to redeem. (John 4:34; 8:29)

## MATTHEW 3:16-17

(Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32)

John then baptised the Lord Jesus.

Following the Lord's baptism, John suddenly witnessed the heavens parting above him. Then, from the heavens, the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove and alighted upon the Lord Jesus. There it rested, symbolizing the almighty power and presence of the Spirit of God upon the life and work of the Lord Jesus.

While the dove rested upon the Lord Jesus, a voice resounded from heaven, *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."* (v.17) Now, John knew that Jesus was the Son of God; the promised Anointed of God, and the appearing of whom God had told John to proclaim to the people.

The apostle John records these events by saying:

> John 1:32-34 ESV
>
> (32) And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. (33) I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptise with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptises with the Holy Spirit.'
>
> (34) "And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

The Lord God had confirmed his word in two distinct ways:

1. By causing the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove to alight on the Lord Jesus at his baptism, God identified Jesus to John as the promised Messiah, since the Baptist had been told previously to expect this sign on God's Anointed.

2. By hearing the voice of God the Almighty speaking concerning the Lord Jesus and identifying Jesus as his beloved Son in whom he was well pleased.

Thus, public testimony was borne to the Lord Jesus by Almighty God. Those who heard the voice of God knew that the Lord God Almighty was declaring the Lord Jesus to be his only Beloved Son. They ought to have known, also, that this was the One whom God had promised to send, and of whom the Scriptures had long spoken—the Righteous Branch, the Son of David, and the Messiah of Israel.

Thus, the prophet Isaiah had declared:

> Isaiah 11:1-2 ESV
>
> (1) There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. (2) And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

And Jeremiah had prophesied:

> Jeremiah 23:5-6 ESV
>
> (5) “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. (6) In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'” (See also Jer. 33:15-16)

Having heard God’s testimony to his Son, it would be wilful disobedience and rebellion to refuse to acknowledge God’s Son as the Messiah or Saviour of Israel and to heed his teaching. Nevertheless, although many would rejoice at his coming, the majority of sinful men and women would not be prepared to hear or receive the Son of God—as subsequent events will show. Even so, God was fully aware that his Son would be despised and rejected at the hands of his people Israel and at the hands of sinful men more generally.

However, even the rejection by the majority of God’s Son was in accordance with God’s sovereign decrees. God’s eternal plans and purposes could not be set aside or nullified by the evil whims or will of sinful men. What God had predestined must come to pass. And, from eternity, God had predestined the salvation of an elect number (known only to God) from among the totality of fallen sinful men and women. God would redeem and reconcile to himself this elect people through the atonement made for sinners by his own beloved Son. Therefore, in his love, grace and mercy, the Lord God would call this people to himself—and he would call his people from among every nation under the sun. It is they who would constitute his church on earth and his special treasure in heaven.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 4

## JESUS TEMPTED BY SATAN

***Matthew 4:1-11***

### MATTHEW 4:1

(Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1; cf. Heb. 4:15)

God the Father had declared publicly that Jesus was his only Beloved Son. (Matt. 3:17; 17:5; Mark 1:11; 9:7; Luke 3:22; 2 Pet. 1:17)

The Father had sent his Holy Spirit upon his Son to identify Jesus as the LORD's Anointed or the Messiah of God, to demonstrate his union with the Father, and to unite the Lord's work on earth with that of the Father in heaven. The Lord Jesus had submitted to the ordinance of baptism—not for repentance—but as a sign of faith and of obedience to his Father, thus forming part of his intention to fulfil all righteousness. (Matt. 3:15)

Now, following his baptism and before beginning his public ministry, God the Father puts his Son's faith and obedience to the ultimate test. The Holy Spirit who descended upon him at his baptism now leads ('drives' or 'impels') the Lord Jesus to a secluded spot in the wilderness of Judea. There, Jesus will be tempted: Not, however, from any evil inclinations or propensities toward evil residing within his human nature; for—unlike every other person in the world—the Lord Jesus does not have a fallen, sinful human nature. He is sinless. (1 John 3:3; 1 Pet. 2:22) Rather, he will be tempted by the evil one, acting upon his mind and will with powerful external suggestions. To be tempted directly by Satan is the most severe form of temptation that any person can undergo.

We must remember, of course, that although Jesus was the Son of God and *divine* in nature, he was also the incarnate Son of God and *human* in nature. It was his human nature alone that Satan would and could assail, and it was by his perfect human nature alone that the Lord Jesus would respond.

### MATTHEW 4:2

However, before the Lord is subjected to the vile assaults of the evil one, he undergoes a period of fasting. Although not explicitly stated, we may assume that the Lord used this period in prolonged and agonising prayer to his Father for the ordeal that lay ahead. Yet, the Lord Jesus would know that the temptations would be but the beginning of temptations throughout the period of his ministry and work since Satan would try repeatedly to turn him away from the Cross. Not that Satan wanted to prevent the Lord Jesus from dying. However, the evil one wanted to prevent the Lord from dying as a perfect, holy and unblemished substitute for sinners. He knew that—should the Lord succeed in making atonement for sin at Calvary—then Jesus would succeed also in winning the victory over evil and the evil one, and would destroy Satan's power at the Cross.

Satan (Gk., Σατανᾶ, *satana*) or the devil (Gk., διάβολος, *diabolos*) is a created being—a fallen angel. As such, he is not omnipotent or omniscient. Again, Satan is not in any way a being equal but opposite to

God in power. The devil is a supernatural being or spirit; but—like the created angels—he is a much lesser spirit being than Almighty God and cannot be compared with God in any sense whatsoever.

Nevertheless, as a mighty (not almighty) spirit being, Satan possesses superhuman or supernatural (but nevertheless limited) power and knowledge which he uses now for evil purposes. This power and knowledge enables him to do and see things that are beyond the scope or abilities of human beings. Thus, it would not be difficult for the devil to have known that the Lord Jesus had come to lay down his life as a sacrifice for sin and as a substitute for sinners. Furthermore, he was well acquainted with the Scriptures. He knew their teaching, and he knew also how to misapply their teaching.

The Lord Jesus was fully aware of Satan's supernatural powers and knowledge. Thus, by fasting beforehand, he was preparing his mind and body for the ordeal that lay ahead. This meant, of course, that although he had prepared himself mentally and physically for the test, he was nevertheless weakened physically by hunger after fasting for the forty day or approximately six week period.

This 40 day period of fasting bears striking resemblances to the 40 day periods of fasting practised by Moses when he was about to deliver God's law of commandments to Israel (Exod. 34:28), and by Elijah the prophet when he was about to proclaim the word of God to the people. (1 Kings 19:8)

## MATTHEW 4:3

At this point, we should note that—in recording the temptations of Jesus—the Gospel writers do not always record them in the same order. Thus, the sequence of the temptations in Matthew's account differs from that given in Luke. (Luke 4:1-13) (Mark records the fact of the temptations without providing a detailed sequence of events. Mark 1:12-13)

After Jesus had finished fasting ...*the tempter came*...

Satan knows when to attack, and when his evil allurements will prove most effective. He waited until the Lord Jesus was at his weakest point, physically and psychologically. In the normal course of events, this is when a person is most likely to succumb to temptation and to commit sin.

Thus, Satan began his onslaught by attempting to deceive the Lord Jesus and to cause him to doubt God's Word. This, usually, is where the devil begins in his attacks against God's people—by tempting them to doubt the word of God—as he did with Eve in the Garden of Eden—and then causing them to disobey God's word and to sin against the Lord. (Gen. 3:1; cf. 2 Cor. 11:3)

The devil's words to the Lord Jesus were, *"If you are the Son of God..."* meaning, 'If you *really* are the Son of God...'

Here, Satan is sowing the seeds of doubt. *'If'* (conditional) *'you are...*' By phrasing his opening remarks in this way, the devil is casting doubt on whether in fact God the Father had spoken from heaven; or, if he had, whether in fact he had acknowledged and addressed Jesus as his beloved Son. Essentially, Satan was questioning Jesus' identity and origins. The evil one was suggesting implicitly and subtly that Jesus had not heard the voice of God speaking to him from heaven, and that in fact Jesus had not come from the very presence of the Father in heaven.

However, if these suggestions were untrue, and he really were the Son of God, then Jesus could easily demonstrate this by exercising his divine power. Satan's next tactic, therefore, is to tempt the Lord Jesus

to prove that he is the Son of God by performing some miracle that only God could perform. Thus, he completes his evil sentence: 'If you are*…then.,.'*

If the Lord Jesus is truly the Son of God, then it would be perfectly possible for him to perform miraculous signs. Even Satan acknowledges that God is Creator of all things. Therefore, if Jesus is the Son of God, he too must be the Creator of all things. (John 1:1-3; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2) With this in view, Satan entices the Lord Jesus to prove his Godhood by turning stones into bread—a straightforward demonstration of divine power. How could a demonstration of such power be conceived of as sinful? Think of the multitudes of poor and hungry people that could be fed from stones transformed into bread!

## MATTHEW 4:4

The Lord Jesus, of course, saw through the devil's wicked designs. The Lord knew that Satan was tempting him to doubt his commission from and anointing by God; to doubt his status as the Son of God, or to confirm his divine Sonship by a demonstration of his almighty power. This, however, would have been to sin wilfully against God. The Father had attested already to Jesus' commission and status, when he had declared, "*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*." (Matt. 3:17; see also 17:5) The Lord did not doubt this statement. He knew he had come from the Father, and that he would return to the Father. However, Satan should not even have suggested otherwise, nor should the evil one have attempted to entice Jesus to demonstrate his divinity by an act of omnipotence. This, too, would have been sinful; because such an act—performed in response to Satan's enticement—would have been in complete disregard of God's express plan and purposes for his Son.

Thus, the Lord Jesus responds to the lies of the devil from the Scriptures of truth. "*Man shall not live by bread alone."* (Deut. 8:3) Yes, food is important—but it is not all-important. Attending to our physical wellbeing is important—but it is not all-important. Paramount above all other things is obedience to the word and will of God. Thus, shall man be fed—"*by every word that comes from the mouth of God*." And obedience to the word of God requires the rejection of all forms of evil; whether by temptations, enticements, deceptions, or lies of the devil.

## MATTHEW 4:5-6

(Luke 4:9)

Next, Satan directs Jesus' thoughts to the holy city of Jerusalem. There, on high ground overlooking the city stood the magnificent temple edifice. Setting the Son of God on the pinnacle (peak, summit or wing) of the temple, the evil one begins by saying again, *'If you are the Son of God…'*

As on the first occasion, this is a direct assault on the integrity of the Father's testimony, on the Word of God, and on the Lord Jesus himself—for, by calling on the Lord to prove his divine power—the devil is tempting the Lord to disobey his Father and to act contrary to his Father's will and purposes. If Satan could succeed in this, then he would succeed in putting an end to the Lord's mission once and for all.

Now, the evil one tempts the Lord Jesus to cast himself down from the pinnacle, assuring the Lord that he could come to no harm and would merely be demonstrating the extent of his power and authority over nature. Indeed, in support of his temptation, the deceiver cites from Psalm 91 where the sacred

writer declares that the LORD will command his holy angels to bear him up, lest he strike his foot against a stone.

This, however, is a classic misquotation and misrepresentation of the Scriptures and Satan is adept at misapplying God's Word. The passage used by Satan reads as follows:

> Psalms 91:9-14 ESV
>
> (9) "Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—the Most High, who is my refuge—(10) no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent. (11) For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. (12) On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone. (13) You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot.
>
> (14) "Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name."

Satan has taken the words of this psalm completely out of context. In context, the psalm speaks of the blessedness and security of those who have made the Most High their dwelling place. The blessings are conditional on this fact. Those, however, who trust and obey the Lord, will experience his protection in all their ways: i.e., on their journey through life. Satan, however, was misapplying these verses to make them say something that the Spirit of God never intended them to say: viz., that God would uphold or protect his people when they disobeyed him; when they thought it necessary to substantiate or prove his promises; when they yielded to the temptation of Satan, or when they acted contrary to the express will of God. Clearly, the passage gives no support for this interpretation, and no promise of protection for those who are not dwelling (spiritually) in God's presence.

Would, then, the Lord Jesus accept the promise of protection given in this psalm—*as it had been misquoted to him by Satan?* Most certainly not! The Lord knew the Scriptures better than the evil one could ever know them, for he was their Author. He was (and is) the Word. (John 1:1) It was a futile attempt by the devil to bring the Lord's ministry and work to an end, but it was doomed to failure—as the next verse demonstrates.

## MATTHEW 4:7

Now, the Lord Jesus brings to bear on the tempter another passage of God's Word. However, the Lord Jesus quotes this passage correctly and he applies it as God intended.

Thus, to the tempter, the Lord declares: "*'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.*"

This was a very appropriate application of God's Word; for, in context, the passage reads:

> Deuteronomy 6:13-17 ESV
>
> (13) "It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear.
>
> (14) "You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you, (15) for the LORD your God in your midst is a jealous God, lest the anger of the LORD your God be kindled against you, and he destroy you from off the face of the earth.

(16) "You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.

(17) "You shall diligently keep the commandments of the LORD your God, and his testimonies and his statutes, which he has commanded you."

Addressed to Israel originally, this passage emphasises the necessity of remaining obedient to the LORD and of remaining faithful to him *to the total exclusion of all others*. To have departed from the worship of the one true God, or to have disobeyed his commands, would have been putting the LORD God to the test—as Israel did at Massah or Meribah when they complained bitterly against the LORD and against his servant Moses. (Exod. 17:7; Deut. 33:8)

The Lord Jesus' use of verse 16 above in his reply to the evil one is appropriate in the context, because it demonstrates that idolatry, disobedience to God, or disbelief in his Word, is identical to putting the LORD God to the test. It is either to assert openly, or to harbour the evil disposition within one's heart (or mind), that we cannot believe the word or promises of God unless we can verify them by taking action to test their validity. This, however, is an expression of rank unbelief and wilful rebellion against the integrity of God and of his word or promises. It is to despise the word of God and to treat the Lord God with contempt. Those who profess to be the Lord's people ought never to yield to such evil temptations. Rather, it is required of the Lord's people that they believe his word and his promises implicitly, for they are inviolable. They cannot fail any more than God himself can fail.

This, however, was what the devil was attempting to do with the Lord Jesus; because, if he could cause the Lord to submit to his evil suggestions, then the evil one would have caused the sinless Son of God to commit sin. Had this happened, however, the Lord Jesus could never have offered his life as a perfect, spotless, sinless sacrifice of atonement. Subsequently, there could have been no salvation for any person anywhere. Everyone would have remained under God's holy and righteous wrath and judgment, and everyone would have been separated from God for all eternity.

The Lord Jesus, however, was not about to let the chief of unclean or evil spirits cause him to disobey his heavenly Father's will and purpose for his life, or for the plan of redemption. Thus, the Lord utterly defeated Satan's subtle and deceptive onslaught by applying the Sword of the Spirit and repelling the devil's vile attack on the integrity of God and his Word.

We must remember, of course, that although the holy Son of God was being tempted by Satan, he was being subjected to this ordeal only by the express permission (or express decree) of his heavenly Father. From eternity, the Father had ordained this test not merely to demonstrate his Son's absolute obedience to the Father at all times—essential as this was—but also to prepare his Son for the ongoing temptations and indescribably severe ordeals and agonies of soul and body that lay ahead: For in these excruciating and harrowing afflictions, temptations and trials would so assail the holy Son of God that—had it been possible—the Lord Jesus might have been tempted to turn away from the Cross. As it was, however, he set his face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51)

It is said sometimes that—although the Lord was being tempted by Satan, there was nothing within his perfect nature that could respond in the sense of yielding to temptation. Certainly, it is true that the Lord did not have a sinful nature; for this nature is conveyed to us from Adam through natural procreation. However, since Jesus was conceived directly by the Holy Spirit within the virgin Mary, he did not receive that sinful nature. He was uncontaminated by the evil nature common to all mankind. However, since the Lord had never experienced sin, or become hardened by the practice of sin, then temptation to sin would

affect him all the more acutely. Humanly speaking, and had the Lord not remained totally obedient to his Father, he would have been at great risk of yielding to Satan's temptations.

It would have been impossible for the Lord Jesus to have sinned from any evil disposition, attitude or thought arising from within him, because he was pure, perfect and holy within. However, Satan was not appealing to the Lord's (non-existent) sinful nature to entice him to sin. Rather, the evil one was enticing the Lord Jesus by appealing to his mind and will from outside: i.e., from an external source (Satan) applying external temptations to the Lord's mind or will in order to induce him to sin.

This was precisely the manner used by the devil in the Garden of Eden, when—in the guise and by the subtlety of the Serpent—Satan tempted Eve *while she still possessed a perfect or sin-free nature*. When created by God originally, both Adam and Eve were perfectly righteous. Yet, although perfectly righteous, and with no innate sinful nature originally, both Adam and Eve could—and did—yield to Satan's temptations. Although with no innate tendency to sin or disposition of mind or soul toward sin, they nevertheless exercised their wills to respond to Satan's allurements and to sin against the LORD—wilfully breaking God's express commandment. As a result, both Adam and Eve suffered the consequences of their sin against God. Both fell from that state of righteousness in which God had created them originally. (Gen. 3:1-6, 13)

Therefore—*and in regard to his perfect human nature* (not his divine nature which is incapable of sinning)—to say that the Lord Jesus could not have sinned under any circumstances is to say that the Lord's perfect humanity was somehow different from the perfect sinless human beings that God created and placed in the Garden of Eden. It is to say, also, that the Lord's temptations were largely irrelevant and unnecessary. In fact, it is to imply that they were not real temptations as experienced by every human being; for if it was impossible for the Lord Jesus to have yielded, then he did not suffer as other human beings suffer: i.e., his suffering would have been incomplete since they would not have included genuine situations where, potentially, he *may* have sinned, but nevertheless refused to yield to sin and therefore successfully resisted every temptation and defeated every evil design of the devil.[12]

The Lord's temptations at the hands of the evil one were much more than a mere character building exercise. They constituted a genuine and very real testing of the Lord Jesus which had been ordained by his Father in order to prepare him for all that lay ahead, including the many subsequent temptations that he would face throughout his work on earth.

The devil, however, was not finished tempting the sinless Son of God.

[12] The fact that the perfect Lord Jesus resisted every temptation and remained totally sinless demonstrates unmistakably that the first perfect man (the first Adam) *need not* have sinned when tempted by the devil. Indeed, since both Adam and Eve had been created as morally perfect or completely righteous human beings, it demonstrates that our first parents could have resisted Satan's temptation by remaining obedient to God and to his Word. Therefore, their sin was wholly avoidable. However, having yielded to the allurements of the devil and deceiver of all mankind, our first parents sinned wilfully against the LORD. In the process, they incurred the guilt of flagrant unbelief, lust (evil desire or covetousness), pride, disobedience and rebellion against their Creator. (GL)

## MATTHEW 4:8-9

(Luke 4:5)

It is both unnecessary and unprofitable to speculate on the identity of this mountain. The location or other geographical details are not important. The circumstances of the temptation, and the Lord's response, are what matters.

Satan brings the Lord Jesus to the summit of a very high mountain. From these great heights, the Lord would be able to see over a vast distance and to glimpse something of the kingdoms that overlaid the earth. Of course, under normal circumstances and with the limitations of his human nature, the Lord could not have viewed the whole earth from the top of the mountain. However, the kingdoms that he could distinguish, or that Satan portrayed to him, represented all the kingdoms of the world, and the magnificence, power and glory associated with each of these majestic worldly realms.

Now, Satan asserts that he will give all these worldly kingdoms, with their vast treasures (the wealth of the nations), to the Lord Jesus as his personal possession—if he will fall down and worship him.

But what right did the devil have to make this offer to the Lord Jesus? Was this not just another lie of the devil, to entice the Lord Jesus into worshipping Satan?

In the Scriptures, Satan is referred to as '*the god of this world*' (2 Cor. 4:4) and '*the prince* (or 'ruler') *of the power of the air*'. (Eph. 2:2) That is, he is acknowledged as exercising his evil power over the entire world of fallen and sinful mankind, and of endeavouring continually to deceive mankind and to keep them away from God. However, the titles, 'prince of the power of the air', and 'god of this world' are usurped titles. Satan has no rightful authority over this world or over mankind, except insofar as God ordains and permits. Nevertheless, the evil one falsely claims such authority as his own by right, and he deceives mankind into believing his lies concerning the extent of his power and authority on earth. This, however, is a deceit of the devil. God—and God alone—rules supreme over the universe. God—and God alone—is in sovereign control of the universe and of everything within it, including mankind and every other created being. God's sovereign rule extends also over other created beings, such as the holy angels, the fallen angels or demons (although not so created), and every power or authority in heaven or on earth. (1 Tim. 6:15-16; Rev. 19:16) Thus, when Satan claimed authority to grant the kingdoms of this world to the Lord Jesus, he was lying and promising something that was not within his power to deliver.

Of course, it would not have been necessary for the devil to have delivered on his promise. Had the Lord Jesus yielded to Satan's blasphemous temptation, then the evil one would have succeeded in his objective.

But how does the Lord reply to such an iniquitous suggestion:

## MATTHEW 4:10

Once again, the holy Son of God turns to the word of God. Commanding Satan to depart, he quotes the written word of God: *"'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'"* (Deut. 6:13; cf. 10:20)

Idolatry is one of the worst sins that a person can commit against God—for it is putting someone or something else in place of God or alongside God. However, the Lord our God will brook no rivals. The Scriptures tell us repeatedly that he is a jealous God: i.e., he will not tolerate any supposed equals or any supposed lesser gods, of whatever nature. God alone must be worshipped exclusively, and God alone must be served exclusively. (Ex. 20:3-6)

It may be argued that there many deities or divine beings recognised by many different nations and cultures around the world, and that each of these divinities is true and valid for those people and for their particular faith. However, this argument is not valid, nor is it acceptable to God. According to the Scriptures, there is one true God and that God is Yahweh. (Ex. 3:14) There is no other. Concerning this, the prophet Isaiah pronounced the word of the LORD:

> Isaiah 45:21-23 ESV
>
> (21) "Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me.
>
> (22) "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. (23) By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.'"

Again, the apostle Paul declares,

> 1 Corinthians 8:5-6 ESV
>
> (5) For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"—(6) yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

From these, and from many other passages of God's Word, we conclude that all others gods (so called) are false gods. Therefore, those who worship and serve them are worshipping and serving false gods or idols. No matter how strong their faith in their particular god, they have been deceived and deluded—*by the lie of the devil*. The evil one uses such false divinities to draw people away from the true God and from a saving knowledge of the truth concerning his Son.

Thus, when Satan attempts to lead the Lord Jesus into sin, the Lord replies to him from the infallible and unchanging word of God, *"'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'"* (Deut. 6:13)

Either we accept the exclusivity of this statement or we imply that the Lord Jesus was making a grave error when he named the LORD our God (i.e., Yahweh) as the only God who must be worshipped and served. However, since the Lord Jesus cannot err, and indeed was stating the truth, then we must accept that no other form of religion is acceptable to God and that no other gods (so-called) have any real existence or power to act. Such gods or idols may exist in the minds of their followers, but they do not exist in fact. (Acts 17:16, 22-31)

Nevertheless, Satan uses belief in these false entities to deceive people and to further his own evil purposes. Furthermore, the evil one encourages belief in such (non-existent) gods or idols by using their

supposed reality to exercise his supernatural powers, or by using them as a channel for demonic operations or occult activities. Thus, people are deceived or deluded into believing that the power exercised by their idols or the voices speaking to them through mediums is a demonstration of their gods' power and divinity or of the mediums' ability to communicate with the dead. Even some people professing belief in Christ claim to have received communications from those now dead through mediums or spiritualists. However, these people, too, have been deceived and deluded either by a demonstration of Satan's supernatural powers or by the deceptive powers of the medium. In each of these cases, Satan has deceived people by demonstrating his power over the hearts and minds of those individuals who refuse to acknowledge the God of the Bible, or Jesus Christ his only Son—*in the manner laid down in God's holy Word, the Bible*.

Thus, the devil exercises his evil powers to deceive the nations and to draw people away to the worship of himself—as exemplified by the worship of false gods or idols. Nevertheless, there is only one divine Being worthy of all worship, homage, praise, honour and glory—and this is the Lord our God and Jesus Christ his Son. (Jude 1:24-25; cf. 1 Chron. 29:1-16)

Thus, Jesus declares to the wicked one, *"'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'"*

At the same time, the Lord of glory commands Satan to depart from his presence—for no supernatural being and no human being or agency will ever cause the holy Son of God to deviate from the path set out for him by the Father. He has come into the world to accomplish the will of his Father for the redemption of sinners, and he will finish this work—triumphing gloriously over Satan, sin and death in the process.

## MATTHEW 4:11

In response to the Lord's command, Satan departed. How could it be otherwise? God the Father rules over the universe, through his Son. Satan is merely a created, but fallen, spirit or angel. Although he can and does exercise supernatural powers, he is incapable of exercising divine powers. Although he is mighty, Satan is not almighty or omnipotent. He has none of the powers or authority of the Godhead, nor does Satan's power or authority approach anywhere near that of the Father or the Son. Thus, if the Lord commands Satan to depart, the evil one must depart forthwith from the Lord's holy presence.

Even believers are commanded to stand their ground against the evil one: "...*Resist the devil, and he will flee from you*." (Jas. 4:7b). This demonstrates the limited extent of Satan's power and authority since Christ defeated him at the Cross. Now, believers who submit to God (Jas. 4:7a) are able to resist the devil in the strength, power or authority of the indwelling Holy Spirit—and the devil will flee from them. Without the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit, the evil one would be able to stand against believers. However, Satan most certainly cannot stand against God the Holy Spirit. As with the demons who were terrified of the Lord's power over them, so the devil is terrified of the Holy Spirit's power over him—for the power of the Holy Spirit is the power of God, the Almighty.

Now that the devil had departed, the angels of God ministered to the Lord's needs. Spiritually, the Lord Jesus must have been exhausted after his encounter with the powers of evil and with the evil one himself. Physically, too, he must have been famished, since he had not eaten during this entire period. However, now the holy and glorious angels of God have arrived to serve their Lord and to provide for his needs, thus renewing his strength for the arduous task ahead.

## JESUS MOVES TO CAPERNAUM

***Matthew 4:12-16***

### MATTHEW 4:12-16

At this point, the Lord Jesus learned that Herod had ordered the arrest of John the Baptist. (Matt. 14:3; Mark 1:14; Luke 3:20) Of course, John's ministry had been pointing to the Lord Jesus, and he had identified the Lord as the Messiah of God. Therefore, it was probable that Herod or the Jewish religious authorities would be seeking the Lord Jesus in order to arrest him also. Their reasoning for detaining him would be that he threatened to cause civil disruption in the region, as had some previous pretenders to Messiahship, and certain Jewish zealots.

The Lord, however, knew their intentions. He had no intention of permitting the civil or religious authorities from hindering or thwarting God's plan or purposes for his life. Therefore, he did not remain in Judea. Instead, he travelled north to Galilee, which lay in a different Roman province. However, instead of returning to his home town of Nazareth, the Lord removed to Capernaum. Capernaum was a small fishing village not far from the Sea of Galilee.[13] The village lay in the border area of the two tribes, Zebulun and Naphtali.

In his allusion to Isaiah's prophecy, Matthew condenses the words of the prophet, but still provides the sense intended by the Holy Spirit. In full, Isaiah's prophecy reads as follows:

> Isaiah 9:1-7 ESV
>
> (1) "But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. (2) The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. (Cf. Isa. 60:1)
>
> (3) "You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. (4) For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. (5) For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.
>
> (6) "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (7) Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Whatever may have been its local application, this prophecy could not have been fulfilled finally before the coming of the Lord Jesus. Verses 1-2 and 6-7 speak primarily—and to some extent exclusively—of the incarnate Son of God. He alone could be called by the names listed in verse six.

[13] *Sea of Galilee:* Measuring about 12 miles by 8 miles, the Sea of Galilee was known also as the Sea of Chinnereth (Num. 34:11), the Sea of Tiberias (John 6:1; 21:1), or the lake of Gennesareth or Lake Gennesaret (Luke 5:1).

In his allusion the above passage, Matthew declares:

> Matthew 4:15-16 ESV
>
> (15) "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—(16) the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned." (Cf. Luke 1:79)

The Lord Jesus fulfilled this prophecy not only by moving from Nazareth to Capernaum (the border of Zebulun and Naphtali), but also by being a light to those in spiritual darkness. This light would arise from the way of the sea (probably, the Sea of Galilee), beyond the Jordan River (which flows through it). The light would shine into 'Galilee of the Gentiles'. One part of Galilee was so called because it had a large number of foreigners or Gentiles within its borders. But, to those Gentiles, this light would shine. They would witness the great light spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, and those dwelling in spiritual darkness, or lost in their sin, would experience spiritual light and life or deliverance from sin.

The passage is speaking of the Lord Jesus—the Light of the world. Very soon, this Light would shine in the darkness,[14] and the darkness would not be able to overcome it. (John 1:4-5) The Lord Jesus is the Light of life. (John 8:12) Through him, those dwelling in spiritual darkness would be brought to a saving knowledge of the truth. Through witnessing this great Light—the Light of the world—and comprehending the truth as it is in Jesus, people would be saved and would receive eternal life. (John 9:5; 12:46) However, as we can see in the passage before us—and as God has proclaimed through Isaiah the prophet—this Light would not shine over Israel alone. Rather, it would shine over every nation on earth, bringing the saving knowledge of Christ both to Jews and to Gentiles around the world—all whom the Lord our God should call. (Acts 2:39,47; cf. Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2,9)

## MATTHEW 4:17

(Cf. Matt. 3:2; Mark 1:14-15)

Now, in Capernaum, the Lord Jesus continues his public ministry—a work that will lead him inevitably to the Cross.

We note that the Lord Jesus preaches exactly the same message as his forerunner, John the Baptist: *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*

The message is the same, and the reason for preaching it is the same. To enter the kingdom of heaven, people must acknowledge their sins to God, repent of them, and renounce them completely. Those, however, who are still in their sins, are wholly incapable of responding to this command to repent—if left to

[14] *darkness*: i.e., moral and spiritual darkness, including lack of knowledge of, or ignorance of, God's will and ways for mankind as revealed in the Bible. Moral or spiritual darkness, however, does not leave a person without excuse for their sin, or for refusing to seek the Lord. Every person on earth is born with an innate knowledge of God's existence, and the heavens testify to his almighty power and glory. People can ignore this innate knowledge of God and his external testimony in creation, or they can stifle it and harden their hearts against that knowledge of God and of his existence, power and glory. (Rom. 1:18-22) However, in the eyes of God, they remain culpable and wholly inexcusable. By rejecting the truth or by refusing to seek the truth as it is in Jesus, they have chosen darkness rather than light; and they have done this because their deeds are evil. Furthermore, as the Lord Jesus says, they will not come to the light lest their deeds should be exposed. (John 3:19-20; cf. Heb. 4:13) Nevertheless, God will judge everyone as their deeds deserve—and no one will escape.

their own devices, or if required to respond of their own unaided free will. This is because they are dead (spiritually) in trespasses and sins; and—like a corpse—they are incapable of responding to any instructions or commands of a spiritual nature while they remain in this condition. This is the situation with every unregenerate sinner in the world. (Eph. 2:1,5; 4:18; Col. 2:13)

Nevertheless, in his love, grace and mercy, God does not leave sinners in their state of spiritual death. On the contrary, the Lord raises the dead. (Cf. John 5:21) The One who is the Giver of life gives life to those who are dead in trespasses and sins. (Eph. 5:14) When God commands a particular action to be performed, he provides the power of his Holy Spirit to make the response possible. Thus, when the Lord Jesus commands people to repent, the Holy Spirit makes this possible in the lives of every single individual whom God calls by his grace. In these cases, the Holy Spirit first calls that person to hear the preaching of the Word or to read the Word; the Spirit then regenerates that person and grants him an understanding and believing heart. The now regenerated person is then able to repent—*freely and willingly*—of his sins, and to exercise faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is very important that we understand clearly this sequence of events. There is a great deal of faulty or false teaching on this subject abroad in the world today—teaching that robs God of his Sovereignty, power and glory, and seeks to make spiritually dead and sinful men and women the initiators of their own salvation. But, as in all these things, God alone must have all the glory.

The Lord had commanded, *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* It is fitting that the Lord's servants and ministers of the Gospel follow this example:

- Firstly, when preaching the Gospel, that they proclaim the message of repentance, that they make unmistakeably clear God's judgment on sin, and that they show sinful men and women their need for personal, genuine and heartfelt repentance toward God.
- Secondly, that the Lord's servants proclaim the message of the kingdom, and the necessity of seeking to enter God's kingdom, while time or opportunity remains.

Both aspects emphasise great urgency, and leave no room for any Gospel message (so-called) that plays down or omits the message of judgment and repentance from sin. Belief in this message is essential for acceptance into God's kingdom, as is the urgency of responding to the Gospel message while opportunity is afforded. God's Spirit will not always strive with man.

## JESUS CALLS HIS FIRST DISCIPLES

***Matthew 4:18-25***

### MATTHEW 4:18-20

(Mark 1:16-18; Luke 5:1-9)

Along the shore of the Sea of Galilee a number of different fishermen could be found repairing or preparing their nets, while others fished from their boats a short distance offshore or further out on the lake. While the Lord Jesus walked along the shore, he saw two of these men casting a net into the water. The two men were brothers named Simon (Peter) and Andrew. As he walked along, the Lord called out to these two men: *"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."*

Probably, Simon and Andrew had heard the Lord Jesus previously, while he was preaching in the town of Capernaum. Therefore, they would have known who he was. They would have known also what the Lord was calling them to do: viz., to leave their present occupation as fishermen to become fishers of men. On a physical level at least, they would have understood something of what this involved, since they were accustomed to the hazards and difficulties of fishing on the unpredictable and sometimes tempestuous Sea of Galilee. Nevertheless, they could not have appreciated fully just how much more demanding it would be to become a follower of the Lord Jesus and fishers of men. Even so, Matthew tells us that these men left their nets immediately to follow the Lord Jesus.

## MATTHEW 4:21-22

(Mark 1:19-20; Luke 5:10-11)

Further along the shore, the Lord Jesus saw another family of fishermen. These were Zebedee and his two sons, James and John. The three of them were in one of the boats carrying out running repairs to their nets.

When he saw them, the Lord Jesus called James and John to follow him. Immediately, these brothers left the boat and their father to follow the Lord Jesus.

We should not assume from this that these two brothers left their father alone to carry on the fishing business, nor that James and John abandoned their parental duties or responsibilities. It is clear from the parallel passages that Zebedee their father was not dependent solely on James and John since he was able to employ labourers (lit., 'hired servants') to assist him with the fishing business. (Mark 1:20) As a man of some means, he could also have engaged domestic servants at home had this been necessary.

## MATTHEW 4:23

(Cf. Matt. 9:35; 13:54)

Now, together with his disciples, the Lord Jesus began to travel around the province of Galilee. In various towns, the Lord entered the synagogues and proclaimed the Gospel of the kingdom. This, of course, was the same message that he had proclaimed earlier in Capernaum. It was a call to repentance in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, and faith in the One sent by God. It was a call to confess and forsake sin, to turn to God and to receive and believe on the Saviour or Messiah whom God had sent into the world.

Thus, for the first time, the Jewish synagogues resounded to the preaching of the Gospel. From this, we learn that the Gospel should be preached first among those professing faith in God, either to confirm them in their faith or to awaken them to their danger should their profession be without a solid foundation.

However, the Lord Jesus did not confine the Gospel message to the Jewish synagogues. Frequently, Jesus preached outdoors, where people who rarely if ever attended a place of worship would hear the word and be challenged to respond. Furthermore, by preaching outdoors, the Lord Jesus ensured that all classes and kinds of people would hear the Gospel, and not just a select group or a particular race. Thus, as Christ preached repentance, his message would be heard by the many foreigners (or Gentiles) then residing in Galilee. However, firstly, the Lord had to call to repentance the lost sheep of the house of Is-

rael. The Gentiles would hear the word, but the call to repentance and faith would be extended first of all to the Jewish people. (Matt. 10:5-6; 15:24)

Nevertheless, this would not have prevented the Lord from extending his ministry of healing to those who sought him. Thus, we see that the Lord healed every kind of disease and affliction among the people. (Cf. Matt. 8:16; 9:35; 15:30)

In passing, we should note that the Lord's healings were miraculous and instantaneous. Jesus simply spoke the word of command, or reached out and touched a person, and that person was healed instantly of whatever disease he or she had. This was (and is) in complete contrast to much of the healing ministries that have been carried out by professing healers up to the present day.

## MATTHEW 4:24

However, news of this miraculous healing could not be contained within the borders of Galilee, or even those of Israel. Very soon, news had crossed the border into the almost purely Gentile land of Syria. Although the boundaries were not necessarily the same as those of present day Syria, it still represented a spread into a foreign country occupied by a largely Gentile population.

Matthew now lists some of the categories of sufferers who came or were brought to Jesus for healing. The full range of medical conditions was included. Also included, were those possessed or oppressed by demons. This affliction was more common around the time of Christ. It involved the taking control of a person's mind and body by a demonic entity: i.e., by an evil spirit sent by Satan. This was not a psychological condition, but a spiritual condition possibly brought about by attempted contact with evil spirits or with occult powers or forces, or by some other involvement in the satanic realm.[15]

In the Greek, the word used for epilepsy is σεληνιαζομένους, *selēniazomenous,* (meaning literally, 'to be moonstruck' or a 'lunatic'). Of course, at this time, no clear distinction was known or drawn between the neurological condition known now as 'epilepsy', and psychological conditions such as psychosis (mental illness or insanity), the various forms of depression, or other disorders of a psychological nature. Whether suffering from epilepsy, or from one of the various mental or depressive illnesses, all those brought to the Lord Jesus found instantaneous and complete healing from their affliction.

Another category to find healing was the various classes of paralytics (as they then were called). Whatever the nature or extent of their paralysis, the Lord healed them completely. As a rule, those who recover the use of their disused and wasted limbs invariably need to undergo a protracted and often painful period of physiotherapy before their limbs become strong enough to be used. However, when Jesus healed those who were paralysed, this was wholly unnecessary. Their formerly atrophied limbs had been restored to full use by the command of the Lord Jesus.

[15] The nearest pathological or psychological conditions that bear some resemblance to this are the various forms of insanity or unsoundness of mind producing irrational or bizarre behaviour. However, psychological conditions belong to the medical realm and ought not to be confused with demonic conditions. Although, on occasions, there may be some degree of overlapping, demonic conditions generally are spiritual conditions requiring the intervention of a suitably qualified and experienced pastor or other spiritual leader, whereas psychological or psychiatric conditions generally are medical conditions requiring the intervention of a suitably qualified and experienced psychologist or psychiatrist. As a rule, the latter conditions do not involve any connection with demons—although it may involve underlying spiritual problems and the necessity for pastoral and spiritual, as well as clinical and medical, intervention. (GL)

The devil had failed in his attempts to force Jesus into demonstrating his divine power. Now, however, in accordance with the plan and purposes of his Father, the Lord Jesus demonstrates that he is God incarnate, for only by God's sovereign and almighty power can such healing be accomplished unfailingly and instantaneously. This is one of the occasions when the Lord Jesus shows by his miraculous signs that he is indeed the Son of God.

## MATTHEW 4:25

The Lord's reputation for healing the sick very quickly spread even further abroad. Now, people from all parts of Israel and Judea had come to witness the Lord's power to heal. People streamed to him from Jerusalem, from across the Jordan, from the Decapolis or Ten Towns, and no doubt from further afield.

Matthew tells us that great crowds followed the Lord Jesus. However, we are not to understand these followers as genuine believers. The vast majority were not seeking the salvation that the Lord could give them, but only the healing that he could accomplish for them or for their family or friends. Others of these 'followers' may have attached themselves to the crowd merely as curiosity-seekers. Very few, however, among those followers sought repentance for their sins and eternal life, as subsequent events will show.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 5

## THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

**MATTHEW 5:1 - 7:29**

In the next few chapters, Matthew provides us with an account of the sermon delivered by the Lord Jesus on a local mountain or hillside. Luke gives an account of a similar sermon that took place on a plain. (Luke 6:17-49) A number of older commentators believed that Matthew and Luke were referring to a variation of the same sermon, since it was quite possible to find large level places or plateaus in hilly or mountainous regions. However, it is entirely possible that the Lord gave very similar teaching on different occasions to different groups of people.

Before proceeding, we should note that, in his Gospel, Matthew speaks of *'the kingdom of heaven'* (thereby avoiding giving unnecessary offence to the many Jewish readers who did not like to hear the name of God pronounced). However, in the corresponding passages in Luke's Gospel, and since he was writing predominantly for Gentile readers, Luke uses the phrase, *'the kingdom of God'* (as does Mark). Clearly, however, these terms are synonymous.

Matthew begins with the teachings that we refer to as the 'Beatitudes' or teachings that express the blessedness or spiritual happiness of those who not only hear the teaching of the Lord Jesus but also who apply that teaching to their hearts and lives.

### MATTHEW 5:1-2

(Cf. Luke 6:17)

The chapter begins by reminding us that Jesus was being besieged by a great throng of people. (Matt. 4:25) Many of these people saw in the Lord Jesus only a great man or an outstanding teacher. Nevertheless, they latched on to him for what they might be able to gain physically or materially, such as healing or food. Many others, however, had been enthralled by his wonderful words, and had marvelled at his miracles of healing and deliverance. Nevertheless, some of these sought only to take Christ and make him their leader, ruler or king—one whom they hoped would lead them against their Roman occupiers. (John 6:15) Still others were genuinely seeking the kingdom of God, and were hungering and thirsting after righteousness.

To those who genuinely sought him with a humble and contrite heart, the Lord Jesus would always respond. Nevertheless, he wished to separate himself from the greater throng of people in order to teach his own. For this and other reasons, the Lord ascended this mountain or hill near to the area.

Once upon the elevated side of the mountain, the Lord Jesus sat down. This was the customary position for Jewish teachers (cf. Luke 4:20), hence we hear of those 'who sit in Moses' seat': i.e., those who occupy a teaching position in regard to the law—the Law of God being considered to stand supreme over all men and all the teachings of men. (Matt. 23:2-3)

We next learn from this verse that the disciples came to Jesus, or gathered around him. Principally, we are to understand the Twelve. However, we note also from the passage that many others followed the

Lord Jesus up the mountain, and these too gathered around to hear his words. Nevertheless, we must understand that the Lord was not about to teach unbelievers—as the subsequent context will show clearly. Rather, he was about to teach his disciples, who in turn would teach the early church. However, also included among this vast crowd would be many who had believed on the Lord Jesus, but who were not one of the Twelve. Therefore, a considerable number of believers could have been present on this occasion, in addition to the Twelve (or Eleven, if we disregard Judas Iscariot).

Failure to understand that the Lord Jesus was addressing this sermon to believers primarily (although not exclusively) will result in a faulty understanding of this entire sermon. Undoubtedly, many would be present who did not (or did not yet) believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, although they would hear—and to some extent benefit from—the Lord's words, on this occasion the Lord's teaching was not addressed specifically to them.

Thus, the Lord Jesus begins to instruct his immediate disciples—although many others also who had believed on him, but were not one of the Twelve, would benefit from the Lord's teaching.

## THE BEATITUDES

***Matthew 5:3-12***

Let us note from the outset the meaning of the word, 'blessed'. Essentially, the Greek word μακάριοι, *makarioi* means to be 'blessed' or 'happy' because of favourable circumstances. However, in this context, it is better to think of the word as meaning 'privileged', 'especially favoured', or 'fortunate' because of that person's relationship to God and to the Lord's loving, paternal and providential care over him or her under all circumstances in their lives. For this and other reasons, these beatitudes can apply only to those who know the Lord personally; having experienced his saving power, grace and mercy in their lives.

Again, in the passage that follows, we are not to consider the beatitudes as though each one were being addressed to different individuals or different classes of individuals. All the beatitudes are intended to be relevant in one way or another to all true believers on the Lord Jesus Christ.

## MATTHEW 5:3

Jesus begins by declaring:

> Matthew 5:3 ESV
>
> (3) "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."
>
> (Cf. Luke 6:20; cf. also Matt. 19:14; Mark 10:14 with Luke 18:17)

We must be very careful to note what the Lord is saying here. He is not declaring that it is a blessing to be poor, to be in financial straits or to be impoverished. The Lord Jesus is referring specifically to a category of people: the poor in spirit. (Isa. 66:2; Luke 4:18)

The poor in spirit are those who are humble and contrite in heart. (Ps. 51:17; Isa. 57:15) They are those who acknowledge their great need of God and of his salvation, and they are those who seek and find the Lord; who experience his mercy and forgiveness, and who then seek to live to the praise, honour and glory of the One in whom they have come to trust. (Ps. 34:18; Matt. 11:25; 18:1-3)

Such people never exhibit an attitude of self-righteousness, or of arrogance, pride or ostentation. They never presume to push themselves forward, but grow daily in the love and grace of the Lord Jesus as they cherish his Word and hide it in their hearts. (Ps. 119:11)

They are described as poor in spirit; but spiritually they are among the most highly favoured of God's redeemed children, and the most richly blessed in the things of the Spirit. Thus, the Lord declares emphatically, *"…for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* Such as these are the truly blessed of the Lord, and such as these find true spiritual blessedness in their hearts and lives. This applies whether they are rich or poor in relation to this world's goods, and completely regardless of their standing or status before men.

Thus, concerning such followers of the Lord, it is written:

> Matthew 25:34 ESV
>
> (34) "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world'…" (See also vv. 35-39)

The poor in spirit are among the first to help others and to minister to their needs. Yet, in their gentleness, kindness and humility, they do not fully realise that in ministering to the needs of others, they are ministering to Christ.

## MATTHEW 5:4

Next, the Lord Jesus declares:

> Matthew 5:4 ESV
>
> (4) "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."
>
> (Cf. Luke 6:21,25; cf. also Isa. 61:2-3; John 16:20-22; 2 Cor. 1:4-7; Rev. 7:17)

This should not be understood to mean that those are blessed, privileged or fortunate who go about with solemn expressions on their faces; who rarely if ever show any signs of happiness, joy or any other such emotion, or who believe that commitment to Christ involves standing aloof from the people of the world and appearing to them as though they were superior or morally better than the ungodly mass of mankind. Manifestly, this would be rank hypocrisy, and this was one of the very sins of which the Pharisees were most guilty.

In this context, '*those who mourn'* are those who show a due appreciation for sin in their lives. (Cf. 2 Cor. 7:10) They are those who acknowledge freely to God their many shortcomings, failures and mistakes—all of which are offensive to a most holy God—and who seek, with a humble, contrite and repentant heart, the forgiveness of the Lord. They, indeed, would be comforted in the knowledge of their sins forgiven because of the work that the Lord Jesus would accomplish for them at Calvary.

We may also understand *'those who mourn'* as those who are suffering great loss or who are grieving intensely over the departure of one greatly loved, whether such grief has been caused by the death of the loved one or by some other means of permanent separation. Such mourning is normal and natural, and was exemplified by the Lord Jesus Christ at the tomb of Lazarus. (John 11:35)

Nevertheless, as the apostle Paul declares, we sorrow not as others do, who have no hope. (1 Thess. 4:13) On the contrary, with our hope securely anchored in Christ, we may sorrow or grieve for a time over the loss of loved ones. Yet, we know that the God of all comfort will comfort our hearts. (2 Cor. 1:3-4) We know that the Holy Spirit indwelling us is our Comforter and Friend. And, concerning those who have died in the Lord, we know that we will meet with them again in glory. (1 Thess. 4:13-18)

So, whether in this life or in the life to come, the Lord's words remain forever true: *'they shall be comforted.'* And, because they shall be comforted of God, their cause of mourning is assuaged and the peace of God that passes all understanding fills their hearts and souls. (Isa. 26:3; Php. 4:7) Thus indeed they are blessed—or they are a privileged, especially favoured, or fortunate people.

## MATTHEW 5:5

Next, the Lord Jesus states to his disciples:

> Matthew 5:5 ESV
>
> "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."
>
> (Cf. Ps. 37:11,34; cf. also Num. 12:3; Ps. 25:9; Isa. 11:4; 29:19; Col. 3:12; 1 Pet. 3:4)

Because of their wilful disobedience to, and rebellion against, the LORD, God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (a beautiful part of God's perfect creation). Thereafter, Adam was compelled to labour strenuously in a world cursed by the effects of his sin. However, what Adam lost by his fall from favour and fellowship with God, the redeemed children of God gain by their union with the risen exalted Lord Jesus Christ—but in far greater measure. '*The meek…shall inherit the earth.*'

Let us consider the significance of the word, 'meek' (Gk., πραυς, *praus*, meaning, *unassuming, gentle, humble* or *considerate*). Contrary to some modern thinking, 'meekness' and 'weakness' are not similar or synonymous expressions. They are distinctly different expressions. One who is meek cannot also be weak (morally and spiritually), for meekness requires considerable strength of character, considerable courage, and considerable endurance in the face of hostility or enmity.

The meek are those who are strong morally and spiritually; but who, at the same time, exhibit a gentle, sympathetic or understanding spirit. They are those who, in their integrity, stand resolutely for the truth of God and who are not prepared to compromise that truth. Nevertheless, although they will maintain and defend the truth valiantly, they do not do so in a spirit of conflict, strife or emulation. Rather, they stand by the truth resolutely but with a gentle attitude toward those who differ; with deep concern for those who err, and with a compassionate heart toward the wayward and the lost.

Thus, the Lord Jesus proclaims:

> Matthew 11:28-29 ESV
>
> (28) "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (29) 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."

In verse 29 above, the word translated 'gentle' (Gk., πραος, *praos*) is a variant of the word translated 'meek' in Matthew 5:5. Indeed, it is translated 'meek' by the KJV and other versions. However, we know

that although the Lord Jesus was gentle (or meek) and lowly, he never deviated from the truth. On the contrary, the Lord held steadfastly to the word and will of God, even although it was to cost him his life. (John 4:24; 5:30; Mark 8:31)

Again, in deep concern for his Father's honour and glory, the meek and lowly Lord Jesus did not hesitate to expel the merchants from the temple precincts, and to overturn the tables of the money-exchangers in order the cleanse the temple and to maintain it as a hallowed house of prayer. (Matt. 21:12-13) Yet again, in dealing with many of the scribes and Pharisees, the same meek and lowly Lord Jesus condemned them uncompromisingly for their impiety, guile and hypocrisy. (Matt. 23:12-15) Thus, here we see the strength of character exemplified by the One who, above all others, was meek and lowly.

Again, God's servant Moses is described as follows:

Numbers 12:3 ESV

(3) Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth.

Although essentially meek in spirit, this same Moses was called by God to lead his people out of Egypt. This involved facing the hostility of the Pharaoh and of the Egyptian people. It involved enduring the unbelief and unfaithfulness of the people of Israel once he had led them out of Egypt.

Thus, we see that meekness is gentleness of spirit, compassion toward the wayward, but a resolute determination to accomplish the will and purposes of God in spite of the opposition and regardless of the difficulties. Meekness, therefore, requires great courage, perseverance, faith and obedience to God.

To all such as demonstrated such meekness (or gentleness) in their lives, the Lord declares that they shall inherit the earth. The possession of the earth (or land) does not fall to those who exercise force of arms, but to those who arm themselves with the sword of the Lord—the Word of God. The believer may not inherit the earth physically at present; but, in Christ, all things are his. (1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 3:3-14) Christ is Conqueror and Sovereign Lord over all creation. (1 Cor. 15:25; Rev. 6:2) When they enter into their heavenly reward, the believer will find that he or she enters also into the new heaven and the new earth, in which righteousness dwells. Then, indeed, the children of God will inherit the earth. (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1-2)

We should observe, of course, that this kind of meekness is not a natural characteristic: i.e., in its spiritual form, it is not to be found among unregenerate mankind. Rather, it is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. (Gal. 5:22-23). As such, true meekness or gentleness can be exhibited only by those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells, and therefore who belong to Christ by regeneration and adoption. This demonstrates once again that these beatitudes were not being addressed to unregenerate men and women, but only to those who knew the Lord's saving power personally: i.e., to all true believers, including his true disciples, but excluding false professors like Judas Iscariot. (John 6:64)

## MATTHEW 5:6

Next, the Lord Jesus affirms:

Matthew 5:6 ESV

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

(Cf. Luke 6:21,25; cf. also Ps. 42:1-2; 63:1; 107:9; John 4:14; 6:27; 7:37)

To *'hunger and thirst for righteousness'* is a common metaphor for the earnest desire to seek God's will and do it. It begins with the heartfelt desire to seek the LORD while he may be found. (Isa. 55:6) However, this spiritual desire is not found in the natural man, but only in those whom the Holy Spirit is convicting of sin, convincing of their need of redemption, and drawing to Christ the Redeemer. (cf. John 16:7-11)

However, this marks only the beginning of a person's hunger and thirst for righteousness. In this first instance, he is led to seek that righteousness (or forgiveness and justification) that God imparts as a gift of his grace to all who call upon the name of his Son. To such as seek the Lord with all their heart and soul, the Lord will surely meet their need and fill them spiritually with all things necessary to their salvation. (Isa. 55:1-2, 6-7; John 6:37; Rom. 10:13)

Having reached this stage, however, the child of God continues to hunger and thirst for righteousness—not to experience salvation, which God has granted to him already—but to become more and more like Christ in his daily life, or to be sanctified. (1 Pet. 2:2; 2 Pet. 3:18) Realising his daily need for forgiveness and cleansing, the justified believer continues to hunger and thirst for the things of God, and of the Spirit of holiness. Those who seek will find; for the Lord never turns away the empty unfilled. Rather, the Spirit of God always blesses those who endeavour to walk with the Lord in humility, trust and obedience. Thus, the Lord's promise proves absolutely true: *'...they shall be satisfied.*'

## MATTHEW 5:7

Next, the Lord Jesus states:

Matthew 5:7 ESV

(7) "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

(Cf. Matt 6:14-15; 18:33-35; Eph. 4:32; Jas. 2:13)

Mercy is the outworking in practical terms of a sympathetic, compassionate and understanding heart. It is that state or condition of mind that results in action taken on behalf of the needy, the suffering, or the lost, etc. Thus, throughout the Scriptures, we read of God being a God of mercy: i.e., he is a God who delights not only in righteousness, holiness, truth and justice, but also in love, compassion, and the practical expression of mercy in order to assist those in need. To this end, the Lord is merciful to those who wander from him, and is willing to receive them back into fellowship with himself upon their repentance and confession of sin. (Cf. Ezek. 34:16 with Luke 19:10) Ultimately, God showed the full extent of his love, grace and mercy when—in a practical manner—he gave his own Son to die for sinners.

Thus, those of the Lord's people who show mercy to others are doing what the Lord requires. Those who, in love and compassion, provide spiritual or practical help for the needy or lost are emulating the Lord Jesus. Those who comfort the downtrodden or the downcast, who reach out to the despairing and support widows and orphans in their distress, are showing mercy toward them. Again, those who are willing to forgive others, including their enemies, are showing mercy to them. (Job 31:15-20; Isa. 58:5-14; Matt. 25:34-46; 1 John 3:17-19; Jas. 1:27)

On the other hand, how can those who never exhibit a loving, compassionate or merciful spirit to others, or assist them in any way, claim that they have received the mercy of the Lord? Those who belong to Christ must be merciful to others, just as he has been merciful to them. (Matt. 18:21-35)

Thus, the Lord declares those 'blessed'—or highly favoured—who show mercy: for they shall receive mercy from God in their time of need.

## MATTHEW 5:8

Next, the Lord Jesus declares:

Matthew 5:8 ESV

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

(Cf. 1 Chron. 29:17-19; Ps. 24:3-4; 2 Cor. 7:1; Heb. 10:22; Jas. 4:8; 1 Pet. 1:22)

Those only can be 'pure in heart' whom the Lord has forgiven and cleansed from all iniquity. Therefore, it is evident that these words cannot apply to any unregenerate person. There is no possibility of an unregenerate person (who, morally and spiritually, is impure in God's eyes) ever seeing God, either spiritually with the eye of faith or face to face with him in glory. Like Joshua, the high priest, an unregenerate and unsanctified person must be stripped first of his unclean garments (or morally unclean life) and clothed with new, clean, pure garments—the 'garment' or application of Christ's perfect righteousness.

Nevertheless, even among the Lord's redeemed and holy people are those whose hearts are not pure, or which are not cleansed completely in the sight of God. Granted, they have been justified by the grace of God. Yet, some sin still clings to their hearts or lives, rendering them impure in the eyes of the Lord. Perhaps, it is to such as these that the Lord addresses these words. Certain it is that no one can experience blessedness—or the especial favour—of God while unconfessed sin remains in that person's life. Such sin creates inward or emotional and psychological disorder, and robs a believer of true peace with God. However, by renouncing his sin, the believer will find that forgiveness, reconciliation and true peace are restored. (Isa. 1:16; 2 Cor. 7:1; Jas. 4:8)

Taken together with sanctification, therefore, those who endeavour to honour God in purity of life and thought; who cherish no sin in their hearts or lives, and who seek to be conformed daily and hourly to the likeness of Christ, are those who are 'pure in heart'.

Notice, however, that purity does not imply perfection. Perfection will be attained only upon the believer's final sanctification and glorification. Purity is seen as being clean, morally and spiritually, in the eyes of the Lord, through forgiveness, justification, and sanctification of the Holy Spirit.

The Lord Jesus says of them, 'they shall see God'. This may be understood in three ways:

1. Those that shall 'see' God are those who *experience the salvation of God*. This, of course, is true of all believers. In this sense, they all see or experience God's salvation, together with all the blessings and benefits of their redemption in Christ Jesus. (Luke 9:27; John 3:3)

2. Those that shall 'see' God are those who *see the Father in his Son*; or those who see in Christ the very image and likeness of the Father. This, of course, is true of everyone who believes that the Lord Jesus is one with the Father; that he dwells in the Father and that the Father dwells in his Son. This much the disciples of Jesus were able to see literally, through believing on the teaching of the Lord Jesus. We, by faith in Christ and his Word, see this union of the Lord Jesus with the Father mystically and spiritually (since we were not present to see the Lord in the flesh). Nevertheless, we remain utterly convinced of the truth that the Lord Jesus and his Father are One—one in essence or substance, or one in being; yet, distinct Persons of the Godhead. (John 8:58; 14:7-11; 17:11; Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 1:1-3)

3. Those that shall 'see' God are all those *who will meet with the Lord in his glory*. Everyone who belongs to Christ, and whom the Father receives into his heavenly abode, will then be able to behold the face of God; both in his Son (for they will see the Son face to face) and in the Father, for—unlike the present when God remains pure Spirit and invisible—the glorified saints of the Lord will look upon this once invisible God whom they have loved and who has loved them with an everlasting love. In worship and adoration, they will fall down before God and before the Lamb, offering to them the unbounded gratitude and praises of their hearts and souls for all the wonders of his love toward them, and for all his grace and mercy in redeeming such sinners to himself as a people, and an everlasting and treasured possession, of his own. (Job 19:26-27; Ps. 17:15; 1 Cor. 13:12; 1 John 3:2; Rev. 22:4)

Thus, indeed, blessed—privileged, especially favoured, or exceedingly fortunate—are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

## MATTHEW 5:9

Next, the Lord asserts:

> Matthew 5:9 ESV
>
> (9) "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."
>
> (Cf. Rom. 14:17-19; Jas. 3:16-18; Heb. 12:14; cf. also Matt. 5:44-45)

The world has its fill of would-be peacemakers; and, undoubtedly, many of these are to be commended for their untiring efforts to achieve peace and harmony among peoples and nations; for, socially or politically—and in the providence of God—they may accomplish great things.

However, the Lord Jesus is not referring to the peacemakers of the world, for the peace that the world brings is transient. It can never be guaranteed to endure. It is fragile at best, and founded usually on

compromising and unstable agreements. Therefore, the peace that the world seeks to achieve is not an internal peace (peace of heart) nor is it an eternal peace (as God provides through the blood of the cross (Col. 1:20)). Rather, the world's peace is an external peace (cessation of hostilities, etc.) and a peace lacking the certainty of absolute permanency. (Cf. Isa. 57:21)

Peace that endures, and that permeates and exerts a powerful and calming influence on a person's life, can be found only in and from God. Those who experience the peace of God in their hearts are those—and those only—whose sins have been forgiven and who have experienced reconciliation with God through the atoning sacrifice of his Son. Thus, to be a true and effective peacemaker between individuals or parties, one must first have experienced the peace of God in his or her own heart and life. (Isa. 9:6; Acts 10:35-36; Rom. 5:1; Php. 4:7-9)

Thus, the Lord Jesus is exhorting all those who belong to him to be peacemakers (or pacifiers), whenever and wherever this is required of them. Since the peace of which the Lord is speaking is spiritually-based, or derives from the Holy Spirit's work of sanctification, then those who would endeavour to live at peace with God must endeavour also to live at peace with others. (Rom. 12:18; 14:19; 2 Cor. 13:11; Gal. 5:22)

Where there is turmoil, they must seek to restore tranquillity. Where there is discord, they must seek to restore harmony. Where there is disagreement, they must seek to find agreement. Where there is division, they must seek to restore union—without, in any instance, compromising the truths of God's unchanging and inerrant Word. (Col. 3:15)

Again, the Lord's people are encouraged to intercede for those in authority over them, that they may experience peace in their land as well as in their lives. (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Tim. 2:1-3; 1 Pet. 2:13)

These, then, are some practical demonstrations of a believer's faith in Christ. Just as the Lord Jesus has brought peace to the hearts and lives of his redeemed people through the blood of his cross, so also the redeemed people of God must endeavour to live in peace and to establish or restore peace with others, insofar as this lies within their power. (Col. 1:20)

Those, therefore, who are peacemakers, are blessed—or especially favoured and privileged by the Lord. Thus, '*they shall be called the sons of God*' i.e., by their actions in seeking to be at peace or to make peace with others they show themselves to be the sons (or children) of God.

## MATTHEW 5:10

Next, the Lord asserts:

> Matthew 5:10 ESV
>
> (10) "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."
>
> (Cf. vv.3,19; Luke 6:22-23; cf. also Ps. 37:12; 1 Pet. 3:13-14)

Once again, we see from this verse that the Lord Jesus was addressing his own believing people.

Unfortunately, in this fallen sinful world, persecution of varying kinds and degrees is widespread, and many people suffer unjustly and intensely at the hands of evil men. Nevertheless, for the most part, these people are not enduring persecution for righteousness' sake, in the sense that the Lord Jesus is

using that term here. Indeed, only those who belong to the Lord can be persecuted for righteousness' sake. For the righteousness of which the Lord is speaking is that righteousness that comes from God the Father; which he imputes and imparts to every believer, and which—in the form of sanctification—is associated with a life of holiness and godliness. Righteousness, therefore, is both the righteousness of Christ credited to the believer (forensic or legal righteousness) and also the righteous life of the believer that flows from the fruit of the Spirit (practical righteousness; i.e., holiness and godliness).

In the Bible, righteousness can be viewed in three distinct, but inseparable, ways:

- firstly, in the form of *justification* (imputed righteousness),
- secondly, in the form of *sanctification* (imparted righteousness), and
- thirdly, in the form of *glorification* (complete and final perfection of character and conduct experienced by believers in heaven).

Those, therefore, who belong to the Lord, are those who are blessed when they endure persecution for righteousness' sake.

But what does this involve?

On occasions, the Lord's faithful people can expect to be deprived of necessities by the unkind or evil actions of others, resulting perhaps in poverty, hardship, or extreme and prolonged difficulties in their lives. On occasions, they can expect to be abandoned or forsaken by their family and friends. Again, the faithful people of God may expect to be subjected to physical abuse—all for the sake of their faith in Christ. In other words, they are being persecuted for righteousness' sake. (Matt. 10:28-30; John 15:20)

However, the Lord's people must expect and anticipate abuses of their person; for so too was the Lord Jesus abused, maltreated and misrepresented. In some cases, they may experience more severe forms of persecution, such as physical assault, or other forms of violence, including beatings, unjustified imprisonments, or even torture or death. Thus, were the faithful apostles of the Lord Jesus abused at times; sometimes, on numerous occasions—as was the apostle Paul. Thus, too, must the Lord's people be prepared to suffer at times, and to endure—for righteousness' sake. (Matt. 10:23; Luke 21:12; Acts 5:40; 8:1, 35-39; 1 Cor. 4:9-13; 2 Cor. 4:8-12, 17)

But what does the Lord Jesus say to such persecuted saints? He declares, *'…theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*'

God's people may suffer the loss of all things on earth—even of life itself; but *theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. They may experience the greatest cruelties for the sake of Christ's name, but *theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. They may endure the greatest hostility from former friends and families, as well as from the world at large, but *theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. (1 Pet. 3:13-14)

Notice what the Lord Jesus is saying here: He is not promising these persecuted believers a place in the kingdom of heaven in the future. Certainly, this is true, but it is not what the Lord is saying. Rather, he is saying of these persecuted believers that 'theirs *is'* (present tense) the kingdom of heaven. Yes, in the future, they will inherit their place in heaven. But, even now, the kingdom of heaven is theirs. Even now, those who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ belong to the kingdom of heaven. No harm done to them on earth can ever change this fact or remove from them the present reality of that kingdom or its future in-

heritance. Though they be persecuted even unto death, yet then shall they experience the greatest blessedness of all—for *theirs is the kingdom of heaven*, and there they shall abide for all eternity, delivered forever from persecution, pain, suffering, sorrow, grief and tears. (Php. 1:28; 2 Tim. 2:12; 1 Pet. 4:12-16)

Blessed indeed, then, are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven!

However, we must bear in mind that the righteousness associated with the present possession of the kingdom of heaven is that righteousness which the Lord Jesus secured for all his people at the cross of Calvary. No other kind of righteousness will ever enable a person to enter the kingdom of heaven. No amount of good works, deeds of merit, works of charity or any other kind of good, upright, or commendable works will enable a person to obtain the righteousness that God requires, and that comes only through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and as a gift of God's sovereign grace.

We must always remember this Scripture:

> Isaiah 64:6a ESV
>
> (6) We have all become like one who is unclean, and *all our righteous deeds* are like a polluted garment... (Emphasis added)

Our own righteous acts, deeds, or works of merit are '*as filthy rags'* (KJV). This is the reason why a person can never win the favour of God by his own meritorious actions or good deeds. A sinful person can receive the righteousness that God requires only through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus' righteousness alone is fully sufficient to justify and clothe the sinner. That perfect righteousness alone makes a repentant and believing sinner acceptable in the sight of the most holy God. Then, the justified believer receives the gift of the Holy Spirit in sanctification: and from the Spirit's work of grace and sanctification in each believer's life flows the fruit of the Spirit, or a life of holiness, godliness and righteousness. However, those who practice a godly lifestyle and hold faithfully to the truth of God's Word often bring upon themselves the reproach and ill-treatment of the world. They are being persecuted for righteousness' sake. Nevertheless, *theirs is the kingdom of heaven*.

## MATTHEW 5:11

Next, the Lord Jesus says to his faithful followers:

> Matthew 5:11 ESV
>
> (11) "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."
>
> (Cf. Luke 6:22; cf. also Isa. 51:7; Heb. 11:26; 1 Pet. 4:14)

The theme of this verse is linked inseparably to that of the preceding verse. However, in this verse, the Lord is speaking more of suffering verbal abuse than of suffering physical abuse for righteousness' sake.

We learn from God's Word that we are called not only to believe on the Lord Jesus, but also to suffer for his sake. (Php. 1:29) Thus, the believer must expect to suffer in one way or another when he lives by the

Gospel and when he endeavours to make known the truths of God's Word to a hostile and unbelieving world. (Matt. 10:18-22; 24:9; Mark 13:9)

The Lord Jesus suffered intense persecution for righteousness' sake at the hands of evil men. So, also, must his followers expect to suffer unjustly. The Lord Jesus was despised and rejected by the religious establishment. Some of the Lord's followers might likewise be despised, rejected and excommunicated from an ungodly or carnal religious group or establishment—without just or justifiable cause or reason in the sight of God. (Matt. 27:39; 1 Pet. 2:23; 4:14)

The Lord's faithful people may find at times that they are more likely to suffer persecution the more closely they walk with God. Of course, Satan hates those who reflect the likeness or character of God in their lives, and he despises those whose lives speak of a righteous, pure and holy God. These attributes simply remind fallen mankind of the awesome majesty of God and of his coming judgments on a wicked, perverse, and unbelieving world. Outwardly, sinful mankind may deny the existence, power and glory of God. But, inwardly, they know that God exists and that he will judge them for their unrighteous deeds. (Rom. 1:18-20,32) Thus, they hate to see the Lord's people living godly and righteous lives, since this only brings home to them their own unrighteousness and the prospect of God's judgment on their lives followed by their eternal separation from God in hell.

Thus, in their bitterness and desperation against the things of God, they endeavour to strike out at the people of God. This may be physically (as intimated in the previous verse), for evil thoughts often result in evil actions. However, in many cases, sinful men and women may attack the Lord's faithful people by their evil words, or by their evil words expressed in written form. Thus, the Lord's people may be subjected to false accusation, slander, libel, vilification of their character (character assassination), innuendo, idle gossip, tale-bearing, exposure to foul or obscene language, and many other kinds of evil expressions or evil reports—all of which are falsely grounded and have no foundation in fact.

This, of course, is a work of the devil. Since he cannot attack God directly, the evil one endeavours to attack the people of God through the sinful character and conduct of unregenerate men and women.

However, the Lord Jesus encourages his persecuted saints by saying that they are 'blessed'—extremely fortunate, happy, or favoured by God. This is not, however, because they are being reviled or verbally abused, but because—*for the sake* or *in the name of Christ*—they are being reviled or verbally abused and otherwise persecuted *unjustly and unjustifiably.* Thus, these words apply to all those whom the Lord has redeemed, and who are walking with the Lord in faith and obedience. They indeed are blessed—and they are blessed of the Lord himself.

## MATTHEW 5:12

The Lord Jesus concludes the above remarks by declaring:

> Matthew 5:12 ESV
>
> (12) "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."
>
> (Cf. Luke 6:23; cf. also Acts 5:41; Rom. 5:3; Jas. 1:2)

It may seem incongruous to exhort God's persecuted people to rejoice and be glad in the very midst of their sufferings and distresses. However, the Lord Jesus is not referring to the ephemeral joy and happiness associated with earthly pleasures, and which is destined to pass away. Rather, he is speaking of that deep inward joy and gladness that is associated with the knowledge of sins forgiven, everlasting peace with God, and the absolute assurance of a place in the kingdom of heaven and in their heavenly Father's dwelling. (Ps. 32:11; 40:16; 1 Pet. 1:6-9; 4:13-14)

Those who possess these assurances can afford to rejoice in their sufferings—for their sufferings are but for a moment. They can afford to be glad in the midst of persecution, for their persecutions for righteousness' sake are transient and can never rob them of their peace with God or their place in heaven. They can afford to despise the sufferings and the shame of the cross, for they know that sooner or later they will inherit their place in God's heavenly kingdom, and receive their glorious reward for true and faithful service to their Lord and Master.

The reference to the prophets, who were before them, was to show to persecuted believers that only those who truly belong to God are so persecuted. False prophets are not persecuted for righteousness' sake, but are welcomed by the people. False teachers are not persecuted for righteousness' sake, but are welcomed and commended for their willingness to approve of practises that the Bible expressly condemns. False professors of the faith are not persecuted for righteousness' sake but are received by the world as friends. However, unlike the false prophets who proclaimed peace to the people when there was no peace (Jer. 6:14), the true and faithful prophets of God denounced the sins of the people and called on them to repent and return to God. For their faithful pronouncements, exposing the sins of the people, these godly prophets were persecuted severely. They were despised and rejected by the people. Some were exposed to barbaric cruelty. Others were put to death for their word and testimony from God. (Cf. Heb. 11:32-40)

Yet, these courageous and faithful men continued to stand alone in the world for God. They may have paid for their courage and faithfulness with their lives. Nevertheless, they entered upon their eternal rest to receive the great reward laid up for them in heaven.

So it must be with those who follow Christ faithfully. They may not be called upon to suffer as intensely as did the prophets, or even unto death—although these things cannot be excluded. Nevertheless, they are to rejoice and be glad—not because of their sufferings as such—but because they are suffering for Christ and for his cause. From him, they will receive their great and sure reward when they enter into their eternal rest, delivered forever from all persecution, suffering, sorrow, pain and death to live and reign with Christ in his new creation.

Therefore, the Lord rounds of this section of his sermon on the mount by declaring to his people:

> (12) "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

## SALT AND LIGHT

***Matthew 5:13-14***

Now, the Lord Jesus expresses to his followers their responsibilities before God for witnessing to a lost and perishing world. Fallen and sinful mankind were bringing ever-increasing decay and degeneracy upon

the world by their evil expressions and lifestyles. They were living in gross spiritual darkness—a darkness that spoke of the rampant evil permeating every strata of society, and of fallen mankind's love for unrighteousness and hatred of righteousness.

Thus, in this context, the Lord says that his followers must be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

## MATTHEW 5:13

The Lord begins by saying:

> Matthew 5:13 ESV
>
> (13a) "You are the salt of the earth..."

[That is, in contrast to others] "*You* are the salt of the earth..."

> (13) "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."
>
> (Cf. Mark 9:50; Luke 14:34-35; cf. also Col. 4:6)

Here, the Lord Jesus is addressing his disciples, whom later—as the apostles—would be the teachers, leaders and guides of the early church. By extension, this applies to all those whom God has called to preach and to teach. They, especially, are the salt of the earth. Their conduct and speech must exhibit something of the true nature of God: i.e., a God of holiness, righteousness, truth and justice, as well as a God of love, grace, mercy and compassion.

However, the Lord is not confining these remarks to leaders and teachers exclusively. Rather, he is addressing all those who follow him as disciples; i.e., all believers. Each one of us who believe on Christ, and who have experienced the Spirit's power in regeneration and sanctification, is called upon to be the salt of the earth.

But what does his mean? What are properties of salt, and how does this relate to the Christian's life and witness in the world?

Salt possesses the following characteristics. It:

- Preserves: From decay, deterioration, and corruption
- Flavours: Adds taste or flavour to everything it contacts.
- Permeates: Spreads throughout the entire mass or body.
- Purifies: Purges or cleanses from impurities.
- Stings: Astringent: may cause pain; or (morally), may offend.

Now, let us consider each characteristic individually.

Salt preserves: Morally, the entire world of unregenerate mankind is corrupt. A wilful forsaking of God's Word and ways leads to a descent from the standards of truth and righteousness to such an extent that

evil is considered good and good is considered evil. This, in turn, leads sinful men and women to indulge in ever greater depths of depravity and wickedness. (Rom. 1:18-32) Yet, this is the very situation that the believer is called upon to combat. Granted, the child of God cannot change evil men. This is God's work. Nevertheless, the child of God is to act like salt upon society. By his godly life and clear testimony for Christ, he is to make plain to sinful men and women that God will judge the unrighteous and show mercy to those who repent of their evil deeds. Thus, by standing against unrighteous deeds, laws or actions, the believer is seen to be standing for Christ. By his faithfulness, he is countering the tendency to decay and corruption in society. However, when this counteraction is removed—i.e., when the Lord's people fail to act like salt on society—society goes from bad to worse in an ever descending spiral of evil.

Salt flavours: Thus, the believer is to act as flavour on the world. The flavour of Christ is to permeate the believers' personal lives, and to overflow into a lost and evil world, that they may be challenged and arrested from their wicked course. (Cf. 2 Cor. 2:15-16)

Salt permeates: It spreads through everything with which it comes in contact. So, too, the gracious and powerful effects of the Christian's life and witness must not be kept among the fellowship of believers, but spread abroad to the world outside. Christ in us must be seen by those who are without Christ, that—by the grace of God—they may be brought under conviction of sin and constrained by the Holy Spirit to seek the Lord's mercy. (1 Pet. 3:15-16)

Salt purifies: It cleanses or acts as an antiseptic on impure bodies. So, too, the believer's speech—seasoned with salt—must act as a cleansing agent on those who hear from the believer's lips the Word of the Lord. But how shall they hear unless the believer opens his mouth and explains God's Word, with love and with genuine concern for those in spiritual darkness and sin. (Rom. 10:14-15; Col.4:6)

Salt stings: It can burn. In moral terms, the effects of a believer's godly life or testimony on unbelievers can produce resentment or give offence. They are offended by the lives of the believer and by the Word of the Lord. Both testify to the holiness and righteousness of God. Both assert that God is a God of justice, holiness and wrath, as well as a God of love, mercy and compassion. The unbeliever may accept that there is a God of love. However, he resents being led to believe that God judges and condemns unrepentant sinners. Yet, this is exactly the effect produced on sinful men and women by the lives and witness of God's faithful children. The believer's conduct and speech is like salt on an open wound. Not only does it permeate, cleanse and arrest the putrefaction of that wound, it also burns or causes pain in the process. So it is with unbelievers. The salt of a Christian's life and testimony causes pain and offence (morally) to those who are yet without Christ. However, without the wound being cleansed and purified there can be no healing. Without a knowledge of sin, of the law's demands, of the penalty of sin—which is death—no sinner will be convicted of his sin, convinced of his great need of redemption, or constrained to call upon the name of the Lord for mercy. (John 16:7-11; Acts 2:37-41)

Therefore, we are to be the salt of the earth.

If, however, a believer's life or testimony to the world ceases to act like salt, then that person's witness for Christ and for God's standards of holiness and righteous becomes worthless. His witness for God and for the truth has proved insipid, tasteless, inconsequential, and therefore of no value to the souls of lost men and women. Those who do not show by their character or speech something of the God to whom they belong are like salt that has lost its savour. Such salt is useless, and worthy only to be trampled underfoot by men. (Luke 14:34-35; cf. also 2 Tim. 2:15; 4:2 with Ezek. 33:6)

## MATTHEW 5:14-16

Now, the Lord Jesus declares to his followers:

> Matthew 5:14-16 ESV
>
> (14) "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. (15) Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. (16) In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

The following is true of light. It:

- Shines: It illuminates darkness, so that everyone can see around them.
- Searches: Like a searchlight, it seeks out hiding places, hidden areas, dark corners, etc.
- Penetrates: Again, like a searchlight, it pervades and penetrates into the deepest recesses, crevices, and crannies.
- Reveals: It makes visible, known or clear that which previously was obscure, unknown or unseen.
- Exposes: It brings to light hidden or secret areas.
- Discloses: Concealed matters (morally and spiritually), unrighteousness, sin, etc.

Now, we will consider each point individually.

Light shines: Wherever light falls, it illuminates. Morally and spiritually, this means that it expels the darkness and brings to light the evil deeds and practises of mankind. Light permeates that dark and evil world—the darkness of a person's heart (inner being or mind): a sinful heart that produces all manner of iniquitous thoughts, words and actions. The light being referred to here, of course, is the light of God's Word. Light represents truth, righteousness and holiness, etc. Whenever sinful mankind is exposed to the light of God's Word, that light (or the truth of God's Word applied by the Holy Spirit) convicts him of sin, of righteousness and of judgment. (John 3:19-21; 16:8) Thus, the believer is to shine like a light in the world. His personal life is to reflect the very light or truth of God's holy and righteous Word. His testimony for Christ is to be as bright and clear as a light shining in a dark place. In this way, the believer becomes a light of the world. By his pure life and speech, he displays something of God's truth, righteousness, holiness and judgment. (Prov. 4:18; Eph. 5:8; Php. 2:15)

Light searches: Not content with expelling the surface darkness alone, light endeavours to search out every area of hidden darkness in order to illuminate it. Similarly, by his sincere and godly life and witness, the believer's example and testimony for Christ brings light to bear on the most hidden areas in a person's life, or character and conduct. The believer may not be aware of the penetrating effects of his life or testimony on the lives of sinful men and women. Nevertheless, by remaining faithful to God and to his Word, that light (the truth of God and his Word) will shine to the deepest recesses of a person's heart and life. Thus, that person is fully aware of God's requirements and of his judgment on those who reject or despise his Word or his Son (v.16).

Light penetrates: A searchlight may endeavour to illuminate even the most obscure or concealed areas. However, it cannot penetrate those areas that lie outside its range or above or below its penetrating beam. Not so with the light of God's Word or the truth of God. God's Word and God's truth penetrates above and below all otherwise impenetrable areas. It shines without diminution over the full extent of its range—which is infinite. Thus, the believer who—by his conduct and testimony—is a shining light for Christ in the world, is ensuring that this light, or the truth concerning God, is being made known wherever his godly life and testimony can be seen or heard, or wherever it is being reported by others. And nothing can thwart or hinder the penetration of God's light into the hearts and lives of even the most culpable and depraved members of fallen and sinful mankind.

Light reveals: Where light shines, it reveals. Where the light of God's truth shines, it reveals that truth. Though lost in the darkness of sin, no one upon whom that light shines can fail to see (or understand) the truth. They see first of all that God's truth condemns them as sinners. They see also from the light of God's Word, that sinners must die and perish for eternity. Again, they see however, that God has provided salvation through One known as *'The Light of the World'*. (John 8:12; 9:5) Thus, because the believer remained faithful to the Lord by acting as a light of the world, sinners are brought into contact with the One who is 'The Light of the World'—the One who alone can expel their darkness forever and grant to them the light of life.

Light exposes: What light reveals it also exposes to the eye (or to the 'eye' of the heart or mind). When, by their example and testimony, a believer's life constrains sinners to see the truth, or to acknowledge the truth of God's Word), then they begin to see the true state or condition of their fallen sinful nature. They begin to comprehend that God's wrath and judgment on sin and sinners is both righteous and just. They begin to realise their very great danger—for the light has exposed this to them; i.e., they have begun to understand the truths of God's Word as it has been revealed to them by the Holy Spirit. Thus, as the Spirit of God enables them, they begin to seek the Lord and to call upon his name for mercy. All those who thus seek the light of God's Word with a truly repentant and believing heart, will indeed experience the mercy of the Lord. (Rom. 10:8-13) Yet, without the believer acting as a light to the world, this person would never have found salvation in Christ through the godly witness of that believer's life or testimony. If he were the elect of the Lord, the Lord would have saved him—but he would have saved him by some other means, or by means of some other person.

Light discloses: Those in the world of sinful mankind who have experienced a clear witness or testimony from a believer in Christ, and who have observed his godly lifestyle, do not necessarily respond to the light or the truth of God's Word. Nevertheless, among the mass of mankind, are a large number who will and do respond, as the Spirit regenerates and enables them. The believer's faithful testimony to the truth, and his consistent and godly lifestyle, may well have proved instrumental in leading that person to seek further light. Although, of course, he could not find the Lord by his own efforts, yet the Lord will be found of all those who seek him with a sincere and contrite heart: a condition brought about by the prior and gracious working of the Holy Spirit. (Isa. 55:6-7; Jer. 29:13) Thus, those sinners find that the light discloses the thoughts and intents of their hearts. It makes known to them just how sinful they really are in God's sight, and how much in need of his great salvation. Therefore, on seeing their miserable condition, and knowing that they stand rightly and righteously condemned for their sins, they appeal to the Lord for mercy. Thus, they find in him full forgiveness for their sins. They experience through him the permanent expulsion of their moral darkness, and regeneration of their souls from spiritual death to spiritual and eternal life. They have seen and believed *The Light of the World* because they saw and were deeply influenced by those who were 'the lights of the world'—the redeemed and forgiven children of

God, shining like the light of a city set on a hilltop over and upon the darkness of the valley (or world) below.

Just as the sun illuminates the world physically, so the believer is to illuminate the world morally and spiritually. Just as a world deprived of light from the sun would perish, so a world deprived of light from God's Word will perish.

## JESUS FULFILS THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS

***Matthew 5:17-20***

We come now to the section that deals with Jesus' attitude toward the Law of God, and indeed to the entire Old Testament Scriptures. From the outset of Jesus' ministry, people had misunderstood or misconstrued the Lord's position in relation to the Law, as given by God on Mount Sinai and promulgated by Moses to the people of Israel.

A number of those listening to the Lord Jesus—especially among the scribes and Pharisees—thought that Jesus was about to overturn or repudiate the Law of Moses, which they considered as sacrosanct. The Lord Jesus, however, had no such intentions. As he is about to explain, the Law of God is immutable and it remained paramount to him. He was not about to diminish or overturn the Law. Rather, he had come to accomplish everything set forth by God in the Law and the Prophets. He had come to fulfil all righteousness. (Matt. 3:15)

Nevertheless, as we shall see, what the scribes and Pharisees understood as being the Law of God was not necessarily the same as the Law that God had given to Moses. In many instances, the teachers of the law (i.e., the scribes or rabbis) had misunderstood, misinterpreted and misapplied the Law of God. In other instances, the Pharisees and others had ***e***ncumbered God's holy Law with their own traditions. (Matt. 15:3-6; Mark 7:8-13) The Lord Jesus would correct these misapplications of God's Law, and would provide the true interpretation of God's unchanging Word.

## MATTHEW 5:17

Therefore, the Lord begins by declaring:

> Matthew 5:17 ESV
>
> (17) "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them."
>
> (Cf. Luke 16:17; Rom. 3:31; 7:12)

From the very outset, the Lord Jesus is declaring his position publicly in relation to the Law and the Prophets. The expression, *'the Law and the Prophets'* was a comprehensive term that the religious teachers employed to refer to the entire body of Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament). Therefore, when the Lord Jesus said that he had not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, he was asserting the permanence of the entire Old Testament Scriptures.

How, then, do we reconcile this with other passages that appear to say that many OT Scriptures no longer apply to the believer in Christ?

We do so without difficulty. When Christ declared that he had not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, he immediately added these words, '…*but to fulfil them*.' Let us consider very briefly what is being implied here:

The Law of God consisted of two major elements, both of which the Lord Jesus had come to fulfil, but in different ways.

1. Firstly, there were the Ten Words or Ten Commandments. (Ex. 20:1-18; Deut. 5:6-22) This is the moral law. This law is unchangeable or immutable. It applies as much today as it did when the LORD God first gave it to Moses on Mount Sinai. However, the purpose of this holy, righteous and good law was not to be the means of salvation and life, but to demonstrate God's righteous standard and requirements to the Hebrew people, and more generally to fallen sinful men and women everywhere. It was given to show to sinners that they could never attain to these standards, and thus it was intended to convict them of their sin and need and lead them to seek the mercy of the Lord. As Paul says, the law was our servant or guide (ESV, 'tutor', KJV, 'schoolmaster'[16] ) to lead us to Christ. (Gal. 3:21-26; 4:1-7) In this respect, what the believer was wholly unable to do in keeping the Law's demands perfectly throughout his or her lifetime, Christ did by his perfect and unwavering obedience to that Law throughout the time that he lived on this earth. Thus, in respect of righteousness (both concerning himself and also on behalf of the believer) the Lord Jesus fulfilled the Law. He did not abolish the Law.

2. The second major element encompassed by the Law was the laws of sacrifices and ordinances. These laws had been given by God until the time of reformation: i.e., they were to be performed or obeyed unfailingly until the time that the Lord would reform the sacrificial system. (Heb. 9:9-14) Thus, offerings and sacrifices—including the sacrifice of atonement—continued to be yielded up to God throughout the history of the Israelite people. Once again, however, the Lord Jesus had come not to abolish these laws concerning sacrifices and offerings, *but to fulfil them*. This he did by the once-for-all sacrifice of himself. This was the time of reformation. This was the time when God had determined to supersede the atoning sacrifices typified by the blood of animals with one perfect and eternal sacrifice for sin. Yet, the former animal sacrifices had not been needless or in vain. They had been essential pointers to the need for an atoning sacrifice—for atonement for sin could be secured only by the shedding of blood. (Heb. 9:22) But now that Christ had shed his blood and laid down his life as a sacrifice for sin, no further sacrifices would ever be required. If a law of this nature (i.e., a temporary, typical and ceremonial law) has been fulfilled, then there is no further need for it to be observed or for such sacrifices to be offered. (Heb. 10:1-18) However, until the Lord Jesus had fulfilled in his own Person everything of which these OT sacrifices had spoken, he had no intention of setting them aside or abolishing them. This was demonstrated by his participation, along with his disciples, in the Passover Feasts, etc., up until the time that he shed his own blood and offered up his own life as a complete and final sacrifice for sin. Then, to show the complete fulfilment and abrogation of the Jewish ceremonial sacrifices at this point in time, the veil of the temple was rent in two as Jesus suffered on the cross. (Matt. 27:51) Thus, in this respect too Jesus fulfilled the entire ceremonial law before abrogating the old system of sacrifices and offerings.

[16] tutor / schoolmaster: Gk. paidagwgoj *(paidagogos)*, meaning, 'servant', 'guardian', 'leader' or 'guide'; but not 'teacher'. [BDAG; Hogg and Vine]

The Lord had said also that he had not come to destroy the Prophets. The first five books of Moses were considered as 'the Law'. The remainder of the Old Testament Scriptures was considered as 'the Prophets' or as 'the Writings' and 'the Prophets'. The Lord, therefore was not about to repudiate the teaching of the Old Testament Prophets. Rather, he had come to fulfil every word that the Prophets had spoken concerning him. This indeed he did—to the letter—when he fulfilled all prophecy and all other teaching of the Old Testament concerning his suffering at the hands of evil men, his vicarious and atoning death, and his subsequent resurrection and glorification—spoken of by the Psalmist and others. (Ps. 22:6-8; 40:6-8; Isa. 50:6; 52:13 – 53:12; Matt. 26:56; Luke 24:44; Acts 3:18; 13:27)

## MATTHEW 5:18

The Lord Jesus continues by declaring to his disciples:

> Matthew 5:18 ESV
>
> (18) "For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled."
>
> (Cf. Isa. 40:8; Matt. 24:35; Luke 16:17; 21:33)

Addressing his followers, the Lord Jesus had asserted quite categorically that he had not come to set aside the Law or the Prophets: i.e., the (Old Testament) Scriptures. Now, in this verse, the Lord prefixes what he is about to declare with the words, '*For amen, I say unto you…'* (Translated here as, *'For verily I say unto you…'*). When used at the beginning of a sentence, the word 'Amen' (or 'Amen, Amen', etc.) means that what is about to follow is of the utmost importance, and that the hearers should listen to, accept, and ponder the significance of these words with extreme diligence.

*…Till heaven and earth pass…*

This simply asserts that no change can occur in what the Lord is about to say until the conditions have been fulfilled completely or until heaven and earth shall pass away: i.e., the words that follow were to last until their complete fulfilment. Thus, the Lord Jesus is emphasising the importance and permanence of God's Law. It cannot change; it cannot cease to apply; it cannot pass away, until everything of which the Law has spoken has been fulfilled completely.

To accentuate this even further, the Lord asserts, *'…one jot or tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled':* That is, not one iota (Gk., iwta—this being the smallest letter of the alphabet), not one keraia (Gk., keraia—this being the minutest stroke, serif, or diacritic mark appended to a letter of the alphabet, and similar to those minuscule accents or diacritic marks and serifs on the letters of the two Greek words quoted in this paragraph.)

Far from repudiating the teaching of the Law or minimizing its importance, the Lord Jesus was emphasising to his disciples just how important it was to observe God's holy Law. Not even the smallest letter of that Law, or the minutest part of that letter, could pass away until its fulfilment. Therefore, the Law could not—and would not—be repealed or annulled until everything of which it spoke had come to pass.

## MATTHEW 5:19

Having stressed the pre-eminence and permanence of God's Law, the Lord Jesus continues:

> Matthew 5:19 ESV
>
> (19) "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."
>
> (Cf. Deut. 12:32; Luke 11:42; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14-24)

In context, this part of the Lord's sermon is being addressed to his disciples (who, later, were to become apostolic preachers and teachers of the early church). In principle, however, it may be applied to all believers. Again, in context, the Lord is referring here to the moral law or Ten Commandments, as his later expositions and applications will confirm.

Anyone—especially, anyone acting in a teaching capacity—who minimises the Law of God, who encourages or condones those who break it, or who denies the Law's validity and application at the present time, is himself guilty of breaking God's holy, just and righteous Law. (Rom. 3:31; 7:12; cf. Ps. 19:7-12)

Those who neglect, disparage, or otherwise set aside the *moral* law, or who suggest that it no longer applies to believers living under grace, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven. They will be among those who have proved unfaithful in the Lord's service. If such people prove to have been unregenerate teachers, they will be excluded from God's kingdom. If, however, they were believers (albeit, unfaithful to the whole truth of God's Word), they will inherit the kingdom of heaven, but they will lose some or all of their reward in heaven.

At no time, did the Lord Jesus ever set aside the Ten Commandments, or their attendant duties and responsibilities toward God and man. This Law was never given as a means of salvation and righteousness for sinful mankind. Nevertheless, it was given to convict men and women of sin and guilt; to make them aware of their very great and eternal danger apart from God's mercy and to induce them to seek the mercy of the Lord. Again, the Law of Commandments was given to set forth God's standard of righteousness: a righteousness without which no one could approach God or inherit the kingdom of heaven. However, since sinful men and women could not keep this Law unto perfection, God provided his own Son to fulfil ever jot and tittle of the Law on behalf of sinners, and to provide them with his own perfect righteousness so that they would be acceptable before God.

Those, however, who prove faithful to God and to his Word by teaching the whole counsel of God—including these Commandments—are considered great (i.e., worthy, true and faithful servants of the Lord) in the kingdom of heaven. However, we must observe carefully what the Lord Jesus actually said here. In the first part of verse 19, the Lord spoke about those who 'shall *break*...' and 'shall *teach*...' In other words, these people broke God's commandments in their own hearts and lives, before they actually taught others to do the same. A corresponding truth applies in this part of the verse. Those who would teach others faithfully about God's commandments must first of all prove faithful in their own hearts and lives at observing these commandments. Those, however, who both observe God's Law themselves, and teach others to do the same, will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

When it is done from a humble, sincere and regenerate heart and life, observing the precepts and principles of God's moral law in this manner does not amount to legalism (which is completely contrary to the teaching of God's Word). Rather, heartfelt obedience to God's moral law and Christ's commands is an expression of a believer's real and genuine love for God and love for others. Those who love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, and their neighbour as themselves, have fulfilled, and are fulfilling, the law as God intended. (Mark 12:28-31; Rom. 13:8-9; Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8-13; 1 John 3:17-19; 4:7-8,21)

As we study the Sermon on the Mount, we must continue to bear in mind that the Lord was placing great emphasis on the importance of God's Word (the Law and the Prophets). However, Jesus' teaching differed considerably from that of the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes (or teachers of the law) and Pharisees had modified and distorted the Law almost out of all recognition. They had added numerous qualifications and supplementary teachings to the Law that God had delivered to Moses. Then, with their many man-made rules and other accretions to God's Law, they had burdened the people with a yoke that they could not bear. (Cf. Acts 15:10) The pure, holy and righteous Law of God had become the laws and traditions of men. This was a classic and inexcusable example of 'legalism'. (Mark 7:5-13; cf. Col. 2:8; 1 Pet. 1:18)

The Lord Jesus, however, did not subscribe to any of the religious teachers' false interpretations of God's Holy Word. Thus, the Son of God taught the Law of God accurately, and he taught it as God had intended it to be understood—without it being encumbered with the unscriptural accretions and appendages of the scribes and Pharisees. By so teaching and applying God's Law, sinners were made aware of their lost estate, of their desperate need of salvation, and of their very great danger if they did not seek the Lord and experience God's mercy and salvation.

## MATTHEW 5:20

Next, the Lord Jesus declares to his disciples:

> Matthew 5:20 ESV
>
> (20) "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."
>
> (Cf. Matt. 23:2-5, 23-28; Luke 11:39-40; 18:10-14; 20:46-47)

These words must have astonished the Lord's hearers. For the most part, the scribes and Pharisees were seen as highly respected members of the community. The Jewish people looked upon these theologians and religious leaders as exemplifying the very epitome of holiness, righteousness and godliness. Yet, the Lord Jesus was saying that those who would enter God's kingdom needed to possess a righteousness that far exceeded the righteousness exhibited by these revered religious leaders.

Man, however, looks on the outward appearance, whereas God looks on the heart. The Lord Jesus knew that the scribes and Pharisees were very religious outwardly and before the people. Nevertheless, the Lord was well aware that, with a few notable exceptions,[17] the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees

[17] *exceptions*: e.g., Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea; both members of the Jewish Council or Sanhedrin, and both of whom later demonstrated support for the Lord Jesus Christ. (Mark 15:43; John 19:38-39) Joseph of Arimathea is said expressly to have been a disciple of the Lord Jesus. (John 19:38)

was not a righteousness of the heart, but merely a show and pretence at piety or godliness. (Cf. Rom. 10:3) To the people, the scribes and Pharisees appeared as the most upright and godly people on earth. However, the Lord saw past their external veneer of 'righteousness' to expose the thoughts and intents of their hearts or minds. In most cases, Jesus described these professors of religion as hypocrites; likening them to whitewashed sepulchres. They appeared 'beautiful' (morally pure or clean) on the outside. Inwardly, however, they were full of dead men's bones (morally impure and corrupt). (Matt. 23:27-28)

Thus, it was imperative that any follower of Jesus be found with a righteousness that far exceeded the 'righteousness' of the scribes and Pharisees. Essentially, the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was an attempt to achieve justification before God by means of works: i.e., by self-effort augmented by good deeds. However, this kind of 'righteousness' could never save them. Indeed, in the sight of God, self-righteousness was (and is) no better than filthy rags. (Isa. 64:6) Sinners (and this included the scrupulously 'religious' scribes and Pharisees) need a righteousness of the heart or soul. They need to possess that kind of righteousness which comes to a person as a gift of God's sovereign grace. This kind of righteousness begins with regeneration by the Holy Spirit, is associated with justification (imputed righteousness), and continues with sanctification (imparted righteousness). Without this kind of righteousness—true righteousness *of heart and life*—no one would ever enter the kingdom of heaven. (Php. 3:9)

## JESUS EXPOUNDS AND APPLIES GOD'S LAW

***Matthew 5:21-48***

The Lord Jesus now begins to expound the Law of God, and to apply its precepts and principles to the hearts and lives of his hearers. Much of what the Lord was about to say would be 'new' or surprisingly and radically different from what the scribes and Pharisees had been teaching the people. It would be significantly different also from what they had been accustomed to hearing from the rabbis at the Jewish synagogues.

This, however, did not represent on Jesus' part a departure from, and re-interpretation of, the Law of God. On the contrary, it represented a return to the true interpretation of the Law as God had given it to Moses, and as the Lord had intended it to be understood and applied. Nevertheless, because it did not accord with traditional or current rabbinical teaching, the scribes and Pharisees would object most strenuously to Jesus' pure teaching of God's Law and would endeavour at every turn to discredit or denounce the Lord's teaching. Such is the way of unspiritual or evil men when their cherished beliefs, rules, regulations and traditions are exposed as mistaken or false and overturned by the authentic truth of God's Word.

## MATTHEW 5:21

The Lord begins this section by declaring:

Matthew 5:21 ESV

(21) "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'"

(Cf. Gen. 9:5-6; Ex. 20:13; 21:12; Deut. 5:17)

*"You have heard that it was said to those of old..."*

This was an expression that called the hearers' attention to what had been commonly declared as true to generations of people by the schools of theology and by the elders or rabbis. In many cases, as here, the truths expounded and applied by the rabbis were based on the Law of Commandments. However, in other cases, the religious teachers had modified the Law or supplemented it with man-made rules and regulations. In course of time, these accretions to God's Law assumed the form of additional 'necessary' laws or traditions; i.e., laws and traditions taught and required by men, not by God. (Mark 7:8-13)

*"'You shall not murder...'"*

This is a direct quotation of the sixth commandment. The Lord Jesus is reminding his hearers of the exact words of God in relation to homicide or murder. The taking of human life unlawfully was expressly forbidden. (Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17)

The termination of human life within the womb is likewise comprehended under this commandment—irrespective of the position in civil law. Unless it is for the express purpose of saving the mother's life (not preserving her health or wellbeing), abortion on demand or by request is a wilful violation of God's express command, *"You shall not kill."* In God's sight, human life is considered to begin at the point of conception, not birth. (Cf. Ps. 71:6; 139:13-16; Isa. 44:2,24; 46:3; 49:5; Jer. 1:5)

To take the life of another person was a wilful and wicked crime not only against that person but also against God, since that person had been created in the image and likeness of God. (Gen. 9:5-6)

*"'and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'"* (Cf. Deut. 16:18)

This part of the sentence is not a direct quotation from the sixth commandment, but rather an expression of the consequences which—elsewhere—the LORD commanded should be exacted on the murderer. Those found guilty of premeditated and wilful murder were to be executed. However, no one was to be put to death on the testimony of a single eye-witness but only on the testimony of at least two competent, reliable and trustworthy eye-witnesses. Thus, murderers were to be purged from the land. (Ex. 21:12-14; Lev. 24:17; Num. 35:30-31; Deut, 17:6; 19:15-21; Rom. 13:4)

In later times, such offenders would appear before the Sanhedrin or supreme religious council. In those days, the Jewish Council could impose and carry out the death penalty. However, later still—at the time the Lord Jesus was speaking—the death penalty could be carried out only by the Roman authorities. (John 8:31)

## MATTHEW 5:22-26

The Lord continues:

Matthew 5:22 ESV

(22) "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother[18] will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."

(Cf. Eccl. 7:9; Eph. 4:26; Jas. 1:19-20; 1 John 3:15)

These remarks must have astonished all who were listening. These people had never heard anything like this from their rabbis or from the scribes and Pharisees. Yet, the Lord Jesus is not providing any new teaching here. Rather, he is expounding the sixth commandment by applying its general principles to other related matters. This, of course, is what the religious leaders should have done, but failed to do. Instead, they added needless rules and regulations that God had never intended to form part of his holy Law.

But what is the connection between anger and murder? The connection is very close indeed, as the apostle Paul and others will declare later in their epistles. Murder and anger differ only in degree. They proceed from the same root: an evil heart maliciously intent on wishing or causing harm to another person—in thought, word or deed. Therefore, we note from the outset that the Lord was condemning not only the evil deed, but also the evil thought, the evil word and the evil intents of the heart. (Gen. 27:41; Lev. 19:16-18; Prov. 26:24-26; 1 John 3:15)

Concerning anger, we should observe that not all anger is sinful. The Lord God is angry with the wicked every day. The Lord visits wrath upon the ungodly and the impenitent. The Lord expresses anger on many different occasions and for many different purposes. (Judges 2:14; Ps. 7:11; Jer. 7:20; Lam. 1:12; Mark 3:5; John 3:36) Again, the Lord Jesus expressed anger against those who defiled the temple at Jerusalem for their desecration of that holy place. (Matt. 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-18; Luke 19:45-46)

In all these cases, however, this was holy, righteous and justified anger—or the expression of God's indignation and unmitigated wrath against sin and upon unrepentant sinners. Such anger is righteous anger, for it proceeds—not from a person's sinful nature—but from the righteous and just nature or character of God, and is an expression of his absolute and unchanging holiness.

A believer, too, may express righteous anger, and we will deal with this in its proper place. (Eph. 4:26-27) However, at the moment, the Lord Jesus is speaking of unjustified and sinful anger.

The Lord warns against anyone, who professes to be a disciple, from remaining angry with his brother. As he will declare elsewhere, those who are in dispute must seek to be reconciled with one another; and, where an offence has been committed, the offender must be forgiven. No one was to approach God's altar (or come to God in prayer) while he remained at enmity with his brother (or neighbour). (Matt. 5:23-24)

[18] Some mss insert …*brother without cause*…

If, however, a person continued to express anger toward his brother, then that individual would find himself under the displeasure of God and liable to his temporal judgments: i.e., chastisement, correction, or punishment on his life for unconfessed sin. While this situation prevailed, this believer would find himself out of fellowship with God and without the peace of God in his heart and life.

Those who expressed their sinful anger by insulting or scandalizing their brother, or by denouncing him unjustly before others, would be liable to appear before the supreme council to answer for their offences. The Sanhedrin was the highest religious authority in the land, and it could impose sanctions or punishments on those who broke the Law of God. By extension, those of the Lord's people today who insult or scandalize other people publicly are liable to appear before the elders of the church. The church leadership may impose sanctions or corrective measures on the offender, or may even exclude a recalcitrant offender temporarily from the fellowship of the church. (Cf. Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:2-5, 9-13)

The Lord Jesus speaks of one further example of unjustified and sinful anger: viz., anger expressed as verbal abuse of another person. The example given, *"You fool"* (*'raca'*;) means an *'empty-head'*, '*numb-skull*', or '*imbecile*'. In antiquity, the word was sometimes used light-heartedly to put down a vain person, without any real sense of malice being attached to its use. However, when the same word was expressed from a spiteful, bitter or angry spirit, it represented an insult of the highest order imaginable. Thus expressed, the word was not only derogatory, but also implied contempt for—or hatred of—the other person. We may also comprehend under this example all forms of verbal abuse or abusive expressions that proceed from a sinful and evil heart and mind.

It is no surprise, therefore, when the Lord Jesus declares most solemnly that such a person will be liable to the hell of fire. Those who resort to such abusive language must question most seriously whether they belong to Christ. For a renewed and regenerated heart and life cannot spew forth a foul torrent of abuse. If it does, it is virtually certain that this person's profession of faith in Christ is a false profession. If so, he is still in his sins; and, as such, he is yet under the wrath of God and destined for eternal punishment in the fire of hell: That is, he will endure the torments of everlasting separation from God with no hope of remission from pain or from a guilty and accusing conscience throughout the eternal ages. (Matt. 10:28; 18:8-9; 25:41; Luke 16:23; John 3:36; Rev. 20:15; 21:8)

Before we leave this verse, we should note that 'anger' comprehends more than just anger alone—as the New Testament epistles make clear. Those also who may be guilty of sinful anger are those who conceal in their hearts—or exhibit openly—hatred toward another person, or who cherish resentment or bitterness in their hearts, or who hold grudges against other people, or who hold on resolutely to an unforgiving spirit, etc. (1 John 2:9; 3:10, 14-15; 4:20-21)

All of these are degrees of murder; ranging from the capital offence itself, to murder of the heart. Heart-murder is that form of character-assassination which a person may harbour in his or her heart (as with hatred, bitterness or resentment) or express by words (as in malicious, insulting or abusive language, or by gossip or innuendo).

## ANGER: FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

### MATTHEW 5:23-24

Next, the Lord declares to his hearers:

> Matthew 5:23-24 ESV
>
> (23) "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, (24) leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."
>
> (Cf. Matt. 18:15-17; Mark 11:25-26)

Essentially, this passage is a practical application of the principles of the sixth commandment. The sixth commandment relates not only to murder but also to all sins of this kind—including hatred, bitterness, resentment and other kindred sins of the heart. The application of this principle here pertains to estrangement or alienation, probably caused by one of the aforementioned sins or a closely related sin.

Before one can approach the presence of the holy and righteous God, that person must be at peace both with God and with his brother. Therefore, any Jewish worshipper who approached the altar to offer his gift to God, or who sought to offer a sacrifice of prayer or praise to the Lord, could do so only with clean hands and a pure heart. (Ps. 24:3-4) However, if—when about to offer his gift—this worshipper remembered that another brother held some grievance against him, he was not to offer his gift to God at that time. Rather, he was to leave the house of worship, seek out the brother who felt aggrieved, and endeavour to be reconciled to him.

The Lord required that the worshipper—rather than the person who felt aggrieved—be the one to seek reconciliation. Whether this grievance was justifiable or not, the worshipper was to seek reconciliation—even although the person who felt offended may have shown no desire to be reconciled. Until, however, the worshipper had attempted reconciliation with his brother he could not come to God with clean hands and a pure heart: For, without this right spirit, God would not have accepted his gifts, offerings, prayers or praises. (Jas. 4:8)

From the narrative here, we do not know whether the worshipper succeeded in achieving reconciliation with his aggrieved brother. Nevertheless, this is not so important as making the attempt in the first instance, and doing so from a loving, caring heart—a heart willing to forgive any offences, to admit or confess any wrongdoing on the worshipper's part, and to clarify or remedy any misunderstandings or misapprehensions that had caused the grievance in the first place. (Jas. 5:16)

As long as the worshipper had made a genuine and sincere attempt at reconciliation, then he could return to the altar and offer his gift to God; which now the Lord would accept. If the worshipper had succeeded in achieving reconciliation with his brother, then he had gained his brother. If he had been unsuccessful, then he had left his brother to answer to the Lord for refusing reconciliation when sincerely offered. Nevertheless, if unsuccessful on this occasion, the worshipper was not to cease his attempts at reconciliation on future occasions—as opportunity afforded. (Matt. 18:15-17)

## MATTHEW 5:25-26

The Lord Jesus now declares:

> Matthew 5:25-26 ESV
>
> (25) "Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. (26) Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny."
>
> (Cf. Prov. 6:1-5; 25:8; Luke 12:58-59; cf. also Isa. 50:8-9)

Again, this is a practical application of the principles of the sixth commandment: on this occasion, the Lord Jesus cites a further serious example of disputes and grievances between two parties.

The setting here is that of a plaintiff (i.e., an accuser[19]) versus a defendant at law. It is assumed that the defendant is being pursued for some outstanding debt, for the return of borrowed property, or for some other similar matter involving money, goods or services. By neglect or dereliction of his duties and responsibilities toward others, the accused (i.e., the defendant) must not permit a situation to arise where he would justifiably be required to appear before a court of law.

Should this happen, the accused would find himself in the hands of the judge. (Formerly, if before the Sanhedrin on monetary matters, this would have taken the form of a tribunal or 'bench of three'; latterly, if before the civil law courts, a magistrate, sheriff or judge would have presided over the case).

These officers of the courts had the power to impose a fine, or even imprisonment, for default in repayment of debts or similar. Those thus imprisoned for their failure to make reparation to their debtors would not be released from their confinement until they (or another person acting on their behalf) had satisfied fully the equitable demands of the plaintiff and the demands of justice.

Clearly, a believer should not be indebted to anyone—except to the Lord his God. (Prov. 3:27-28; Rom. 13:7-8) However, from a purely pragmatic point of view, the Lord Jesus recognises that individuals may still become indebted to others. It is the Christian's duty and responsibility to make good, or pay off, outstanding debts as they become due. No one should default on their repayments or withhold payment from those to whom payment is due. Should they do so, however, they may expect their creditors to pursue recovery of their money, goods or services through due process of law. This is why the Lord Jesus instructs his hearers to settle quickly with their accusers, before their case is brought to court.

The Scriptures, of course, forbid believers from engaging in lawsuits against fellow-believers. (1 Cor. 6:6-7).

[19] *accuser (Gk,* antidikw| *)*: Lit., one who brings a charge in a lawsuit [BDAG]. The KJV and some other versions render this word as 'adversary'. Frequently, 'adversary' means 'enemy' or 'opponent'. However, in the present context, the primary meaning of the word is 'accuser' (at law).

## SEXUAL IMMORALITY: ADULTERY AND LUST

### MATTHEW 5:27-28

(Cf. Matt. 19:1-9)

The Lord Jesus now expounds and applies the seventh commandment:

> Matthew 5:27-28 ESV
>
> (27) "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' (28) But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

(Cf. Ex. 20:14; 20:17; 2 Sam. 11:2)

The Lord now moves on to expound and apply the seventh commandment relating to adultery.[20] As with other commandments, we will see that the prohibition of one specific act (in this case, adultery) is not confined to the adulterous act alone, but extends to all related matters of this kind or category. However, to apply the commandment so comprehensively was contrary to the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees, and demonstrated once more how these religious teachers had misunderstood and misapplied the Law of God.

The expression, *"You have heard that it was said..."* (v.27a) is a reference to the commandments delivered by Moses to the people. However, the phrase may refer also to the mistaken and wholly inadequate teaching that, for centuries past, the people had been accustomed to hearing from their religious leaders. Previously, the people had been taught to observe the seventh commandment as expressly stated: *'You shall not commit adultery.'* However, their teachers had failed to apply the principles of this commandment to all related areas of sexual thought and behaviour. They had been quite content with forbidding the act of adultery (or marital unfaithfulness) alone. However, this was never God's intention when he gave this, or any other, commandment to Moses. Now, therefore, by his teaching, the Lord Jesus gives the true interpretation of God's commandment and applies its extensive and pervading principles to the hearts and lives of his hearers.

Thus, the Lord Jesus declares: *"But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart."* (v.28)

In verse 28, the Lord declares emphatically that the sinful thought is just as culpable in the sight of God as the sinful act. By extension, this means that the sinful attitude, disposition of the mind, intent of the heart, or bias of the will is just as blameworthy before God as the sinful act. Yet again, the sinful atti-

[20] *adultery:* At this point, we should note that when these matters are being discussed and expounded in the New Testament epistles, illicit sexual relations are not confined to adultery. In keeping with the teaching of the Lord Jesus, the apostle Paul makes it unmistakably clear that all forms of sexual misdemeanours are included in this category. Therefore, it would be better to understand the Lord's teachings here in the light of the whole New Testament teaching on this subject. In this case, we should consider 'adultery' as comprehending every form of sexual impurity or immorality, of whatever type, whether in thought, word, gesture or deed. This would include any immoral or questionable matters that a person chooses to listen to or watch, any impure conversations in which he participates, any corrupt company with which he associates, or any impure media that he reads or views. (GL)

tudes or thoughts expressed outwardly by words or gestures are just as blameworthy as the act of adultery.

What applies here to adultery in thought, word, gesture or deed, applies equally to all other forms of sexual immorality in thought, word, gesture or deed. Those who dishonour God and defile their bodies or their minds with sexually impure or immoral thoughts, attitudes, words, gestures or actions are breaking the seventh commandment and stand guilty of sin before God and before others. Under no circumstances did the Lord Jesus make provision for relaxing this law. On the contrary, by interpreting and applying it as he has just done, he has magnified God's Law and made it glorious. Thus, to break this or any other commandment is to sin against God and against his holy Law. Any one of us may become guilty of such sin at some time. However, the Lord requires us to confess and renounce our sin, and to seek his forgiveness. (Ps. 51:1-3; 1 Thess. 4:3-7)

Furthermore, we should observe that the principles of this commandment comprehends and forbids all forms of unnatural sexual relations, such as same-sex or homosexual relationships—whether involving two males or two females. For a male to look lustfully at, or to think lustfully toward, another male is sexual immorality. Similarly, for a female to lust after another female is sexual immorality. For two males or two females to engage physically in homosexual intimacy or acts is also sexual immorality. However, it is also unnatural and perverse behaviour, since, at creation, God made the woman for the man and the man for the women that they might become one flesh. (Gen. 1:26-28; 2:18-25) The male-female union constitutes the only natural God-ordained union, and it is this union alone that God has promised to bless and to honour. Furthermore, the LORD God expressly forbids sexual intimacy or union between two males or two females, and prohibits them from engaging in any form of sexual activity. (Lev. 18:22-28; Deut. 23:17-18; Rom. 1:22-28; 1 Cor. 6:9; Jude 1:7)

Nevertheless, God's judgment is never without mercy. Those who commit any of the above sins can and will be forgiven whenever they acknowledge their sin to God, renounce it completely, seek God's mercy and forgiveness and the forgiveness of the other party, and endeavour to live henceforth to the honour and glory of God. (Ps. 51:1ff; 1 Cor. 6:9,11)

Thus, those who are married to a husband or wife in God's appointed way may enjoy those marital and conjugal relations as God intended, in purity, holiness and honour. (1 Cor. 7:1-5) Those who remain unmarried God will yet bless abundantly as they seek to honour and serve him in the way that he intended. However, while they remain unmarried, they must not engage in any form of sexual relations. (Cf. 1 Cor. 7:32-33)

## SEXUAL IMMORALITY: THE RADICAL REMEDY

### MATTHEW 5:29-30

(Cf. Matt. 18:8-9; Mark 9:43-48)

In these verses, the Lord Jesus further applies the principles of the seventh commandment:

> Matthew 5:29 ESV
>
> (29) "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell."

In this passage, the Lord Jesus is emphasising the very serious nature of sexual sin. Those who are guilty consistently of breaking the seventh commandment, in thought, word or deed, must search their hearts to see whether the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of sanctification—is indeed dwelling and reigning within their lives. For those who walk in the Spirit must continually mortify the sinful nature, and therefore cannot continue to satisfy the old nature's sinful desires. Those, however, who live to satisfy the pleasures of sin demonstrate that their hearts are not right with God; either, they have backslidden from the way of righteousness and are out of fellowship with the Lord, or they have never known Christ—i.e., they have never experienced regeneration and conversion—in spite of any beliefs or claims to the contrary. (Rom. 6:6; 8:13; 1 Cor. 9:27; Gal. 5:24; Col. 3:5; 1 Pet. 4:1-3)

No-one is exempt from temptation, nor from succumbing to sin at some time in their lives. However, those who have backslidden into sin—whether by thought, word, or deed—must acknowledge their sin, renounce it, and seek the Lord's forgiveness (together with the forgiveness of other parties, where involved).

When the Lord Jesus asserts most solemnly that, if our eye is the cause of sin we are to tear it out, he is not commanding us to remove our eye literally. To remove an eye would not remove the cause or root of this sin, which lies within our heart or mind. Rather, the Lord is commanding any one of us who is tempted to view or look at immoral things to deal drastically with the source of the temptation. The eye feeds the brain and mind with visual information, and the brain transmits information back to the eye. Therefore, it is the inner thought-life (or 'heart') that must be dealt with severely—not the outer physical organ, such as the eye (which is merely a 'viewer' for the mind).

Thus, elsewhere in the Gospels, we find this pronouncement:

> Mark 7:20-23 ESV
>
> (20) And he [Jesus] said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. (21) For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, (22) coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.
>
> (23) "All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

When tempted to look on impure things, we must act immediately by putting such thoughts from our minds as soon as they arise, by removing ourselves from the source of temptation, and—wherever practicable—by avoiding such sources or places in the future. Indeed, the apostle Paul enjoins the believer to *flee from* this sin, rather than attempt to resist it or stand against it. (1 Cor. 6:18; 2 Tim. 2:22; cf. also Prov. 5:8-14)

Everyone faces this kind of temptation at some time. The temptation itself is not sin. However, dwelling on the temptation, harbouring impure thoughts, or expressing our thoughts by impure words or gestures, is sin. (1 Cor. 10:13)

So serious does the Lord consider this sin to be that he reckons it better to lose one part of the body than to suffer the loss of our entire body in hell (Gk., geennan, *Gehenna*). Thus, the Lord is declaring that the cause of sin (the eye stimulating the mind or thoughts) must be dealt with radically. For, if a person indulges persistently in the sins of the old nature, and if he refuses wilfully to mortify that sinful nature and allow the Holy Spirit to sanctify and control his thought life, then that person effectively denies any saving relationship with Christ and any sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit within. If this is so, then it

is certain that this person does not belong to Christ and therefore will be cast into hell, unless—by the grace of God—he repents and forsakes his sinful lifestyle. (Rom. 8:5-9; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Rev. 21:8)

Moving on now to verse 30, the Lord Jesus declares:

> Matthew 5:30 ESV
>
> (30) "And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell."

What is true of the eye (stimulating or feeding the mind or 'heart' and generating impure thoughts from the old sinful nature) is true also of the hand—or any other part of the body that may be misused for sinful purposes. If, in response to temptation, a person uses his hand, etc., in yielding to that temptation, then he has become guilty of sin; in the present context, the sin of adultery or some other form of sexual immorality or impurity. Once again, however, the hand does only that which the mind (via the brain) commands it to do. Therefore, using the hand or other bodily parts sinfully is another expression of a person's sinful thoughts, or the evil intents of his heart applied in the form of sinful actions.

Thus, the Lord Jesus declares most solemnly the serious nature of using the parts of the body for sinful purposes. For the believer, his body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and must be used only for good and honourable purposes and for the glory of God—For God the Holy Spirit dwells within his sacred temple (our bodies). To this end, the Lord asserts unmistakeably that it is better to sever our right hand than to find our whole body and soul severed from God and cast into hell. (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:15-20)

Again, however, the Lord is not commanding people to sever literally any parts of their bodies. This, in itself, would be an abuse of the body and a sin against God. Furthermore, to mutilate the body literally would not resolve the cause of that person's sin, which lies in the 'heart' or mind (or, in the old sinful nature). Rather, the Lord Jesus is commanding his followers *to sever their relationship with sin; and to sever it at its source.* He is commanding them to deal with their thought-life by mortifying or putting to death the sinful nature, and by allowing the Holy Spirit to work within them that work of grace and sanctification. He is commanding his people to 'walk' in the Spirit, or to live by the power of the Spirit, consecrating their lives to the honour and glory of God in heaven. This means yielding our whole person—body and soul—to the Lord as a living sacrifice, and submitting to his Lordship and control in every area of daily life. When Christ is Lord of our bodies and souls, then he must rule over our thoughts and govern our every action, and we must yield willingly to his control over our lives. (Rom. 6:13; 12:1-2; Gal. 5:16)

Thus again, we see how the Lord Jesus not only honoured the Law and made it glorious by his interpretation and application of that holy Law, but that he required his people to live by the moral precepts and principles of that Law.

This is not to suggest, however, that the Law is the means of a person's salvation, or that by observing it a person can merit or contribute toward his salvation. Salvation is entirely the gift of God, bestowed by the grace of God through faith in Christ. The Law is the servant or guide that leads sinners to Christ to find that salvation, and that acts as a moral guide to holy and godly living to all those who have experienced complete salvation in Christ Jesus. However, it does not in any way count toward a person's salvation or toward keeping them secure in that salvation. (Gal. 2:16,21; 3:10-14; 19-26)

## SEXUAL IMMORALITY: DIVORCE

### MATTHEW 5:31-32

In verses 31 and 32, the Lord Jesus applies the principles of the seventh commandment to divorce:

> Matthew 5:31- 32 ESV
>
> (31) "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' (32) But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

According to the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees, a man could divorce his wife simply by providing her with the necessary legal certificate ('a writing' or 'bill of divorcement'; cf. Deut. 24:1-4 with Matt. 19:7-9). Again, according to the teaching of certain religious leaders, a man could sue for divorce not only on the grounds of adultery but also for such matters as a husband finding some minor fault with his wife or 'not being pleased with her manners' (so, *Josephus* when dismissing his wife).

This, of course, represented a gross distortion of God's Law, and of the commitments, vows and sanctity of the marriage bond. Furthermore, it belittled the woman and made a travesty of justice. The Lord Jesus, therefore, gives the true interpretation of God's Law in this regard and applies to the case the principles of righteousness and justice. By doing so, he solemnly warns any husband against treating his wife unjustly or unfairly, or in any way inconsistent with his God-ordained duties and responsibilities toward her. A husband must love and care for his wife as though she were his own flesh; for such she is through their holy union with one another.

Later in this Gospel, the religious rulers questioned Jesus on this matter:

> Matthew 19:3-9 ESV
>
> (3) And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"
>
> (4) He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, (5) and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'? (6) So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."
>
> (7) They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?"
>
> (8) He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. (9) And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." (see also Luke 16:18)

God hates divorce. (Mal. 2:14-16) Nevertheless, he permits divorce under very specific circumstances and under these circumstances alone. The example cited here by the Lord Jesus is that of adultery. Where a woman has violated her marriage vows and covenant and has united with a man other than her lawful husband, she has become guilty of adultery. Of course, in keeping with the tenor of New Testament teaching elsewhere, the unfaithful wife ought to acknowledge and repent of her sin, and confess it to God. She ought also to confess her sin to her lawful husband, and the husband ought to forgive her

freely and willingly, receiving his repentant and forgiven wife once more to himself and to the marriage bed. (1 Cor. 7:3-5, 10-11; Heb. 13:4)

However, where a wife refuses wilfully and persistently to confess her sin and to be reunited with her husband, then she has become guilty of marital unfaithfulness. She has violated her union with her husband, with whom God had made her one flesh. She has despised that sacred union. Under these circumstances, the Lord Jesus permits the offended husband to seek divorce from his wife: for, to all intents and purposes, the wife—by her actions—has effectively dissolved the marriage union. The husband, however, must seek to ratify this situation legally through divorce proceedings.

Although not expressly stated, it is assumed that the husband would be free subsequently to remarry. The situation is similar to the loss of a husband or wife by death, in which case the surviving party is free to remarry in the Lord.

If, however, a husband divorces his wife on any ground other than that sanctioned by God in his Word, then he causes his wife to commit adultery. (Matt. 5:32; cf. 19:9) For the woman to commit adultery, however, assumes that she would then seek union with some other man, while—in the sight of God—still married to her former husband. This is because the Lord does not recognise as valid any divorce on grounds other than those laid down explicitly in his Word. (1 Cor. 7:10-11)

Similarly, any man who marries a woman who has been divorced on grounds not permitted in God's Word is himself guilty of committing adultery. (Matt. 19:9; Luke 16:18) In legal terms, this would constitute bigamy if it were not for the liberal interpretation and application of modern divorce laws.

What is true concerning an adulteress is true equally concerning an adulterer. In the sight of God, and when he violates the marriage covenant, a husband is equally blameworthy—if not more so. This is because he is considered as the woman's head, and it was for the man that the woman was created. (1 Cor. 11:9; Eph. 5:23) Yet, he too must seek the Lord's forgiveness and that of his wife. Where, however, he refuses persistently to seek forgiveness and reconciliation with God and with his lawful wife, he is considered to have severed the holy union and annulled the marriage bond and covenant.

In regard to divorce involving same-sex civil partnerships or 'marriages' (so-called), these relationships are not recognised as valid in the Word of God. Indeed, God's Word expressly prohibits and condemns sexual relations between same-sex partners. Therefore, in God's eyes, any such unions are wholly invalid. For this reason, the issue of Scriptural divorce in respect of these unions does not arise.

## SOLEMN OATHS AND VOWS

### MATTHEW 5:33-37

(Cf. Matt. 23:16-22)

Now, the Lord Jesus deals with perfunctory oath-taking and solemn commitments or pledges confirmed by an oath to God. This is based on the commandments:

> Exodus 20:7 ESV
>
> (7) "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain."

Exodus 20:16 ESV

(16) “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.”

With this in mind, the Lord Jesus declares:

Matthew 5:33-37 ESV

(33) “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.'

(34) “But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, (35) or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. (36) And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.

(37) “Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.”

The scribes and Pharisees had insisted that solemn oaths were never to be sworn without good and necessary reason, or falsely. Again, they insisted that solemn oaths had to be performed to the letter. However, instead of taking an oath in the name of the Lord God, the religious teachers lightened the solemnity and pledge of the oath by instructing people to swear by their head, by Jerusalem, by the temple, by heaven or by earth, etc. The religious teachers thereby made it much easier for a person to avoid or evade their sworn commitments, since (they believed) they had not pledged their word by the Name (of God). The scribes and Pharisees, therefore, had trivialised the taking of solemn oaths, pledges, or vows. (Cf. Matt. 23:16-22)

What the religious teachers had overlooked, however, was the fact that Jerusalem was the city of God, the temple was the house of God, heaven was the throne of God, and the earth was God’s footstool. Thus, in God’s eyes, taking an oath by any of these names was taking an oath in his Name. And breaking an oath taken in any of these names was breaking an oath made before God, the Almighty.

It was this practice that the Lord Jesus was condemning: i.e., oaths taken without regard to God (even although his name was involved indirectly), and with no compunction at breaking a solemn oath once pledged.

Indeed, when these instructions had been given originally, the LORD God had declared:

Leviticus 19:12 ESV

(12) “You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.” (Cf. Ps. 24:4)

Numbers 30:2 ESV

(2) If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.

Deuteronomy 6:13 ESV

(13) “It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear.”

Deuteronomy 10:20 ESV

(20) "You shall fear the LORD your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear."

Deuteronomy 23:21-23 ESV

(21) "If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. (22) But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin.

(23) "You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth."

The solemn oath was an inviolable pledge to testify to the truth or to fulfil a promise sworn before God (cf. Ps. 50:14; 76:11; Eccl. 5:4-6). However, at the time the Lord Jesus was on earth, oaths were being taken and broken regularly. People no longer regarded either the solemnity or the inviolability of their oaths, or their responsibilities before God or to other people in respect of their oaths. Furthermore, in defiance of God's express command, the LORD's name was being used profanely or in vain, and—in some quarters—in the form of blasphemous expletives invoking the name of God.

Thus, the Lord Jesus forbids the taking of all solemn oaths as they were then being used, or rather as they were being misused and abused. This meant that the people were to cease from all forms of frivolous oath-taking; all forms of common or everyday oath-taking, all forms of oaths that used God's name profanely or in vain, and almost all forms of solemn oath-taking or swearing.

We note, however, that the proscription against solemn oath taking was not universal. The Lord Jesus himself submitted to the high priest's adjuration and answered the high priest when bound by his solemn oath. (Matt. 26:63). Again, Paul solemnly invoked the name of God as his witness (Rom. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:23), and on another occasion the apostle placed himself under a solemn religious vow (Acts 18:18).

Thus, certain solemn oaths were still permitted if they were for legitimate religious, legal or judicial purposes. Thus, for example, taking a solemn oath in a court of law is not prohibited by Jesus' teaching. The Lord Jesus did not revoke the laws concerning solemn oaths. Rather, he corrected the misinterpretation and misapplication of those laws by the scribes and Pharisees, and he restored the laws concerning solemn oaths to their rightful place. However, the common everyday use of solemn oaths was now strictly forbidden by the Lord Jesus, as was using God's name profanely.

With the specific exceptions mentioned above, therefore, no one was to confirm his word with an oath. Rather, people were commanded to respond only in terms of 'Yes' or 'No'. However, 'Yes' was to mean 'yes' and 'no' was to mean 'no'. There was to be no prevarication or equivocation in a person's answer, and no evading of that person's responsibilities when he committed himself to perform some action, etc.

To this end, James declares:

James 5:12 ESV

(12) But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

To fall under condemnation meant the judgment or discipline of the Lord. However, the phrase is related to another similar expression, '*the condemnation of the devil*'. The devil is the 'father' or originator of all lies. As such, he lies under the condemnation of God. Those who emulate the evil one by engaging in

lying or broken pledges or deceptive promises also fall under a like condemnation. This is why the Lord Jesus in verse 37 of the passage in Matthew 5 that anything other than 'Yes' or 'No' comes from evil.

## RESPONDING TO EVIL

***Matthew 5:38-42***

### MATTHEW 5:38-42

(Cf. Exodus 21:22-27)

Two points ought to be made before considering the following verses:

1. The 'evil' to which the Lord Jesus is referring here is not *moral* or *spiritual* evil, for such forms of evil must always be resisted. Rather, here, the Lord Jesus is speaking of *physical* or *verbal* evil: e.g., any verbal abuse or physical attack directed against a person. This includes also any civil action pursued in a court of law on unjust grounds against an individual.

2. The law to which the Lord Jesus refers on this occasion was contained in the civil code (not the moral code). Although not part of the Ten Commandments, the civil code formed part of God's Law: i.e., it was included among the statutes and ordinances given by God to Moses. The LORD had imparted these civil ordinances to Moses for the guidance of magistrates, judges and other law officers of Israel. The precepts and principles laid down in the civil code were not intended for the use of individuals in a private capacity, but for the guidance of Israel's law officers and tribal leaders alone.

Referring to one of the ordinances of the civil law, the Lord Jesus declares:

> Matthew 5:38 ESV
>
> (38) "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'" (Cf. Ex. 21:22-25; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21)

*"You have heard that it was said…"* alludes once again, not to the original Scriptures alone, but also to the mistaken teaching of those Scriptures by the scribes and Pharisees. These religious leaders had taken the ordinances of the civil code (intended principally for the guidance of judges, magistrates, tribal leaders, etc.) and had applied them to disputes that private individuals might settle between themselves.

This, however, was never God's intention when he set down this particular principle—*'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'.* This principle was intended as a direction to judges and other administrators of the law to apply the law equitably and exactly as the offence deserved. No judge was to impose a lesser or greater penalty than the offence merited. Rather, the punishment was to equate with (or 'fit') the crime *(lex talionus*—the law, or principle, of exacting like for like). Thus, for the crime of murder (culpable homicide), the equitable and just punishment for taking a life that God had created in his own image was death. (Gen. 9:5-6; Exod. 21:12; Lev. 24:17; Num. 25:30) For all lesser crimes, a corresponding punishment was to be imposed. Such punishments could range from loss of liberty (imprisonment), loss of dignity (corporal punishment) loss of income (fines) to loss of property (forfeiture, seizure or impounding of goods). However, the principle of *'an eye for an eye'* was never intended to imply the amputation of parts of the body (e.g., eye, tooth, hand, etc.) for any criminal or civil offence.

Thus, as a rule, private vengeance (or revenge), blood-feuds, and all other similar matters between individuals or families was expressly forbidden. (Lev. 19:18; Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:17-19; 1 Thess. 5:15)

If it proved impossible to resolve such matters peacefully between the contending parties, these matters were to be handled, as appropriate, either by the ecclesiastical courts (for non-criminal offences) or by the legal institutions of the land. (But cf. 1 Cor. 6:1-7)

The scribes and Pharisees, however, had distorted and misapplied this teaching. It was these distortions and misapplications that the Lord Jesus now corrects. However, the Lord does not stop at correcting the erroneous teaching of the religious leaders and the people's mistaken views of God's Law. Rather, he extends the civil law so that now it has a personal application and requires a personal response. This response is much more far reaching than that required under the civil law alone, for it imposes a moral duty or obligation on the offended party to return good for evil.

Thus, the Lord continues:

Matthew 5:39 ESV

(39) "But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." (Cf. Luke 6:29; 1 Pet. 3:9; see also Rom. 12:20)

The KJV says, *"...That ye resist not evil..."* However, this rendering appears to imply that no form of evil (including moral evil) is to be resisted. Clearly, the Scriptures cannot forbid in one place what they enjoin in another. As mentioned at the outset, the evil of which the Lord is speaking here is physical or verbal evil: i.e., harm intended or caused by another person, either physically or verbally. Thus, the ESV translation, *'Do not resist the one who is evil'* better explains the meaning.

Far from applying the principles of justice himself, the offended party was not to take the law into his own hands. On the contrary, he was not to resist those who opposed him or who endeavoured to cause him harm. (Rom. 12:17-19; 1 Pet. 3:9)

In those days, to slap a person on the cheek (with the back of the hand) was considered grossly insulting, and more offensive than the physical blow itself. However, the offended party was not to retaliate in kind. Rather, he was to repay evil with good. This does not mean necessarily that he was required to offer his other cheek literally to the smiter—for that would be to entice, provoke or encourage evil. Rather, it means that the offended party was to give back to the offender a degree of kindness and consideration that corresponded, or more than corresponded, with the degree of insult.

This, of course, was a very demanding requirement, but it was based on the law of love, about which the Lord Jesus would speak shortly.

At this point, we must make it plain that the Lord was not instructing his followers to permit passively all forms of evil against them. This would be not only foolishness, but also contrary to the teaching of God's Word elsewhere. Rather, the Lord's emphasis was on correcting the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees and the mistaken apprehensions of the people regarding the civil code. The Lord was expounding that code in such a way that it placed a moral obligation on the offended party not to seek personal revenge but to treat his offender with kindness and compassion. If required, it would be for the courts—not for the offended individual—to impose any necessary sanction or punishments on the offender.

Still addressing cases under the civil code, the Lord Jesus continues:

Matthew 5:40-42 ESV

(40) "And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. (Cf. Luke 6:29)

(41) "And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

(42) "Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you."

If a person were to claim and recover damages, costs or reparations from one of the Lord's followers, then the person sued was to provide the plaintiff with not only the amount awarded by the court (whether in money or goods) but also to provide an additional amount not required by the court.

The Lord is not requiring his followers to act unreasonably or irrationally. Rather, he is making plain to them their duty and responsibility to make good any damage caused by them to the property or possessions of others, whether such damage was caused wilfully, incidentally or accidentally. However, the Lord is making it plain also that, in such cases, mere equivalence is not sufficient to redress the damage, but equivalence plus an additional amount by way of compensation and good will. Furthermore, such compensation was to be provided cheerfully and willingly, and out of genuine concern for the damage caused to the neighbour or to his property. (Cf. Luke 19:8; see also Ex. 22:1-4; 2 Sam. 12:6; Prov. 6:31)

Thus, the Lord clearly teaches that it is not enough to remedy a matter with the equivalent in goods or money. Rather, the believer was to go beyond that which was required to show genuine concern for the damage and inconvenience caused to his neighbour. This would apply whether the matter came to court or was settled out of court.

In verse 41, the Lord refers to the practise of commandeering or requisitioning. In those days, military or government officers could commandeer a person or his property for official use. Thus, Simon of Cyrene was commandeered by the Roman soldiers to help carry the cross of the Lord Jesus to Calvary. (Matt. 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26; Rom. 13:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:13-17)

In response to this practice, the Lord instructs his followers to give more than what was required of them in terms of compulsory service. If compelled by the authorities to travel a certain distance, or to serve in a specific capacity, then they were to do so—with a willingness to travel further or serve further than the authorities required. This is simply saying that those whose services were commandeered temporarily by the authorities (as was Simon of Cyrene), or who were impressed into the service of the state (or, later, conscripted by the state) should serve the state or its agents willingly and beyond the call of duty.

In verse 42, the Lord deals with those who would beg for assistance. Then, as now, it was common for beggars to be despised and ignored. However, the Lord sees such a person as one in need. Thus, whether the person is a street beggar, a homeless person, or simply a household neighbour pleading for assistance of some kind, the Lord instructs his followers to hear their plea and to respond to their need. To ignore their cry for help was not an option. Whatever their present situation or circumstances, all people were to be treated as individuals created in the image of God. (Matt. 25:35-40; Luke 6:30-36; 14:12-14; Jas. 2:15-16)

This is not to imply that the Lord's people were to act unwisely or naively when responding to such pleas for assistance. Clearly, certain street beggars or homeless people might not use any money given them

for essentials such as food or clothing, but for other things such as alcohol or drugs. Thus, where there may be doubt, a person may respond by providing food or clothing, etc., rather than money. Where, however, a neighbour was begging for assistance for some household or family distress which was evident to others, then their need was to be met by whatever means was within our power and at our disposal.

Similarly, in this verse, the Lord Jesus instructs his followers to be generous to those who would borrow from us. Again, but with regard to common sense, wisdom and discretion, we are to provide whatever we are able to help our friend or neighbour in need. We are not to say, 'We do not have it with us. Come again tomorrow'. Rather, we are to provide what is needed at the earliest possible opportunity—when our neighbour's need is greatest, and regardless of the cost to ourselves. (Deut. 15:7-14; Prov. 3:27-28; 19:17; Isa. 58:6-12; 1 John 3:16-18)

## LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

***Matthew 5:43-48***

### MATTHEW 5:43

Matthew 5:43 ESV

(43) "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.'"

Here is a classic misquotation and misrepresentation of God's Word as given in Leviticus. The scribes and Pharisees had taken this command and given it a completely different meaning to what God had intended. The LORD had not said merely, '*You shall love your neighbour...,*' as the scribes had been asserting. Rather, God had said, '*You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'* (Lev. 19:18) Furthermore, the scribes and Pharisees had added the words, *'...and hate your enemy'*—words which were not part of the original command, and indeed were contrary to the teaching of God's Word elsewhere.[21]

Nevertheless, the scribes and Pharisees contended that the command to love their neighbour applied only to fellow-Israelites and not to strangers or foreigners, whom—they asserted—lay under God's righteous judgment. Therefore, they argued, since they were not required to love strangers, then they were at liberty to despise or hate these 'ungodly Gentiles'. Unfortunately, the Jewish teachers made no distinction between hating a person's sin, and hating the person himself (which God forbids).

[21] *'...and hate your enemy':* Apparently, the religious leaders had deduced the idea of hating one's enemies partly from the fact that the LORD avenged Israel's enemies and punished them according to their evil deeds. However, God did not punish them because he hated them as individuals. (As individuals, God had created them in his own image—rationally, morally and spiritually). Rather, in his righteous indignation and holy wrath, God punished wicked individuals and nations for their sins. It was because of their deliberate rebellion against God, their vile iniquities and their wilful impenitence that the LORD judged or destroyed these people and nations, in his holiness, justice and righteousness. (Gen. 18:25; Ps. 7:11; Rom. 1:18,32; cf. also Rom. 9:13). Again, in Psalm 139:21-22, David is expressing his hatred for the sinful speech and behaviour (not the person *per se*) of his enemies; whom he describes as 'wicked' and 'men of blood'. If this were not so, he could not have added the following two verses from an honest or sincere heart.

How far is this kind of reasoning from the truth of God's Word? Those who claimed to be God's chosen people found no difficulty in harbouring bitterness, resentment, and hatred in their hearts against those whom they thought had no part in God's kingdom and no right to expect his blessings! They had forgotten—or ignored—God's express instructions in the same chapter of Leviticus to make provision in their fields for the poor and the stranger (Lev. 19:10). And, if this were not enough, they also had ignored this command—in the same chapter:

> Leviticus 19:33-34 ESV
>
> (33) "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong.
>
> (34) "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, *and you shall love him as yourself*, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God." (Emphasis added; see also Deut. 10:18-19)

*'You shall treat the stranger…as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself…*'—the very same command given in respect of the Israelite people. Therefore, the LORD had made it abundantly clear that, in this regard, Israel was not to discriminate between Israelites and non-Israelites. Rather, they were to love the stranger or foreigner equally as their own. One purpose for this was that the stranger might come to know the God of Israel.

Furthermore, in Exodus, God had commanded:

> Exodus 23:4-5 ESV
>
> (4) "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him.
>
> (5) "If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him."

Such a passage leaves the teachers of the Law and the people without excuse. From the earliest days of the Law, God had commanded his people to love their enemies and to assist them practically in their time of need—in this case by helping to rescue their animals in distress.

What, however, was true of the mistaken views of the Israelite people in those days regarding people of a different race, culture or religion, could be true of some of the Lord's people today. We must never forget that we are included in God's kingdom, and that we experience his blessings, by his grace alone. Therefore, neither the Jews nor we should ever presume upon the grace of God or show contempt, hatred or even dislike, toward those who have not experienced that grace—whatever may be their nationality, religion or colour.

The priests (who, in the early days of Israel's history, were also the teachers of the Law) and later, the scribes and Pharisees, had completely misunderstood the significance of the LORD's command as given in Leviticus. Indeed, they had taught the people almost the complete opposite of God's command. The Lord Jesus, however, is about to correct the false interpretation and application of this passage, and give to his followers the true meaning of God's command. Therefore, once more, we see that the Lord Jesus had not come to set aside or replace the Law of Moses, but to set it in its proper place and to fulfil it. (Matt. 5:17-18; Luke 24:44; cf. Gal. 5:14)

Thus, in verse 44, the Lord continues:

## MATTHEW 5:44

Matthew 5:44 ESV

(44) "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you…"

It was difficult enough for the Jewish people to love their own people at times. Perhaps, they might find themselves able to love a stranger, or at least to show kindness or benevolence toward him. However, to love one's enemy was something that the vast majority of the people were not prepared to attempt—especially, if that enemy happened to be a hybrid Samaritan, or even worse, a Gentile 'sinner'. (Cf. Gal. 2:15)

Once again, therefore, we see that these words were not being addressed to the generality of the people or to the Lord's hearers indiscriminately. Those only who know the Lord personally and savingly, and who have experienced something of the power of God and of the Holy Spirit in their lives, can even begin to respond to this command. Those who are still unregenerate and still governed by their fallen sinful nature cannot possibly show this kind of love—for it is that love which is the fruit of the Spirit, and which results from a heart and life reconciled to God through the blood of the cross and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. (Gal. 5:22; Col. 1:20-22)

All those, however, who are the Lord's true followers, or disciples, are required by him to show such love—not only to family, friends, neighbours and people at large, but also to those who are our enemies. Those who have intended or practised harm or evil against us, the Lord declares that we must pray for; that we must intercede for them; that we must beseech God that he may be merciful toward them. For it is certain that if they do not meet God in mercy, they most certainly will meet him in judgment. Therefore, out of genuine love and concern for them, and in view of their inevitable judgment under the hand of an angry God should they remain impenitent to the end, the Lord Jesus commands his people to pray for all those who persecute or otherwise seek to harm them. (Gen. 18:23-32; 1 Tim. 2:1)

The next verse confirms that the Lord is addressing these words to his own people:

## MATTHEW 5:45

Matthew 5:45 ESV

(45) "so that you may be sons of your Father who is 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."

None can ever be called the sons of the Father except those who belong to the Son. Nor can anyone ever become a child of God by attempting to obey the Lord's commands. A person becomes a child of God by regeneration (the new birth), through repentance toward God and faith in the Son of God, and through adoption by the Father. However, all this is a work of sovereign and electing grace. Therefore, when the Lord Jesus uses the words, *'so that you may be the sons of your Father who is in heaven'*, he is not talking about their becoming sons (or children) by practising his command to love one's enemies. Rather, he is declaring that they will be shown to be (or known to be) the sons of the Father by such actions. For, as has been said above, this kind of love is the fruit of the Spirit, and those only who have been regener-

ated, who are being sanctified by the Spirit of God, and who are walking humbly with God, can show such genuine, caring and committed love to their enemies.

*"...For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." (v.45b)*

God's redeemed children each have benefited from God's call in special or saving grace (their effectual calling and election to eternal life). However, the Lord bestows on all mankind another form of grace—common grace. Thus, by his providence, God bestows upon all mankind indiscriminately rain to water their crops, fruitful seasons, and many other benefits of his common grace. (Jer. 14:22; Acts 14:15-17)

However, the point of what the Lord Jesus is saying is that his own people are to be seen (by their speech and conduct) to be the children of their Father in heaven. They are those whom the Lord has especially favoured and blessed *by his sovereign grace and mercy* (and not because of any superior worth or merit on their part). Therefore, they are to be seen to others in the world as distinctive, and as those who have received blessings from God over and above those of common grace. One purpose being that those who witness the lives of God's redeemed children may see their good works and glorify God: i.e., be constrained to acknowledge the presence and power of God in their lives, and be drawn to the One who has bestowed such gracious blessings upon his people. (Matt. 5:16)

Taking this a step further, the Lord declares:

## MATTHEW 5:46-47

Matthew 5:46-47 ESV

> (46) "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? (47) And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"

There is no credit in loving or caring for those who love us. Even the worst of mankind is capable of such loving care to his family or kindred. Furthermore, if the Lord's people extend friendship only to their own brothers or sisters in Christ, or to their own friends and relatives, they are doing no more than the ungodly and sinful world is doing. No, the very purpose of the Lord's words was to instil within his people a realisation that God's Law required love to be shown to *all* people; embracing *all kinds* of people—even their enemies.

This, of course, meant that the Christian was being called upon to show the same quality of love to unbelievers—including strangers to the Gospel, outcasts from society, and sinners of the worst kind—as they did to their own people. For, when God so loved the world, he did not confine his love to certain classes, kinds, or categories of people, but extended that love to *all kinds* of people, without distinction based on morals (or the lack of them), race, colour, culture or creed. (John 3:16)

Thus, we whom the Lord has redeemed must never consider ourselves superior in any way to those who are yet in their sins. Rather, the Lord calls upon his redeemed and holy people to love sinners—for we do not know who among them might be the elect of God, and yet be called according to his purpose. Thus, Christ commands that we love all people—yet, as Jude declares—*hating even the garment spotted by the flesh*. (Jude 1:22-23) In other words, we are to associate with the lost, including the outcasts and sinners

of society (as did the Lord Jesus), but we must never encourage them in their sin or condone their sinful lifestyle or their evil actions, and we must never join with them in their evil words or deeds.

## BE PERFECT

The Lord concludes this section by declaring:

## MATTHEW 5:48

Matthew 5:48 ESV

(48) "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Frequently, this verse has been misunderstood and misinterpreted, or has been removed from its immediate context and misapplied. However, we must always examine and interpret Scripture in the light of the immediate context as well as comparing it with all other related passages of God's Word. For example, we learn from the parallel passage in Luke's Gospel that the words are there rendered:

Luke 6:36 ESV

(36) "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."

Thus, from the context and from the related passage in Luke, it is evident that the Lord Jesus is speaking of the manner in which his words are to be received and applied in a believer's daily life. He is not speaking here of perfection or a sin-free state (i.e., 'sinless perfection'). Such a discussion does not belong to this context. Rather, the Lord is emphasising the necessity of putting into practice the words that he has just uttered, and of leading an exemplary or blameless life. For example, the love that the believer was to show to all people was to be a pure love; a perfect or complete love (i.e., an unqualified love); a sincere love; an unfeigned love, and an enduring love. It was to be a love that not only expressed deep concern for others, but also matched that expression with deeds of kindness and compassion. (Cf. Gen. 17:1; Matt. 19:21)

Let us remember the Good Samaritan in his genuine concern for the injured Jewish man left lying by the roadside after being robbed. The Samaritan did not only express his concern in words, but also acted practically and immediately to help alleviate the victim's suffering and to bind up his wounds. And he did this for one who looked upon him as his enemy (most Jews despised the Samaritans). (Luke 10:29-37) How much more should a believer demonstrate such practical love? And should not that love be perfect, or complete, free and unrestricted, in every respect. Should it not emulate the perfect love and the perfect character of our Father in heaven?

What, however, is true concerning perfect or unqualified love, should be true also of all other characteristics of a believer's new nature. For example, he should exhibit perfect integrity or honesty in his dealings with other people; perfect or unqualified mercy and forgiveness toward those who have wronged him; perfect toleration, patience or forbearance toward others, and so on. From this, we see that the Lord's standards are very high; but these are the standards not only of God's pure and perfect Law but also of the law of love. This is godliness, holiness and righteousness exemplified. (2 Cor. 7:1; Php. 3:12; Col. 3:14; 1 John 2:5)

From this, we can see how far short of true righteousness the scribes and Pharisees had come. This is not surprising since they were expressing their own works-based righteousness, and not the righteousness that comes from God, and is a gift of his grace. Nor were they exhibiting that righteousness that issues from a sanctified life; for sanctification is a work of the indwelling Holy Spirit and is available only to the redeemed children of God.

Again, it is no surprise when the Lord declares that his followers' righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees before they could enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:20) From what we have seen already, it is evident that the scribes and Pharisees did not possess the righteousness of God, but merely their own self-righteousness. Furthermore, by their gross distortions, misinterpretations and misapplications of God's righteous and holy Law, they had twisted out of all recognition God's righteous standards and requirements for his people. (Matt. 23:13-15, 27-28)

Nevertheless, even among the Pharisees were a few who were seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Although both Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were active members of the Sanhedrin, their subsequent actions showed that they were not part of the unspiritual, hypocritical and materialistic majority.

The righteousness that God requires is:

- that righteousness that he grants to the believer as a free and sovereign gift of his grace (justification or imputed righteousness);
- the righteousness that is produced in the believer's life by the work of grace and of the Holy Spirit (sanctification or imparted righteousness); and
- the personal righteousness that issues from the believer's new nature as the fruit of the Spirit (imparted righteousness in action). The first of these fruits is love; a genuine, fervent and humble love toward God, and a genuine caring and practical concern for other people—and not just for other believers.

Taken together, this is the kind of righteousness in which God delights, and this is what he expects to see in the lives of his redeemed children.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 6

In this chapter, it becomes evident once more that the Lord is addressing only his own followers or disciples. Thus, he teaches them the meaning of true faith—true piety or godliness, true prayer, true forgiveness, true fasting, true treasures—all of which are applicable only to the redeemed children of God. Furthermore, in this chapter, the Lord teaches his disciples how to pray. Again, however, this assumes that those learning this prayer are the Father's children already by regeneration and by adoption.

## TRUE PIETY

***Matthew 6:1-4***

### MATTHEW 6:1-2

Concerning true, heartfelt piety or godliness, the Lord declares:

> Matthew 6:1-2 ESV
>
> (1) "Beware of practising your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.
>
> (2) "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward."

The Lord begins this sentence by saying, '*Beware*...' i.e., 'take the greatest care', or 'observe the utmost diligence' regarding the practice of righteousness (i.e., the practical outworking of your faith in terms of godly living, good deeds, acts of kindness, charity or benevolence, etc.)....

The Jewish people, including the Lord's disciples, were very familiar with the practices of the scribes, Pharisees and some others in relation to their professed piety. It was common for the vain Pharisees to make a great show of their 'righteousness' by ensuring that other people witnessed their good deeds or charitable acts. Thus, when they performed any good or charitable act—whether within the synagogue or temple, or toward someone in the towns or cities, they made it so obvious that other people could not fail to notice. (Cf. Matt. 23:5) The Lord Jesus compares this to sounding a trumpet, which arrests the attention of all those who hear and causes them to look toward the source of the loud blast. Thus, the proud Pharisees sought the praise of men for their acts of goodness or kindness to others. The praise of men, however, is the only reward that hypocrites ever receive.

The Lord detests such pride and ostentation in religion. True religion is a matter of the heart. (Cf. Jas. 1:27) Those who must display their good deeds outwardly, *in order to be seen by men*, clearly are not worshipping God in Spirit and in truth. (John 4:23-24) Such is sham religion. It is a religion devoid of the grace or power of God. It is a religion of works that leads only to condemnation and judgment—for a works-based religion is wholly unacceptable to God.

The Lord Jesus is not saying, however, that his followers should not practice righteous acts or good deeds for the glory of God and for the benefit of others. On the contrary, the believer in Christ has been set apart for this very purpose. (Eph. 2:10; 1 Tim. 2:10; 5:10; 2 Tim. 3:17; Titus 2:7,14; Heb. 10:24)

However, the good deeds that the believer performs are the fruit of the Spirit, and they issue from the first fruit of the Spirit, which is love. (1 Cor. 13:1-13; Gal. 5:22-23) Thus, a genuine child of God, who is gentle and humble in spirit, will never attempt to display his good works or righteous acts in order to win the approval or praise of men. On the contrary, although not seeking praise, honour or reward, he will receive the infinitely higher blessing and commendation of the Lord for his true and faithful service.

Those who practice their good works for the glory of God and for the benefit of their neighbour will be blessed abundantly by the Lord, in whose name these good deeds are performed. Thus, contrary to those who practice their good deeds to receive praise from men, and who will receive no reward in heaven, the truly humble and contrite child of God who practices his good deeds discreetly will receive great reward in heaven.

In passing, we must note that there is no suggestion here of a person inheriting reward in heaven simply by the practice of good deeds—if that person is not a child of God already. Good deeds practiced in the name of God by those whom God has not forgiven are like vile or filthy rags in his sight. (Isa. 64:6) Therefore, no unregenerate person ever ought to imagine that God will accept and reward him on the basis of his good deeds or righteous acts (so-called). That person must first be reconciled to God through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Then, having received a *place* in heaven by the grace of God alone, his good deeds will earn him a *reward* in heaven.

Thus, the Lord Jesus declares to his disciples:

## MATTHEW 6:3-4

Matthew 6:3-4 ESV

(3) “But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,
(4) so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

This is one expression of true piety or godliness. Those who know truly the salvation of the Lord will seek to live to the Lord’s honour and glory, trusting and obeying his Word. This means that they will be concerned to love God with all their hearts and their neighbours as themselves. Thus, if they see a neighbour in need, they will not hesitate to help meet that need. (Job 31:16-21; cf. Jas. 2:8, 14-17)

However, in giving to the needy, they will follow the Lord’s instructions to assist their neighbour secretly or discreetly. The Lord likens this to one hand not being aware of what the other hand is doing. Thus, those who help others must do so without drawing attention to their kindnesses, and without advising other people of what they have done—unless it is to enlist further necessary assistance for a person in distress.

Although no other person may be aware of what assistance this believer has provided to one in need, yet the Lord knows. Nothing can be kept secret from our Father in heaven, and he will reward his people for the good that they have done to others in the name of Christ their Redeemer. (Jer. 17:10; Matt. 25:35-40)

At this point, we must emphasise again that the Lord did not consider a person’s neighbour to be only those people living nearby, or who were known to that person. When used by the Lord in this context, a person’s neighbour is anyone who stands in need. This applies whether that person lives near or far, and

it applies irrespective of that person's status, colour, culture or creed. Once again, we must remember the story of the Good Samaritan, where the Samaritan willingly helped a Jewish person—knowing that many of the Jews looked upon Samaritans with deep suspicion, or treated them with outright hostility. Thus, we ought to learn from this what Jesus meant by our 'neighbour'. (Luke 10:29-37)

This teaching of the Lord Jesus about the meaning of one's neighbour was not in keeping with the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. Nevertheless, it was in keeping with the LORD's commandment:

> Deuteronomy 10:18-19 ESV
>
> (18) "He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. (19) Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt."

It was in keeping also with the Lord Jesus' own words later in this Gospel:

> Matthew 25:35-40 ESV
>
> (35) "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, (36) I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'
>
> (37) "Then the righteous will answer him, saying,
>
> 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? (38) And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? (39) And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'
>
> (40) "And the King will answer them,
>
> 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'"

And the writer of Hebrews declares:

> Hebrews 13:1-2 ESV
>
> (1) Let brotherly love continue. (2) Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

## TRUE PRAYER

***Matthew 6:5-8***

### MATTHEW 6:5

Concerning true prayer, the Lord Jesus declares to his followers:

> Matthew 6:5 ESV
>
> (5) "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward."

Notice what the Lord says here, "*And when you pray....*" It was not 'if' but 'when' you pray. It was assumed to be beyond question that his disciples would pray, and pray habitually. However, the Lord warns his disciples not to emulate those who prayed hypocritically. Such people made a show of religion. They claimed that they had faith in God and they paraded their sham 'piety' openly before men.

Those, however, who pray to God so that men may take notice of them, dishonour the name of God. The scribes, Pharisees and other hypocrites stood in the synagogues or on the street corners to pray—but not as contrite, humble petitioners or worshippers of God. (Matt. 6:5; Mark 12:38; Luke 11:43) Rather they trumpeted forth their petitions as proud individuals who sought the admiration of men for their grandiose, flowing prayers and their (supposed) piety. (Matt. 6:2; 23:14; Luke 20:47)

In Luke's Gospel, the Lord Jesus addressed this very situation in a different context:

> Luke 18:9-14 ESV
>
> (9) He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:
>
> (10) "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. (11) The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus:
>
> 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. (12) I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'
>
> (13) "But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying,
>
> 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'
>
> (14) "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Those who praise themselves—like the Pharisee—are not praying to God and will not be heard by God. (Jas. 4:6) These are the hypocrites—or 'play actors'—of whom Jesus speaks; but there are no parts for actors in the kingdom of God. The Lord says that they have received their reward—the acclaim (or the pity!) of men. There will be no reward for hypocrites in heaven, for no hypocritical person will ever enter heaven.

On the other hand, those who beseech God for mercy—like the contrite tax collector[22]—will always be heard by God. Such humble, repentant men and women will never fail to receive the mercy and forgiveness of the Lord.

[22] *tax collector:* In Jesus' day, Jewish tax collectors were considered amongst the least esteemed in society. Much of Jewish society despised tax collectors because they believed that no Jew should work for the Roman authorities or gather taxes from other Jews on behalf of the Roman government. Thus, any Jew who was willing to be employed as a tax collector was considered to be at the lowest level of Jewish society. Indeed, the Jews would place tax collectors in the same category as prostitutes and 'sinners' (i.e., 'especially wicked sinners'). It was noteworthy, however, that the Lord Jesus did not exclude any of these people when he was preaching the Gospel. Furthermore, Jesus ate drank with them while at the same time remaining completely uncontaminated by their sins.

## MATTHEW 6:6

Matthew 6:6 ESV

(6) "But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

This, then, was how the Lord's people were to pray. When it involved personal, private prayer, they were not to make such prayers openly or in the place of public worship. Rather, prayers of this nature were to be made in the confines of their own homes and rooms, or at some other secluded location (in those days, people often went up to their rooftops to pray (Acts 10:9)). In their secluded location, they were to shut the door (where appropriate) to prevent interruptions or distractions. Then, they were to pray privately to their Father in heaven. (Cf. 2 Kings 4:33; Matt. 14:23)

Under these circumstances, they were meeting with their heavenly Father in secret. They were approaching his most high and holy throne as though there were no other person in the world who then was praying to God. They were to make known their petitions, and offer to God their praises and thanksgivings—in the secret of his presence, and in the secret of their room. (Dan. 6:10)

Thus, the believer is assured that such secret prayer is heard and answered by their Father in heaven, and that he will certainly reward his contrite, humble people when they approach him in this manner, and in sincerity and truth. (2 Chron. 7:14; 34:27; Ps. 34:18; 51:17)

By saying that his followers were to pray to their Father in the secret of their own rooms, the Lord Jesus was not implying that all prayer was to be conducted in this manner. In this instance, the Lord was dealing with personal or private prayer. This kind of prayer should never be aired openly or in a public place, but only in the secret place with God. However, public prayer should still be made in a public place; whether in the place of worship, in a home with family or friends, or in a public situation where such prayer is appropriate. The Lord Jesus attended the synagogue and the temple regularly, and it is recorded that he participated in the worship services, which included periods of public prayer. (Luke 4:15-30) At other times, the Lord sought the secrecy and seclusion of the Garden of Gethsemane; but, even there, he prayed to his Father in the presence of his disciples. (Matt. 26:36) Furthermore, in Acts, the disciples met together regularly to break bread and to share in the fellowship of prayer. (Acts 2:42) In many places elsewhere, the disciples, groups of believers, or church gatherings met together for communal prayer. (For example, see Acts 1:14; 6:4; 12:5)

Thus, the Lord's people ought to pray publicly, in the house of prayer or elsewhere as the situation presents itself or requires—but in a God-honouring and God-glorifying manner, and from a humble and contrite heart. At other times, however, they must seek the solitude and secrecy of their own room, so that they may bring to their heavenly Father all matters that are of a private or personal nature.

## MATTHEW 6:7-8

There was a specific manner in which a person was to pray to God. Thus, the Lord declares:

Matthew 6:7-8 ESV

(7) "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.

(8) "Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

It was common for non-Jews (or Gentiles) to multiply words when they were praying to their gods. The Gentiles believed that the more they prayed, and the more words they uttered, then the more likely they were to be heard and answered. Since, of course, false gods or idols are incapable of answering anyone, then the Gentiles must have spent a considerable amount of time and words praying in vain—in the futile hope that their gods might respond! (1 Kings 18:21-40)

Furthermore, from their Old Testament history and from experience, the Lord's disciples would have been aware that the Gentile or heathen nations around them often uttered the same prayers repeatedly to their idols, in the form of a mantra. Such vain or futile methods were not to be employed by the children of God, however; for their Father in heaven would hear and answers their prayers without the need for needless repetition or for any superstitious forms of prayer.

Repetitive or lengthy prayers are completely unnecessary in the case of a believer. To pray the same thing over and over again, or with multitudinous words or 'pious' phrases, merely draws attention to the person praying rather than to the Lord who hears and answers the prayers of a humble, contrite heart. Those who have experienced the salvation of the Lord are his own children. As such, the almighty, sovereign and only true God always responds to their heartfelt pleas and petitions.

Because they are the redeemed children of God, the Lord Jesus tells his followers that repetitive praying is unnecessary—because their heavenly Father knows already every need of his children, even before they ask him to meet those needs. (Matt. 6:32)

Repetitious prayer, however, is not the same as persevering prayer. The Lord told his disciples expressly that they should persevere in prayer, and this principle is emphasised in many other parts of God's Word. (Luke 18:1-8; see esp. v.7)

Once again, we see that these words were not being addressed to the generality of the Lord's hearers, but only to those who could say in sincerity and truth that God was their Father in heaven. This, however, is true only of those whom the Lord Jesus had come to redeem, and of no others.

## THE LORD JESUS TEACHES HIS PEOPLE TO PRAY

## (THE LORD'S PRAYER)[23]

***Matthew 6:9-13***

(Cf. Luke 11:2-4)

Having discussed the importance and manner of prayer, the Lord Jesus now gives a model or example of prayer to follow. This prayer summarises the most important aspects of prayer, praise and petition to the Father. However, although it may be useful to memorise, it is not strictly necessary to make use of the exact words. Furthermore, a believer must be careful of repeating this prayer in a formal manner, or

[23] *The Lord's Prayer*: This prayer is known commonly as '*The Lord's Prayer*'. Due to its wide acceptance, we will retain this title here. However, we should bear in mind that this prayer is more accurately the model of prayer that the Lord Jesus taught to his disciples, and thus to all his followers. The 'Lord's Prayer' ought to be considered as that prayer recorded by John in chapter 17 of his Gospel.

merely out of habit. Each word, sentence and section is important, and we ought to pray these words only from a sincere, humble, believing and receptive heart, and with a sense of gratitude, thankfulness and praise to our heavenly Father for all the wonders of his love toward us, and for his assurance of answered prayer.

This prayer is outstanding for its example of brevity and comprehensiveness. It was intended to demonstrate that lengthy or repetitive prayers were unnecessary and superfluous. Yet, it contains some of the most important elements of intercession with the Father. We will consider these elements here. Firstly, however, we will show the entire prayer below:

*Matthew 6:9-13 ESV*

The Lord Jesus said:

(9) "Pray then like this:

"'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

(10) "'Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

(11) "' Give us this day our daily bread,

(12) "' and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

(13) "' And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.'"

A number of manuscripts and versions render verse 13 as follows:

Matthew 6:13 NKJV

(13) "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."

## MATTHEW 6:9

Matthew 6:9 ESV

(9) "Pray then like this:

"'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.'" (Cf. Luke 11:2)

Now, the Lord Jesus instructs his disciples precisely how each one of them ought to pray. Note, however, that the Lord Jesus says, 'Pray...*like* this...' In other words, pray along these lines, or using this prayer as an example.

The very first words of the prayer are addressed to the Father.... This might seem obvious. However, by beginning this prayer to '*Our Father...'* we are acknowledging that we belong to him and that we are his children. (Isa. 64:8; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6) Furthermore, the Lord Jesus is making it abundantly clear that we must approach only the Father. That is, we must never approach anyone other than God the Father (through his Son, and by the intercession of his Holy Spirit). (1 Tim. 2:5)

The Lord Jesus than adds the words, *'...in heaven...'* Again, this is not an unnecessary expression of the obvious. By acknowledging that our Father is 'in heaven', we are acknowledging that heaven is God's

throne and the earth is his footstool. In other words, we are acknowledging the absolute sovereignty and supremacy of our Father in heaven. (2 Chron. 20:6; Isa. 57:15; 66:1) Again, by acknowledging that our Father is in heaven, we are acknowledging that this is the place in which righteousness dwells, the place of unparalleled beauty and holiness in the presence of God upon his throne, and the place where myriads of holy angels worship the Lord in holy array. Furthermore, we are acknowledging that heaven is our home or place of final abode. (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 7:11)

Now, of course, simple untaught believers in the Lord Jesus Christ would not appreciate all of these truths from the outset, or when they first began praying, *'Our Father in heaven*....' Nevertheless, they would learn these truths by degrees, as the Spirit taught them from the Word of God.

The next phrase used by the Lord Jesus in this opening sentence is, '*...hallowed be your name*.' This, of course, is recognition from the outset that although God is our Father in heaven, he is also the Sovereign of the universe, and his Name is Most Holy; or that he dwells in unapproachable light (i.e., he rules in absolute and unwavering holiness, righteousness, truth and justice). (Isa. 6:3; Ezek. 38:23; Mal. 1:11; Luke 2:14; 1 Tim. 6:16) Thus, believers are taught never to approach God on overly-familiar or casual terms. Even although God is our heavenly Father, yet we must regard him with a pure and paternal love and respect—a respect, in this case, that equates with reverence and awe (or godly fear), and yet with boldness in approaching the throne of grace. (Eph. 3:12; Heb. 4:16; 12:28; 1 Pet. 1:17)

Of course, at this time, most of Jesus' followers were Jews and were very familiar with the Jewish faith and practises. They knew that no Jew would ever address God as 'their Father' in a personal sense (although, they acknowledged him as 'Father' in the sense of being their Creator (Mal. 2:10)). They knew also that all Jews regarded the name of God *('YHWH' or 'Yahweh'*) too sacred to pronounce. However, the Lord Jesus was about to remove the barrier that separated people from God. (Eph. 2:11-22) Through his atoning sacrifice and by his resurrection, ascension and exaltation to glory at the right hand of the Father, the Lord Jesus would open up the way whereby all his redeemed children would be able to approach the heavenly Father directly; albeit, through his Son. Thus, they would be able to call him their Father in heaven, and to pray to him directly (through the mediation of the Son and by the intercession of the Holy Spirit) but without the need of a priest on earth to intercede for them before the throne of God. (Heb. 4:14-16; 7:25; 8:1)

## MATTHEW 6:10

Matthew 6:10 ESV

(10) "'Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven'."

After acknowledging God as his Father and blessing his most hallowed or holy Name, the believer's next priority is to pray for the extension of God's kingdom on earth.

Now, of course, no power in heaven or on earth can hinder the expansion or the coming of God's kingdom. Nevertheless, the Lord Jesus instructs his followers to pray to their heavenly Father that he might extend his kingdom of grace and righteousness throughout the created earth—just as he has done already in the glorious heavenly realms. (Ps. 103:19; Dan. 4:35)

Here, God's kingdom consists of his rule in the hearts (or innermost beings) and lives of men and women (*'the kingdom of God is within you'* (Luke 17:20-21 NKJV)). God's kingdom is not only a real kingdom

comprehending all his redeemed people; it is also and primarily a moral and spiritual kingdom. As the Lord Jesus says, his kingdom is not of this world. (John 18:36) The kingdom of the Father and of his Son is not a physical or material kingdom located on this earth and which is similar to the kingdoms of the rulers of this world. God's kingdom does not sustain any connection with earthly or worldly kingdoms except insofar as God and his Son rule supreme over and above every other ruler and kingdom throughout the entire universe. (1 Chron. 29:11-12; Ps. 47:7-8; Isa. 37:16)

In the present context, and as far as believers on earth are concerned, God's kingdom essentially is a spiritual and heavenly kingdom. It is that kingdom comprising those in whom God's Holy Spirit dwells, and who live before their heavenly Father in truth and righteousness. Of this kingdom, Christ is the Supreme Head; and all his redeemed people are his subjects—the subjects of the King of kings. (Zech. 9:9; Rev. 11:15)

Concerning this spiritual and heavenly kingdom on earth, the Lord Jesus declared:

> Matthew 24:14 ESV
>
> (14) "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." (Cf. Luke 8:1; Acts 8:12; 28:31)

By praying that this kingdom would come (v.10 above), the Lord Jesus was encouraging his followers to pray for the extension of God's kingdom and God's rule into the hearts and lives of many who, as yet, had not been brought to repentance and faith. It was (and is) to pray for the complete fulfilment of God's kingdom on earth: i.e., to the point where the full number of the elect have been called and regenerated by the Spirit of God. In this sense, therefore, the believer prays for God's kingdom to come. (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 7:21; Col. 1:13)

When the Lord adds, '...*your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*', there is, of course, no thought that God's will would not, or could not, be accomplished on earth. What God has decreed from eternity, must and will come to pass; and nothing and no one in heaven or on earth can thwart or hinder the execution of the Almighty and Sovereign God's eternal decrees. (Isa. 43:13; 45:9-11; 46:10-11; Dan. 4:35; Acts 5:39)

However, in this context, the Lord Jesus is perhaps telling his disciples to pray that God's will—*in the sense of God's revealed will*—will be observed and obeyed on earth. This, then, is to pray that the Word of God (the revealed will of God) will go forth in power and glory and will accomplish its intended purpose in the hearts and lives of men and women. Of course, in this, it cannot fail: for God's Word cannot return to him void. (Isa. 55:11) However, the believer is to pray that the righteous and holy will of God will be known and obeyed among the children of men, as sinners are brought to repentance and faith in the Son of God by the gracious and effectual working of the Holy Spirit.

From the elements of this prayer covered so far, we note that we ought to begin our prayers to the Father—not by petitioning him for our own needs, or for the needs of others—but by blessing him for who he is, for what he has done for his people, and for the ultimate fulfilment of his kingdom on this earth. Only then, ought we to pray to our Father concerning our personal needs.

Of these matters, the Lord Jesus now speaks:

## MATTHEW 6:11

Matthew 6:11 ESV

(11) "'Give us this day our daily bread…'" (Cf. Luke 11:3)

Now, the Lord Jesus teaches his disciples how to ask their heavenly Father for their basic needs. The believer is simply to petition the Father for his or her most immediate needs (not wants or desires). (Php. 4:19; 1 Tim. 6:8) He is to petition the Father *daily.* This ensures ongoing fellowship with the Father in heaven, ongoing trust in his Word, and ongoing belief in his promises.

There is, of course, no point in asking God to meet our needs if we do not believe that he can or will meet our needs. The Lord Jesus makes it abundantly plain that our Father is concerned about every aspect of his children's lives—both great and small. Therefore, we are not to become anxious about what we shall eat or wear. All our needs are known to God; and he who feeds the birds of the air, will most certainly feed his own children and meet their every need. (Matt. 6:25-26)

Therefore, in effect, the Lord is telling his followers to ask God for their daily bread—in the assured belief that their heavenly Father will not fail to provide their daily bread. (Ps. 107:9; 145:16; Prov. 30:8; Isa. 33:16)

Of course, as God's Word makes plain elsewhere, we must work to earn the bread we eat—unless prevented from doing so by adverse health or other incapacitating circumstances. The assurance of our daily needs being met by our Father in heaven does not imply that we do not need to work for our living. (1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:12; cf. also Eph. 4:28)

Some older commentators (e.g., *Theophylact*) believed that the phrase, *"Give us this day our daily bread…"* did not indicate a request to provide bread alone, but to provide the petitioner with sufficient bread (or food) each day to nurture and support the body in order to maintain health and strength. Others among the early church fathers believed that the phrase included both a request for the provision of daily literal bread or food and also a request for daily spiritual 'bread' or spiritual nourishment through God's grace and by the means of grace. (Cf. Matt. 4:4; cf. John 6:35,51)

## MATTHEW 6:12

Matthew 6:12 ESV

(12) "…and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." (Cf. Luke 11:4a)

Here, the believer petitions his Father in heaven to forgive him his debts: i.e., his sins or transgressions. The believer's debt of sin has been paid, of course, by the Lord Jesus' atoning sacrifice at Calvary. Nevertheless, although justified in the sight of God and although being sanctified daily by the Spirit of God, the believer will not attain to perfection of character or conduct until he is glorified. (Php 3:12-14; Heb. 12:23) Thus, he needs to seek the Lord's mercy and forgiveness for sins committed unwittingly or unintentionally. (Those who practise a sinful lifestyle *habitually* while claiming to belong to Christ show by their ungodly way of life that they have not experienced God's grace in regeneration and sanctification. Thus, they are still at enmity with God and still separated from Christ. Rom. 8:9))

The truly regenerated believer, however, is assured that his heavenly Father will indeed forgive his sins, whenever they are acknowledged, confessed to him through his Son, and renounced. Thus, the apostle John declares in his first epistle:

1 John 1:6-10 ESV

(6) If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. (7) But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

(8) If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

(9) If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

(10) If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

The Lord Jesus then adds these words, '...*as we also have forgiven our debtors*.'

It was unthinkable that those whom the Lord had forgiven would fail to forgive others. Yet, many people in Jesus' day, and in the present day, do not consider themselves under any obligation to forgive those who are indebted to them, or who have wronged them in some way. On the contrary, although claiming to be the Lord's people, some are quite content to harbour bitterness, resentment, malice and ill-will against other people, rather than forgiving them their wrongs. (Matt. 18:21-35; Mark 11:25)

This, of course, is to despise the grace and mercy of the Lord: For if we cherish such evils in our hearts, we show by so doing that our hearts are not right with God. We ourselves stand in need of God's forgiveness. Thus, we must repent of our sin and seek God's mercy, and then we must seek reconciliation—involving full forgiveness—with those whom we have wronged or who have wronged us. (Matt. 5:22-24)

Again, some who claim to belong to the Lord Jesus are quite willing to forgive their own brothers and sisters (the family of believers), but not outsiders or strangers. This, however, cannot be. The Lord Jesus forgave us when we were not only outsiders and strangers to grace and to God, but also when we were positively the enemies of God, or at enmity with God. (Rom. 5:10; Col. 1:21-22) If, out of his great love for us in Christ Jesus, God should so forgive his enemies and make them his own beloved children, how much more should these redeemed children demonstrate something of God's love and forgiveness toward their enemies or toward those who have wronged them? (Cf. Luke 7:40-48)

(In verse 15 below, the Lord Jesus makes it plain that those who are not willing to forgive others will not themselves be forgiven. (Cf. Matt. 18:28-35; James 2:13))

## MATTHEW 6:13

Matthew 6:13 ESV

(13) “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” (Cf. Luke 11:4b)

God, of course, does not tempt anyone in the sense that he causes that person to sin; nor does he lead anyone into (moral) evil. Thus, James declares:

James 1:13-14 ESV

(13) Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. (14) But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

The meaning of *‘lead us not into temptation…*’ is illustrated aptly by the Psalmist:

Psalms 141:4a ESV

(4a) Do not let my heart incline to any evil… (cf. Ps. 121:7)

In other words, this is a plea that God will not permit his servant to be led into, or to stray into, the paths of unrighteousness, nor allow his servant’s heart or mind to tend toward that which is displeasing or dishonouring to the Lord.

We may consider also the Lord’s words to his disciples later in this Gospel:

Matthew 26:41 ESV

(41) “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

God permits his people to be tempted by evil or by Satan (as was the Lord Jesus). However, our Father in heaven is never responsible for causing his people to yield to temptation or to sin.

God permits temptation to sin, but with the temptation he provides a way of escape. (1 Cor. 10:13). Therefore, when we fail to take this way of escape, we are wholly responsible for yielding to temptation and for committing sin. God is in no way responsible for our disobedient, faithless or otherwise evil actions or for the consequences of those actions.

The word ‘temptation’, however, may be understood in another way: God may be said to ‘tempt’ his people in the sense that he subjects them to, or permits them to endure, trials, tribulations, afflictions, pains, or sorrows etc. This sense of the word ‘temptation’ is found in the older versions of the Bible. However, more modern versions render the word as ‘testings’ or ‘trials’ or similar. Testings or trials are not temptations to sin. Rather they are intended for the strengthening of a believer’s faith and character. Thus, God ‘tempted’ Abraham and Job very severely (i.e., God ‘tested’ or ‘tried’ them very severely) by God. Abraham, however, obeyed God and proved his faith and faithfulness to God. Similarly, when tested, Job held steadfastly to his faith in God. (Gen. 22:1; Deut. 8:2,16; John 17:15; Rev. 2:10)

The second part of the petition, *‘…but deliver us from evil’*, may be understood *either* as a plea to be delivered from sinful inclinations, tendencies, dispositions or intentions of the mind and from any sinful acts,

*or* as a plea to be delivered from the temptations of the evil one himself. Both are valid, because temptations to sin arise both from our old fallen, sinful nature, and also from the wiles, deceptions and enticements of the devil. (Eph. 6:11; Jas. 1:13-14)

In the second part of the petition, the Greek text has the definite article, which translates as, '...lead us not into *the* evil.' This may be understood in either of two ways (or both):

a) '*the* evil' is that temptation, enticement to sin, or other allurement which is presenting itself to us at that moment in time (i.e., the evil thought, object, etc.)

b) *'the* evil' is an ellipsis or abbreviated form of words for the 'evil one' (i.e., the devil or Satan).

Whichever is correct is immaterial. By petitioning God for deliverance from evil, we are petitioning him for deliverance from evil in all its forms, shapes or guises, and not just from one particular type of evil.

In passing, we should remember that, in Scripture, the word translated 'evil' has two distinct meanings. The more usual meaning relates to all forms of moral or spiritual evils, such as the Lord Jesus is referring to here. However, in Scripture, catastrophes, calamities and disasters—such as war, famine or plague—are also referred to as 'evils'. In this case, God's Word is not referring to moral or spiritual evil, but to physical evil. In the case of natural disasters, etc., these may have absolutely no moral connotations, and do not necessarily imply sin or judgment, unless that disaster has been sent expressly as a judgment from God. Such divine judgments did occur, for example, with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (a moral judgment on an immoral and wicked people (Gen. 13:13; 19:24-25; 2 Pet. 2:6; Jude 1:7)) and the destruction of the world in Noah's day (a moral judgment on an immoral and wicked world (Gen. 6:5-8, 11-13; 7:21-23; 1 Pet. 3:20)).

Although omitted by the ESV, NIV and other translations, the NKJV, NASB and certain other versions include a doxology in the second part of verse 13. The NASB, etc. shows this doxology in italics, indicating that the sentence is not present in all manuscripts. It would appear that the following doxology is almost certainly a gloss or marginal appendix. However, since it expresses the truth of God's Word, we will include it here for consideration while bearing in mind that these words were not spoken by the Lord Jesus nor were they included in the earliest manuscripts of this Gospel:

Matthew 6:13b NKJV

(13.) "...For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."

*'....For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.'*

These words sum up God's sovereign government or rule over the entire universe (universal dominion), the infinite extent of his power (omnipotence) or authority, and the extent of his glory or the sum total of his attributes (infinite perfection).

A similar doxology can be found in 1 Chronicles:

1 Chronicles 29:11 ESV

(11) Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. (see vv.10-13)

The kingdom and sovereign rule of God, the power or authority of God, and the glory or attributes of God are immutable. They endure throughout the eternal ages, for they are everlasting and cannot change any more than God himself can change. (Exod. 15:18; 1 Chron. 29:11; Ps. 41:13; 47:2; 145:10-13; 1 Tim. 6:15-17)

Thus, having worshipped and hallowed the Name of their Father in heaven, and having placed their petitions before him to answer according to his will, the believer can rest assured that their heavenly Father will never fail to answer them or to meet their needs.

Our Father in heaven is the Sovereign Ruler of the universe. He rules over the kingdoms of men, disposing events as he pleases for the good of his church and for the ultimate benefit and blessing of his people. No one in all creation can thwart or even hinder the purposes or decrees of God. What God has determined, will be fulfilled. Thus, his people can be assured that the kingdom of God, which is within them and about them, cannot in any way be interfered with by prevailing circumstances or by the plans, purposes or intentions of evil men or of evil spiritual beings. (Dan. 4:25, 34-35)

This assurance can be guaranteed to all the redeemed children of God; for—to God and to his Son—all power belongs, both in heaven and on earth. God is infinite in all his attributes: For example, he is omnipotent or all-powerful. (Matt. 28:18; Mark 14:62) Therefore, no human being, power or authority, and no spiritual being, power or authority, can begin to equate with or overcome the power or the authority of God. No created being in heaven or on earth possesses infinite power or authority: i.e., no created being in heaven or on earth is omnipotent. Therefore, since God alone is all-powerful, no one can hinder him from accomplishing his will throughout the universe, nor can anyone prevent God from answering the prayers of his redeemed and holy people.

Our Father in heaven is also the God of all glory. He is majestic in holiness; and in love, mercy, grace, righteousness, holiness, truth, and justice, etc. he is infinite. He is pure and perfect Spirit; exalted in the heavens, full of glory, and shedding forth the light of his glory and truth to all around his glorious throne; and, through his Son who was the glory of God incarnate, revealing something of his eternal power and glory to mankind. (Exod. 15:11; Ps. 57:11; 72:19; Isa. 6:1-5; Rev. 4:8)

Thus, concerning our Father in heaven, whose Name is to be hallowed, his is the kingdom, his is the power, and his is the glory forever or throughout the eternal ages. Amen—so let it be!

## TRUE FORGIVENESS

***Matthew 6:14-15***

## MATTHEW 6:14-15

Matthew 6:14-15 ESV

(14) “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, (15) but if you do not forgive others their trespasses neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Here, the Lord Jesus is making it plain to his followers that their Father in heaven does not treat with impunity an unforgiving spirit. Those whom God has forgiven must be ready and willing to forgive others. Failure to do so is to harbour a grudge in one's heart, or to cherish an angry, bitter and resentful spirit.

Those who are unwilling to forgive others their trespasses against them will find that the Lord will not forgive theirs. This is because the Lord will not forgive sin until that sin is acknowledged, confessed to him in genuine repentance, and renounced. Those, however, who continue to hold grudges against others, are refusing wilfully to acknowledge and confess their sins to God. Rather, they are cherishing hatred or bitterness in their hearts. Therefore, in justice and righteousness, God cannot and will not forgive them—until they are prepared to acknowledge and renounce their sin. (Matt. 7:2; Jas. 5:9)

Only when they resolve the issue that is causing them to harbour anger or bitterness, will God hear their prayers. Thus, before seeking God's forgiveness, they must seek reconciliation with the one who caused offence or who otherwise wronged them. Then, they must be prepared to forgive that person's offences willingly and unreservedly. Having done this, they must then acknowledge and confess their earlier sins of anger or bitterness, etc. to God. Then, of course, the Lord will forgive their sin—willingly and unreservedly. (Matt. 5:23-24; 11:25-26; 18:21-35)

This principle applies to all kinds of offences, wrongdoings, and misunderstandings, and also to unkind, thoughtless, or intolerant attitudes, words or actions, etc. The Lord's people ought always to forgive one another—just as the Lord Jesus has forgiven them.

Granted, it can be very difficult in practice to obey the Lord's instructions here. Nevertheless, they are essential to our spiritual well-being, for the good of God's church, and for our living witness or testimony before others. Yet, each of us must seek the Lord's grace, to make and keep us humble and contrite in spirit: for, anger, bitterness, resentment, and an unforgiving spirit arise from our old sinful nature and from a proud and evil heart. (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13)

## TRUE FASTING

***Matthew 6:16-18***

### MATTHEW 6:16

Matthew 6:16 ESV

(16) "And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward."

In keeping with their outward show of piety, the Pharisees and others ensured that people were aware of just how assiduously they practised their religion—for they valued the commendation of men more than the commendation of God.

Thus, when they fasted or abstained temporarily from certain foods, drinks, or legitimate pursuits, they *'disfigured their faces'*: That is, they made themselves look solemn, grave or downcast, so that others would take note of their 'pious', 'holy' or 'godly' appearance. Yet, it was from men alone, and not from God, that such hypocrites would receive their reward or praise. (John 5:41,44; 12:42-43)

The outward show of 'piety', as practised by people like the Pharisees, made a mockery of true religion. For those who desired to spend time alone with God in prayer, etc., the Lord honoured periods of fasting—as long as they were undertaken with a sincere heart or mind and with pure motives. (Cf. Luke 2:37) However, the Lord detested the practice of fasting from an insincere heart and a hypocritical mind.

The ordinary Jewish people believed that the Pharisees were honouring God. However, they equated a sombre countenance with piety or godliness and holiness of life. Yet, God does not look on the outward appearance, but on the heart. The Lord knew that these apparently pious individuals were corrupt inwardly, filled with iniquity and far from his saving grace and presence. They were pretenders to godliness and holiness; but, like all pretenders of the faith, they were excluded from the kingdom of heaven and from the people of God. (Matt. 23:13-28)

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, the LORD had rebuked his people's insincerity and had made it abundantly plain how his people ought to fast. The passage begins with the people asking why the LORD did not acknowledge their fasts:

Isaiah 58:3-12 ESV

(3a) 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?'

To which the LORD responds:

(3b) "Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. (4) Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.

(5) "Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD?

(6) "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

(7) "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

(8) "Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

(9) Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'

"If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, (10) if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. (11) "And the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

(12) "And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in."

Thus, the Lord Jesus instructs his disciples how they should fast:

## MATTHEW 6:17-18

Matthew 6:17-18 ESV

(17) "But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, (18) that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

According to the Psalmist, fasting is a humbling of one's soul before God. (Ps. 35:13) Those who would fast from a sincere and humble heart were not to make it obvious to others that they were abstaining from or curtailing certain foods, drinks, or legitimate activities. They were not to put on an appearance of solemnity, sullenness or seriousness merely for outward show—as did the Pharisees. Rather, if their fasting was associated with repentance, grief or mourning, etc., they were to show only those signs of repentance, grief or mourning that originated from their hearts and that were a genuine (and not a pretended) expression of their feelings.

In verse 17, Jesus declares, '…*when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face…*'

Anointing one's head and washing one's face was simply a reference to the common method of cleansing oneself or 'freshening oneself up'. (Cf. 2 Sam. 12:20). Observing this practice indicated also that the person was not in a state of mourning. (Cf. Dan. 10:3)

Thus, since the person fasting was not making their worship obvious to others, other people might remain unaware of that person's religious state. Their fasting, or temporary abstinence from or curtailment of food and activities, would remain known only to themselves and to God. Thus, their Father in heaven to whom all secrets are revealed, would see that person's humble and contrite act of worship, and would honour and reward him accordingly.

In passing, we might observe that fasting does not *necessarily* imply total abstinence from food or drink, etc. A person can fast on a light or meagre diet, as, for example, did John the Baptist. (Matt. 3:4) When speaking of fasting unto the Lord, the Bible is not implying that a person should deprive himself *totally* of essential food or drink.

Again, we might observe that fasting was still being practised by New Testament believers, usually in conjunction with prayer. Thus, the practice has not been set aside, although today it is rarely observed in the Biblical manner. The paramount example of fasting is that of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. (Matt. 4:2) The disciples of John the Baptist fasted. (Mark 2:18) The widow, Anna, frequented the temple, worshipping God with fasting and prayer night and day. (Luke 2:37) The early church was fasting and praying when the Holy Spirit instructed them to set apart Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 13:2) (For further examples, see Acts 10:30; 14:23; 1 Cor. 7:5)

## TRUE TREASURES

***Matthew 6:19-21***

### MATTHEW 6:19

Matthew 6:19 ESV

(19) "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal…"

Here, the Lord Jesus is applying the principles of the commandment that says, *'You shall not covet…*' (Ex. 20:17)

Although contrary to their creed, certain of the Pharisees (and others) stored up for themselves great wealth or possessions. However, like the rich farmer who filled his barns with plenty (Luke 12:16-21), they took no thought for their spiritual well-being or for the state of their soul. They professed piety while accumulating plenty and preaching health, wealth and prosperity to the people.

It is one thing to make necessary provision for our family, etc.; and God commands that his people work to earn their living so that they might provide adequately for their loved ones, for the church, and for the poor of society. (Acts 20:35; 2 Thess. 3:7-12) Furthermore, the Lord is not discouraging or condemning the accumulation of wealth or possessions as such, as long as these have been gained honestly by diligent labour or received as gifts or legacies. God blessed Abraham with great wealth. Abraham, however, did not set his heart on his wealth or possessions, but on the LORD his God. Those who set their hearts or minds on their earthly wealth or possessions forget that they cannot retain these possessions, nor can material goods benefit them spiritually. (Eccl. 5:10-14; 1 Tim. 6:8-10, 17; Heb. 13:5; Jas. 5:1-3)

Thus, the Lord Jesus tells his people quite clearly, '*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth…*'

To do so—in the sense of setting our hearts on the accumulation of earthly wealth or possessions, or on ambition or achievement at the expense of our commitment to God—would be spiritual idolatry or the worship of false gods (the gods of lust or greed, materialism, etc.). Furthermore, those who would increase their goods or wealth on this earth, increase also the probability of corruption and loss (such as that occasioned by devouring insects, etc, or by corrosion or decay). They increase also the risk of misappropriation of their property or wealth since their possessions provide a greater target for thieves and other criminals.

Where, then, ought the Lord's people to store their most valuable treasures?

### MATTHEW 6:20

Matthew 6:20 ESV

(20) "…but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal…"

By saying that his people were to store up their treasures in heaven rather than on earth, the Lord Jesus is making it plain what constitutes real or true treasure. It is not the things of this earth, such as material

goods, money, or any other kind of possessions. All these things will pass away. Not one of our earthly goods or possessions would be of any use to us in heaven, even supposing we could take them there. (Matt. 19:21; Luke 12:33; 18:22)

True treasure—such as should be stored in the heavenly vaults—are the treasures of the soul. The believer's greatest treasure should be the knowledge of God as his Father and of Jesus Christ his Son. It should be to walk with him and to fellowship with him. It should be to worship and praise him who loved us and who gave himself for us.

Again, treasures of the soul include such things a humble contrite spirit, a gentle and compassionate mind, and a loving, pure and sincere heart. Also, any acts performed toward others in the name of Christ, and from a humble and godly heart, results in treasures—or great rewards—in heaven.

Furthermore, those who are content with what the Lord is pleased to provide for them, and who honour God with the little or much that he has committed to their stewardship, will store up treasure in heaven by using that stewardship wisely, and with concern for God's glory. Those, however, who seek to add unnecessarily to their needful provision, will add unnecessary sorrows and heartbreaks associated with worldly attitudes or desires. For those who desire the riches of the world or the pleasures of this life at the expense of heavenly riches, ultimately make this life and this world's goods the real object of their affections, and their real god. (1 Tim. 6:8, 17; Heb. 13:5)

The followers of Christ must bear in mind that they are heirs to the Father's heavenly inheritance—where their true treasures lie—and joint-heirs with the Son in his glory. This inheritance is incorruptible; it is undefiled, and it will never fade away. On that inheritance in glory each believer ought always to set his heart or mind; for, in Christ Jesus, his true treasures lie. (Heb. 10:34; 11:26; 1 Pet. 1:3-5)

## MATTHEW 6:21

Matthew 6:21 ESV

(21) "...For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

By laying up treasures in heaven, we show that God is the supreme object of our love, affection and desires. Those who place their treasures in his hands cannot forfeit them: for, there no thief can enter; neither can corrosion or corruption spoil this vast wealth of heavenly riches.

Those who accumulate earthly wealth must spend time maintaining or improving that wealth. For some, this can be done without compromising their commitment to God or to his church and people. For many others, however, the time and energy spent pursuing monetary matters detract from the time and energy spent pursuing spiritual matters. Thus, monetary matters become ever more important to them. However, whatever is the most important matter in our lives is the true object of our worship, whether it be God, or whether it be wealth or possessions—false gods or idols.

This, of course, holds true for anything that we hold as the most important person or object of our desires. For example, if our wife (or husband) and family are the most important people in our lives, then we have made them our false gods or idols. For none but God himself must occupy the supreme place in our lives. Again, if we think more of other interests, ambitions, pursuits or activities, than we do of God

and his Word, then we have made these other matters our false gods or idols. For God must come first in our lives.

Thus, the Lord Jesus declares, "…*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*."

Our treasure—the most important person or object in our lives—is where our heart really lies. That person or object is the object of our devotion, whether it is God or something else. For, if our hearts are right with God, the Lord must come first in our lives, above all others.

Those, however, whose hearts are set in heaven find their treasure there, both in the knowledge of God as the Father and of his Son as their Saviour and Lord, and in the assurance that he is their true and everlasting portion and possession. From the wealth of his riches in glory flow an abundance of grace, mercy and every good thing necessary for life and godliness. (2 Pet. 1:3-4)

## MATTHEW 6:22-23

Matthew 6:21-23 ESV

> (22) "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light,
> (23) but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Cf. Luke 11:34-36; cf. also Matt. 13:15 )

Here, the Lord Jesus illustrates and expands on what he has just said concerning laying up treasures in heaven.

The eye is not itself the source of light, but it admits light into the body: i.e., it feeds the brain and the soul (including mind, will, reason, intellect, etc.) with information upon which a person may act. If the 'eye' is healthy,[24] i.e., if a person sets his gaze on those things that are beneficial to the soul, then his mind and his entire body will benefit from the influx of light, goodness or truth. Again, if a person looks constantly upon his Lord and the things of the Spirit, then his eye (or his mind's 'eye') will be the means through which great blessings are admitted to his soul. Furthermore, if a person sets his mind's eye on things above and not on things of this earth, *and lives his life accordingly*, then he is storing up treasure for himself above, where Christ is seated at God's right hand. (Col. 3:1-2) In all these ways, a person ensures that his body and his mind is being filled with light—i.e., spiritual truth, goodness and virtue, together with the multitude of blessings that accrue from them.

If, however, a person's eye is bad (i.e., defective or diseased), then his mind cannot receive true light or information. Thus, being unable to see the way ahead (spiritually), that person stumbles in the darkness. His rational senses—will, reason, intellect, etc.—are darkened or blinded to the light or the truth. Spiritually, therefore, he is blind. He is unable to look upon (i.e., to understand, apprehend or appreciate) those things that benefit the soul. In his spiritual blindness, he has no desire to lay up treasures in heaven for he has no desire for the things of God. Rather, in the darkened condition of his soul, he can see or appreciate only that which lies in his immediately proximity: in other words, the things of this world, the

[24] *healthy*: KJV, 'single'; from a Greek word meaning 'without guile', 'sincere' or 'straightforward'. The word implies steadfastness in pursuing a particular object with a pure and sincere heart: in this case, setting one's eye (or gaze) upon those things that produce righteous or godly living, etc.

goods of this world, and the wealth or riches of this world. On these, he sets his benighted gaze; and for him these become the true objects of his devotion, or his false gods. (Rom. 1:21; 2 Cor. 4:4; Gal. 4:8; Eph. 4:17-18) To such people, the Lord Jesus addresses these solemn words, "…*If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!"* (v.23b)

We must remember, of course, that many of those who were listening to the Lord Jesus as he taught his followers were still in spiritual darkness. Although, as Jews, they may have been very religious people, for many of them their religion was outward and formal. Those, however, whose religion is outward and formal, are still in their sins. Although perhaps morally 'upright', they are still in spiritual darkness. (Matt. 23:26-33; Rom. 2:17-23)

Spiritual darkness, of course, arises from spiritual death. Those who are dead spiritually, or dead in trespasses and sins, are without God in this world, abiding under his just wrath, and heading for a lost and dreadful eternity in hell. Thus, any person who believes that he is a follower of the Lord Jesus, yet whose mind's eye is set on the things of this world has to consider very carefully whether he has ever experienced salvation. And any person who claims to be a follower of the Lord Jesus, while still living in the darkness of sin—i.e., while still practising a sinful lifestyle—has no part in the kingdom of God. For the Spirit of truth, holiness and righteousness cannot dwell in a body blackened and defiled by habitual sin. (Rom. 8:9) Hence, the reason for the Lord's solemn pronouncement. Those who are still in darkness are still unforgiven. They are without God and without hope in the world, unless—by the grace of God—they repent and seek his mercy. (1 Cor. 2:14; 6:9-10; 1 John 2:11)

## MATTHEW 6:24

Matthew 6:24 ESV

(24) "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." (Cf. Luke 16:13)

Here, the Lord Jesus expounds and applies further the principle that he has just enunciated above.

The Greek word translated 'serve' can mean '*to submit or yield willingly to the service of another'*, or '*to be owned by another'*. Thus we see that a person can submit willingly to the service of another person or to the pursuit of something, or he can be 'owned' (i.e., bound or enslaved) by that other person or thing.

It is impossible for any person to commit himself wholeheartedly and entirely to two different masters simultaneously. By its very nature, wholehearted and complete commitment demands dedication either to one person or to another, or to one aim or object or to another. It is impossible to pursue both at the same time without compromising our loyalty and commitment to both. (1 Tim. 6:9-10)

Thus, in the sphere of worship, the Lord Jesus is declaring to his listeners that he who commits himself wholeheartedly and completely to one person, object, interest, or pursuit does so at the expense of all others. Essentially, this means that whatever person, aim or object is paramount in someone's life is the real love of that person's heart and soul. From this, it follows that all other people, aims or objects must occupy a lesser place in his heart and life. To all intents and purposes, these lesser interests are 'despised' or 'hated'; i.e., they are considered of no importance, relatively or absolutely, in that person's life. (Luke 14:26-33)

Ultimately, however, those who choose to seek and serve anyone or anything before God will become bound to, or enslaved by, their cherished objects, desires, wealth or possessions.

The point, therefore, of what the Lord is saying is that those who set their hearts or minds on anything other than the Lord their God are guilty of worshipping or idolising these other people or objects, and of despising or contemning God. Thus, in the context of money, wealth or possessions, the Lord is declaring that a person must choose to dedicate his life either to the worship of materialism (which is idolatry), or to the worship of God. He can possess both, but he cannot dedicate his heart and life to the pursuit of both. (1 Tim. 6:17; Jas. 4:4; 1 John 2:15-16)

## TRUE TRUST IN GOD'S PROVIDENCE

***Matthew 6:25-34***

At this point, the Lord Jesus comforts and reassures those whose wealth and possessions were negligible or non-existent. Of course, at this time, and with some notable exceptions, many of those listening to the Lord's teaching were either poor or very poor. Was not poverty or lack of possessions a genuine cause for concern? How would those poor people who followed the Lord find their daily bread?

The Lord Jesus addresses these matters in the following verses.

### MATTHEW 6:25

Matthew 6:25 ESV

(25) "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious 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?"

The word translated *'anxious'* here, is from a Greek word (merimnaw) meaning 'to be apprehensive about', 'to be unduly concerned about' or 'to be unnecessarily distracted with'.

Many of those to whom the Lord was speaking had never been wealthy, nor did they own much by way of material possessions. Some of the Lord's disciples had been men of business, such as fishermen or tax collectors. However, they were not rich by the world's standards. (Matt. 4:18-20; Mark 2:14-17)

Now, however, the Lord Jesus had called these men to forsake everything to follow him. They had left their secular vocations and apparently were without means of support. Some of the women who followed the Lord Jesus had their own private means, but this did not apply to the majority of the Lord's followers. (Luke 8:2-3) Thus, the Lord Jesus begins to reassure his disciples. Those whom he had called to follow him would not suffer to the extent of being deprived of their most basic needs. By his providence and grace, the Lord would provide their essential needs from day to day. (Gen. 22:14; 30:30; Ps. 107:9; cf. Acts 14:17)

The Lord Jesus begins with the expression, '*Therefore, I tell you*....' This is an emphatic introduction to an authoritative or solemn declaration or promise to follow. '*I'* emphasises the person, office and authority of the One who is about to make the pronouncement—the Eternal Son of God. '*I tell you*...' emphasises that the assurances that the Lord is about to give to his people cannot fail of fulfilment, since they are the

words spoken by God the Son himself—the Everlasting Word. (John 1:1; 10:30) God cannot fail, nor can he prove unfaithful to his Word or to his promises. (Jos. 21:45; Isa. 55:11; 2 Cor. 1:20)

Thus, the Lord asserts, *'Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life….'*

This does not mean that a person should neglect his life or become carelessly indifferent about his life, health or welfare. Nor does it mean that a person should 'trust the Lord to provide for his daily needs' without making the least effort to provide for himself. (Eph. 4:28; 1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:12) Rather, the Lord is telling his people not to become unduly concerned, alarmed, or worried by their apparent or real lack of resources or necessary provisions. Whatever may be the cause of their concern, they were not to permit a genuine concern for their well-being to turn into an unhealthy anxiety; or worse, a lack of trust in God to meet their needs. (Deut. 8:3-4; Ps. 84:11; Luke 12:30:33; Php. 4:19)

Thus, the Lord continues, *'…do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on….*'

Those whom the Lord had called to follow him were to put aside any unhealthy and unnecessary anxiety for their daily provisions. God had called them to himself and to his service. Therefore, they were not to worry about how they were going to provide for the necessities of life. The Lord would provide. (Ps. 55:22; Php. 4:6) If they lacked food or drink while engaged in the Lord's service, then he would meet their needs—as he did with prophets such as Elijah. If they required clothing, the Lord would provide all that was necessary, often by means of his own people. (1 Kings 17:13-16)

In principle, this truth applies not only to those whom the Lord has called specifically to his service, but to all those who belong to the Lord and who are serving him faithfully in one capacity or another, whether formally or informally. Those in need of provisions for their lives will find that the Lord will meet their needs, as long as they continue to trust him, and to honour and obey him in their lives. (Php. 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:7)

At this point, the Lord Jesus reminds his disciples of the true meaning of 'life' by asking, *'…Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?*'

'Life' is not associated primarily, nor confined to, that which is physical, material or visible. Indeed, this form of life is transient. All too soon, when death intervenes, this present earthly form of life will pass away. (Cf. Luke 12:16-21) No, 'life' is much more than physical life. True life is spiritual and eternal. Thus, the Lord Jesus said,

> John 17:2-3 ESV
>
> (2) "…Since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. (3) And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." (Cf. John 10:28; Acts 13:48; 1 John 5:11-12)

Those who know God and his Son personally and savingly possess eternal life. (John 3:16,36) This is true life, and this life can never pass away.

Thus, the Lord's followers were to trust him to provide for their everyday needs. However, at the same time, they were to realise that this life and its provisions were fleeting or transitory. Their real life was spiritual life; and the food for that life was the Word of God. This life was eternal life, and long after their

earthly existence had ceased, their immortal souls—together with their resurrected and glorified bodies—would live forever in the presence of God. (John 6:32-40; 11:25-26; 1 Cor. 15:52-58)

## MATTHEW 6:26

Matthew 6:26 ESV

(26) "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Cf. Luke 12:24)

Now, the Lord takes an everyday example of God's providence. Jesus speaks of the birds. These creatures prepare a nest to raise and feed their young. However, they make no other preparation for their own or for their offspring's welfare. By contrast, men and women labour by sowing, reaping, gathering and storing up for the future. They work to earn their living in order to procure goods and services necessary for their life and welfare, and for that of their families.

Apart from preparing their nests, however, birds expend no corresponding labours in making advance provisions either for themselves or for their offspring. They seek their food when the necessity arises—and find it supplied by the hand of the Lord; i.e., by his providence. In the normal course of events, the Lord ensures that every need for his creation is met providentially from nature itself. By these means, God provides for every living thing. (Job 38:41; Ps. 104:21,27-28; 136:25; 145:15-16; 147:9; Luke 12:6-7)

Since, from the creation of the world, God has made necessary provision for all living creatures, then it is certain that he will supply the needs of his own children; almost invariably, providentially—but not excluding the occasional miraculous intervention and provision, of which we have a number of examples in the Bible.

It may be argued that there are certain times, places or circumstances where provision for men and animals is not merely scarce but positively lacking, and that God's creatures are suffering hunger, thirst and other forms of deprivation or want. Certainly, this is true in places—as a result of the curse on the earth; of man's misuse of the planet and its resources, and of his failure to distribute the vast wealth or resources of the planet equitably to all peoples. It is true also for individuals, groups and societies among mankind who have chosen to ignore or reject the true and living God and who worship false gods or idols. Those who choose to follow other gods, or other objects of their desires, cannot call God their Father in heaven. Since they are not his children, they cannot be guaranteed their food in due season in the same way that God guarantees to provide for his own. (Cf. Ps. 104:27) Nevertheless, although not blessed with such promises as the Lord gives to his own, *God provides for fallen, sinful mankind out of his common grace and ordinary providence.* (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17)

God's providence cannot be hindered or thwarted either by the effects of the curse brought about by man's rebellion and fall, or by man's failure to rule the earth wisely, justly, and with equal concern for all peoples whom God has created. (Cf. Dan. 4:35) When Jesus was speaking these words, shortages were well known. Yet, this did not prevent the Lord from assuring his disciples that they should have no anxiety about meeting their basic needs. God, who provided food for the birds of the air, would meet all the needs of his redeemed people, regardless of the prevailing circumstances. (Php. 4:19)

Why should we not be anxious about these things? Because the Bible tells us that not one sparrow can fall to the ground apart from the will of our Father in heaven. Thus, in chapter 10 of this Gospel, the Lord Jesus declares:

> Matthew 10:29-31 ESV
>
> (29) "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. (30) But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. (31) Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."

God is concerned for his entire creation, from the very least living creature to the highest living creature on earth—mankind. Mankind is a form of creation superior to and completely distinct from the animal kingdom; for, unlike them, God created Adam and Eve in his own image and likeness: i.e., as completely rational, moral and spiritual beings, and with an immortal soul. (Gen. 1:26-28; Acts 17:26-29)

However, if even the least of God's creation cannot escape his notice or his providential care, how can those possibly escape whom he loves with an especial and everlasting love? These are his elect and redeemed children. These are his special possession. Thus, compared with the lesser forms of creation, such as the birds which are the objects of his ordinary providence and common grace, the Lord Jesus asks rhetorically: *'...Are you not of more value than they?'*

And, since of intrinsically greater value to the Father than the birds for which he cares and for which he provides, how much more care and provision will he bestow on those who love him? How much more concern will he show toward his redeemed children? He who provides grass for the oxen and seed for the sower will most certainly provide food for his people—for his people are of more value to him than all others. (Exod. 19:5; Mal. 3:16-17; Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 2:9; see also Matt. 25:34; Rom. 8:32)

This is not to say that a child of God will never suffer from a temporary shortage of food, clothing, or other basic necessities of life. This, however, brings us back to the principle that—for the believer in Christ—this physical life is not the most important form of life. Should, in his infinite love and wisdom, it be the will of God that any believer lose his life in this world, then it is so that the Lord may take him home to his presence to enjoy life and riches in glory for evermore.

## MATTHEW 6:27

> Matthew 6:27 ESV
>
> (27) "...And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?" (Cf. Luke 12:25-26; see also Ps. 39:4-5)

Then, as now, anxiety was commonplace among men and women. However, those who believed with all their hearts on the Lord Jesus and trusted his Word and his promises had no cause for anxiety or needless worry. This was because they knew that their lives—their circumstances and their destiny—was in the hands of the Almighty God, their heavenly Father. (Ps. 31:5) Nothing could ever happen in their life that was unknown to their Father in heaven or outside his control. Indeed, nothing could set upon his people to harm or distress them except by the express will, purpose or decree of Almighty God. (Ps. 31:15)

This is not to say that God's people cannot suffer loss—sometimes, grievous loss, hurt or sorrow. God's people do suffer in common with all mankind. However, their suffering, grief or loss is not to be compared with those who do not know God as their heavenly Father; for these people are without God and without hope in the world. (Cf. Eph. 2:12) The child of God, however, belongs to God and to his Son. His hope is in Christ and in his promises. He believes that God works out everything in his life in accordance with his own plan and purposes; and that ultimately, everything works together for good to those who love God, and who are the called according to his purpose. (Rom. 5:1-5; 8:24-31; Heb. 12:6-12; 1 Pet. 1:7-8)

With such assurances of God's love, grace and mercy, the Lord Jesus teaches his followers that it is needless to feel anxious or worried about events or circumstances. Certainly, there may be a place for genuine concern over certain matters (cf. 2 Cor. 8:16; 11:28; Php. 2:20), but not for needless anxiety or worry—which would amount to a lack of faith in God and in the promises and assurances of his Word.

Thus, Jesus points out that worry or anxiety will do nothing to improve or resolve matters. It cannot increase a person's stature or lengthen a person's life by the least amount. Indeed, constant and needless worry and anxiety may lead to a decline in health—physically, psychologically and spiritually. Thus, we are exhorted and encouraged to trust God; to believe his Word and to accept his promises, concerning our lives and our future. For our times are in his hands; and no amount of worrying will alter the course of events that God has charted for our lives on earth. (Ps.127:2; Php. 4:6)

## ANXIETY OVER CLOTHING AND FOOD

From the general principle of trusting our heavenly Father to provide, the Lord Jesus now moves on to specific examples of his providence. Thus, concerning clothing, the Lord declares:

### MATTHEW 6:28-30

> (28) "And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, (29) yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. (30) But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?" (Cf. Luke 12:27-31)

Then, as now, one of the most common matters of anxiety concerned clothing and other personal necessities. For the rich, this rarely presented a problem—unless indecision over their abundant choice of apparel led them to needless concern or anxiety about which they should wear! However, most of the Lord's hearers were poor, or relatively so. For them, procuring or purchasing clothing could be a major issue, and often a cause of worry. Such needless worry could distract them from other important issues (as it did with Martha (Luke 10:40-42)), or it could fill them with unnecessary apprehension or tension. Thus, here, the Lord Jesus is encouraging his people to trust their Father in heaven about matters such as clothing; for even these matters are in his almighty and sovereign hands.

By way of illustration, the Lord uses the example of the lilies.[25] Here was a wild plant of the field strikingly arrayed in nature's apparel. However, their intrinsic beauty had been provided to them not by nature alone, but by God who created the lilies and who continues to sustain the laws of nature that he instituted at the creation of the world.

Now, the Lord Jesus draws a comparison between the natural, but God-given, beauty of these flowers of the field and the artificial beauty of King Solomon's magnificent attire. With all his great wealth, Solomon could afford to array himself in the most costly and beautiful finery then known to man. His royal robes were of the most exquisite and unique design. All who beheld King Solomon in his glorious apparel could not fail to appreciate the magnificence of his wardrobe and the vast expense of his regal garments. (1 Kings 10:4-7; 2 Chron. 9:20-22)

Nevertheless, the Lord declares that even Solomon in all this glory was not arrayed like a solitary lily of the field. God's providence in nature exceeded by far man's provision for himself. Again, God's providence was guaranteed to all his creation, and especially to his own people. Man's provision for himself was transient or ephemeral; and his ability to make such provision was uncertain at best and likely to change or pass away at any moment.

All too soon, also, the beauty of the lilies would fade and pass away. (Jas. 1:10-11) Yet, God would continue to provide in nature all that was necessary to sustain the natural creation until the end of time. However, Jesus declares that if God clothes the flowers of the fields, which soon die only to be burned in the oven, how much more will he clothe his own people? Their lives are more important by far than that of any plant or flower—however beautiful; for their lives will endure for the days that the Lord is pleased to allot to them. Therefore, if God makes abundant provision for the lilies, how much more will he provide for his redeemed children?

Thus, the Lord Jesus exhorts his followers not to be anxious about meeting their need for clothes or for other basic necessities. The Lord will provide. Yet, God's people are expected to trust him implicitly to make that provision—for God cannot fail or prove unfaithful to his Word or his promises. (Cf. Matt. 10:10; Luke 22:35)

Clearly, some of the Lord's hearers doubted God's willingness or ability to provide such things as clothing. Therefore, the Lord finds it necessary to add a mild rebuke to his words, by declaring, *'....O you of little faith'* (v.30c). Their faith needed to grow, so that they accepted God's Word and promises as unfailing and infallible. So, too, we need to ensure that our faith continues to grow to the point where we accept God's Word, the Bible, as unfailing and infallible in its entirety. (Cf. Matt. 8:26; 14:31; 16:8)

If there was one other matter of anxiety or concern to those on limited incomes, it was in connection with food and drink. We must remember, of course, that—in Jesus' day—there was no equivalent to the modern welfare state system that provided basic support to those in need. If a person had relatives who were more comfortably off, then those relatives might assist their poorer kindred. However, in many cases, the people and their relatives were poor. Those who were desperately poor had no option but to

[25] *lilies*: The Lord may not have been referring only to the plant of this name. Rather, he may have been using the term 'lily' comprehensively to include many or all of the flowers of the fields which, in all their varieties, displayed their natural God-given beauty. (GL)

beg for their basic support—as did Lazarus (who lay neglected at the rich man's gate) and many others. (Luke 16:20)

The Lord Jesus continues by declaring:

## MATTHEW 6:31-32

(31) "Therefore do not be anxious, saying,

'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'

(32) "For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all."

If God, our Father in heaven, had promised to provide his people with clothing to meet their needs, then it is certain that he would meet their needs for food and drink. Therefore, the Lord Jesus encourages these dear children of God to trust him to provide their daily bread. They were not to become concerned over their shortages of food, and their apparent inability to feed either themselves or their families. They might be poor in this world's goods and they might find great difficulty in procuring even the most basic of necessities. However, they belonged to their Father in heaven, and their Father in heaven knew their circumstances precisely. He knew exactly what needs they had, and when these needs had to be met. Whether it was for food, drink, or clothing, all was known to the Lord—and the Lord would provide. (Matt. 4:4; Luke 12:29)

We are speaking, of course, predominately of those who were unable to provide for themselves, or who were too poor to meet all the necessary needs of their families. In these cases, the Lord would feed and clothe his children by providing for them (usually, by means of other people) as circumstances required. (Cf. Luke 3:11) However, while the Lord promises to meet every genuine need of his people, this assurance must never be understood as an encouragement to anyone not to make every necessary provision for themselves and for their families. For those who are able to work, God's provision comes through their health, strength and ability to labour and to earn a wage or salary, and thus to provide for themselves and for their loved ones. However, for those who are prevented from providing for themselves in the normal way, the Lord will take care of their needs by other means. (Acts 20:35; 1 Thess. 4:11-12)

Thus, Jesus exhorts his people to refrain from worrying about such matters. People who do not know God as their heavenly Father (the 'Gentiles') may seek after and worry about all these things. However, those who know God as their Father in heaven need have no such concerns. Their Father in heaven knows their every need; and, from his abundance, and by the counsels of his own inscrutable will, the Lord will provide.

Emphasising spiritual priorities, the Lord Jesus asserts:

## MATTHEW 6:33

(33) "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." (Cf. Luke 12:31)

Rather than fretting and setting their hearts on the things of this life and this world, the Lord encourages his people to set their hearts and minds on the kingdom of God and to follow after his righteousness, or to live in conformity with the righteous standards of God's kingdom. (Ps. 84:11; Matt. 5:6)

It is often said that those who set their minds on heavenly things are no earthly good. This, however, is to misunderstand completely what is involved in setting one's heart and mind on things above. Those who set their minds on the things of God are setting their priorities in the right order. By putting God first in their lives and by seeking the things of his kingdom from above, they are being prepared to serve the Lord effectually and powerfully on this earth. Those who would help others and minister to their needs must first be fed with the bread from heaven and nourished in their own souls by their communion with God. Only then, can they become an effective witness or servant to the people of the world. (Rom. 8:6; 2 Cor. 4:18; Col. 3:1-2) Those, however, who seek to perform good works in the world without seeking first the kingdom of God or setting their hearts and minds on things above, cannot succeed merely by human effort. Nor can they please or honour God, since they have not given him the first and foremost position in their hearts and lives.

Thus, the Lord Jesus teaches his disciples, and us, to seek first the kingdom of God; i.e., to seek with the utmost diligence those things that pertain to righteousness and holiness of character and conduct, together with all other aspects of seeking the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Those who seek the kingdom experience the blessings of the King on their lives and on their endeavours in this world. Again, those who seek the kingdom and its truth and righteousness, become the most effective servants of the Lord among sinful and lost mankind.

Because of their constant communion and intercession with their Father in heaven, faithful believers experience God's answers to their prayers, God's blessing on their work or ministry, and the attendant power of the Holy Spirit operating in the hearts of believers and unbelievers through the all-powerful application of God's living Word to their lives.

## MATTHEW 6:34

> (34) "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."

The Lord Jesus closes this part of his discourse with these most comforting words. There was no need for undue concern or for worry or anxiety. All things pertaining to each believer's life would be taken care of by their Father in heaven. Every genuine need would be met. God would not fail his own children, nor would he leave them desolate. He had loved them with an everlasting love and he would never let them go or suffer want.

The Lord adds, *'... for tomorrow will be anxious for itself...*': In other words, there was no point in worrying about what might happen in the future. The future would be filled with anxieties and uncertainties, and the world would be oppressed and often overcome by them. However, this was not to be the case with God's redeemed and beloved children. Whatever uncertainties lay before people, nothing was uncertain to God or with God. Every eventuality lay in God's hands and could take place only by his decree and permission. Thus, God's children were to trust their heavenly Father, knowing that he controlled and disposed all events in the universe. Let tomorrow—or the future—be filled with uncertainties and let ungodly men and women concern themselves with the cares of this world. However, God's children were to take no thought for the morrow—i.e., they were not to concern themselves unduly or become anxious about

what might take place tomorrow or in the future: For the future was under God's control, and believers' lives were in God's hands. It was not in the hands of unknown circumstances, chance, fate or anything else. (Cf. 1 Sam. 17:46-47; Ps. 31:15; 135:5-6; Dan. 4:25)

The Lord closes with the words, '*Sufficient for the day is its own trouble*.'

Essentially, the Lord was telling his people to live their lives one day at a time. They were to fulfil God's purposes for them for that day; to perform their labours for that day, and to enjoy life with their families and friends for that day. They did not know what might happen on the morrow. Indeed, they did not know whether they would live to see tomorrow. Whatever might be their age, they might at any moment be taken home to be with the Lord—far away from all trouble, toil and anxiety. Or, together with the Lord's people worldwide, they might be gathered home to be with the Lord forever—never to see another day on this present earth. Thus, Jesus exhorts his followers to live one day at a time, and to live each day as though it might be their last on this earth.

Having said this, however, the Lord was not implying for one moment that a believer should not, or did not need, to make wise and necessary provision for their future and for their families. Other passages of God's Holy Word make it abundantly clear that it is believers' duty and responsibility to make such provision. Indeed, those in the church who failed to provide for their relatives were declared to be worse than unbelievers because of their irresponsibility and neglect toward their own kindred. In Matthew's Gospel, the Lord Jesus is making it abundantly plain that anxiety for the future is unnecessary and sinful. However, when he forbids us from becoming needlessly anxious or concerned about the future (since God will provide), he is not suggesting that anyone need not work to earn a living and to provide for themselves and their families. (Eph. 4:28; 1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:7-12)

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 7

## DO NOT JUDGE

***Matthew 7:1-6***

### MATTHEW 7:1-2

(Luke 6:41-42)

In this section of his discourse, the Lord Jesus warns his followers against making private judgments on others: i.e., judging other people unjustly or criticising them unfairly.

Thus, in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 7, the Lord declares:

Matthew 7:1 ESV

(1) "Judge not, that you be not judged…" (Cf. Luke 6:37)

The Lord is speaking here of those who, like the scribes and Pharisees and other carping and captious individuals, sought to pass critical judgment on people for the least inconsistency in their speech or behaviour. However, their judgment was not according to God's law and to God's standards of justice and righteousness tempered with his love and mercy. (Mic. 6:8; 7:18) Rather, it was in accordance merely with these religious rulers and teachers' personal opinions, ideas or traditions. They were making a personal assessment of an individual's words or actions, without reference to God's standards (correctly understood and applied), and they were passing judgment on, or being critical of, those whose speech or behaviour did not conform to their cherished opinions or personal standards of righteousness (i.e., self-righteousness). (Matt. 23:25-32)

Thus, the Lord Jesus expressly forbids his redeemed children from passing judgment of this kind on anyone else. Those who judge others in such a manner are, like the scribes and Pharisees, acting hypocritically. None of us ought to pass judgment on another person, or criticise them unfairly, on the basis of our own personal views or opinions; for we ourselves are not above reproach and are in no position to sit in judgment upon anyone else. (Rom. 2:1-2; 14:3-4; 1 Cor. 4:5; Jas. 4:11-12)

This is not to say that there is no place for judgment or censure in a believer's life. However, where judgment or censure for particular actions is required, it must follow the principles laid down in God's Word. For example, where a brother or sister has caused offence (wittingly or unwittingly), the offended person ought to meet with his brother or sister in Christ to discuss the cause of the grievance, and with a view to full reconciliation. The offended person may point out the offender's fault, but he may not accuse him unjustly or judge him on account of that fault. (Matt. 5:22-24; 18:15-17)

Again, where a believer refuses to acknowledge his offence, or any sin affecting others in the church, then it is for the church leadership to call that person to account; and, if necessary, to judge him by exercising some form of church discipline. However, this is not private judgment but the collective and corrective judgment of the church leadership exercised in love and with a view to restoring the offending believer to God and to church fellowship.

It should go without saying that the Lord's prohibition of private judgment between individuals has no bearing on official or legal judgments. The judgments of the law courts are accomplished by the application of the law of the land. The law officers or judges are acting as God's representatives for the upholding of law and order and for the good of society. (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17)

This is not to say that all judgments of this kind are righteous or acceptable to God. Those that conflict with the moral standards or the explicit teaching of God's Word, and are therefore contrary to God's express commands, are reprehensible to God. Indeed, those lawmakers who make such unrighteous laws, and those who apply them in the courts, will answer to God—the Supreme Judge—at the Final Judgment for condemning the innocent and acquitting the guilty.

After forbidding private judgment among his followers, the Lord Jesus continues by declaring:

Matthew 7:2 ESV

(2) "For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you." (Cf. Luke 6:38)

(This is exactly the same principle as *'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth...*' (Cf. Exod. 21:22-25) God's law requires a penalty commensurate with the offence: i.e., full equivalence for the offence committed. According to God's Law, anyone found guilty of committing a criminal offence should be punished in a measure proportionate to that offence. However, except where expressly stated to the contrary in God's Word—as in the case of wilful murder or culpable homicide (Gen. 9:5-6)—equivalence (i.e., a *'like for like'* penalty) does not necessarily or invariably mean that the judicial punishment should be identical in every respect to the offence. Rather, equivalence of punishment can be imposed by means of a fully appropriate term of imprisonment, a fine, restriction of liberty, or by some other justifiable method.)

Thus, when the Lord Jesus speaks of being judged as we have judged others, he is referring to the principle of judicial equivalence. Although, of course, the law courts are not involved in this situation, the same principles apply. Those who pass private judgment on their fellow human beings, or criticise them unfairly, can expect others to pass judgment on them and to criticise them—in like measure. Thus, the Lord is warning his disciples against making private judgments, lest their condemnatory spirit should return upon their own heads. However, it is also a reminder to the Lord's disciples that, later—when acting in their capacity as apostles, church leaders and teachers—the Lord Jesus would require his undershepherds to exercise extreme care in ruling and judging God's church in love, mercy, justice, equity and righteousness.

Again, we must bear in mind that we will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ to account for the deeds done in the body. Then, the Lord will judge us for every inconsiderate, idle or careless word spoken while on earth. Thus, the Lord Jesus declares:

Matthew 12:36-37 ESV

(36) "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak,
(37) for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

And the apostle Paul asks:

> Romans 14:10-13 ESV
>
> (10) Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; (11) for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God."
>
> (12) So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. (13) Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

Again, the apostle writes:

> 2 Corinthians 5:10 ESV
>
> (10) For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

In respect of believers, the reference here is to rewards or loss of rewards. The genuine believer cannot forfeit his salvation, for this was bestowed upon him as a free gift of God's sovereign grace quite apart from any works. However, believers will be judged for their deeds or actions on earth subsequent to their conversion, and they will be rewarded accordingly. Those who have proved faithful to the Lord Jesus will receive rewards or blessings commensurate with their service on earth. Those, however, who have not honoured the Lord wholeheartedly or who have marred their testimony by their words or by their manner of life, will forfeit part or all of their rewards. They will be saved eternally—yet, like one escaping through the flames. Nevertheless, they will not experience the same degree of responsibilities, blessings or other benefits as those who have honoured the Lord wholeheartedly while on earth. (Cf. 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 1 Pet. 4:17-18)

This is one of the reasons that the Lord Jesus warns us against judging others unjustly, unfairly or without just cause or reason—for we ourselves will face the judgment of the Lord.

## MATTHEW 7:3-5

The Lord Jesus now begins to expound this teaching further. Thus, he declares:

> Matthew 7:3-5 ESV
>
> (3) "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? (4) Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye?
>
> (5) "You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye." (Cf. Luke 6:41-42)

It is all too easy to see infinitesimally small faults in others but fail to behold the glaring faults in our own lives. Thus, Jesus calls attention to the incongruity of passing judgment on others for the most minor or insignificant of 'offences', while ignoring totally major faults in our own life. However, those who would point out and remove the 'specks' and 'splinters' in another person's life must be able to see clearly what they are about to do: i.e., their own moral conduct must be above reproach, so that they can 'see' spiri-

tually to apply corrective measures *out of love and concern* for the other person. However, if, morally and spiritually, their sight is obscured by the presence of a large log or beam, then they are hardly in a position to correct or advise anyone else—until they have removed the log (the glaring offences) from their own lives. (Cf. 2 Sam. 12:5-7; Luke 18:11)

Thus, the Lord Jesus warns his followers against exhibiting a critical and hypocritical spirit. Many religious people were, and are, guilty of this sin. (Matt. 23:15-28) However, sins of this nature are detestable to God, since God alone is able to see a person's heart and judge him as his thoughts and deeds deserve. (Cf. 1 Sam. 16:7; Heb. 4:12) Those who would honour the Lord must endeavour to seek the welfare of their brothers and sisters in Christ at all times, *and to correct them in love* and with a genuine concern for their spiritual wellbeing. (Gal. 6:1) We ought to confess our faults to one another, and to forgive one another, but we ought never to judge, criticise unjustly or unfairly, or condemn one another. (Jas. 4:11-12; 5:9,16)

## MATTHEW 7:6

The Lord Jesus turns now to sacred matters insofar as these relate to the believer's presence in, and witness to, the world of lost mankind. The treasures of God's kingdom are of inestimable value, and must not be wasted or squandered on those who would despise them. Thus, the Lord Jesus declares:

> Matthew 7:6 ESV
>
> (6) "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you."

To the apostles originally—and ultimately to his entire church—the Lord Jesus has entrusted the duty and responsibility of making known his name to a sinful world by proclaiming to lost mankind the Gospel of eternal salvation. However, the Gospel, and the Word of God more generally, is immeasurably holy. That Word is the Word of the Living, Sovereign, Immutable and Eternal God. To treat God's Word with contempt, or to neglect or reject the Gospel of eternal salvation, is a sin of the utmost magnitude. Such a sin leaves the offender without remedy, and facing only the final and eternal judgment of a holy and righteous God who will by no means clear the guilty. (Exod. 34:6-7; Heb. 10:26-31)

In the Scriptures, 'dogs' is a derogatory term for ungodly Gentiles; and especially those who despise and repudiate the providence of God in nature and the grace of God in salvation. (Cf. Matt. 15:26-28; Php. 3:2; Rev. 22:15)

The Lord Jesus commanded his disciples to preach the Gospel and to take that Gospel to the ends of the earth. (Matt. 28:18-20) For out of every nation on earth, God would gather together a people for himself. These are his elect: those called to belong to him through repentance toward God and faith in his Son, and drawn by the Holy Spirit from every nationality, ethnic group, colour, creed, condition or standing in society. (Matt. 24:30-31) Every one of these individuals who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved—eternally. (Rom. 10:12-13) Although previously many may have been grossly unrighteous and ungodly, the Lord will receive them and they will be cleansed by the atoning blood and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor. 6:9-11)

However, should the Lord's disciples proclaim the Gospel to those who reject and despise that Gospel *consistently and repeatedly* then the Lord's servants must withdraw both themselves and the Word of life

and salvation from that area and from those people. To continue in such a situation would be to '*give dogs what is holy*'. To continue presenting the imperishable Gospel to those who repudiate the message and despise the messenger would be to '*throw [your] pearls before pigs*'. The great danger here, of course, is that these same wicked individuals or groups would set upon the Lord's servants to attack them—as did wicked Israelites to God's faithful messengers, the prophets. (Matt. 10:14-15; 23:37; Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5; 10:10-11)

Thus, the Lord is telling his disciples expressly not to continue proclaiming the Gospel to those who *aggressively and repeatedly* despise the Gospel. This is not to say that no one living among a wicked people or nation can or will experience the salvation of the Lord. In Noah's day, a wicked world perished because it repudiated the message of grace and despised the ark of salvation. Nevertheless, Noah and his family experienced the full salvation of the Lord—and so could anyone else among the depraved multitude that perished, if they had repented, believed the message, and entered with Noah into the ark. But, in their wickedness and unbelief, they held back until it was too late to escape the impending judgment of God. (Gen. 6:5-8; 11-13; 7:21-23)

So it is today with those who repudiate Christ and his Gospel. By despising the way of salvation, nothing remains for them but the final and eternal judgment of God and their place in the eternal torments of hell. Yet, not one person will ever enter hell—even from among the most iniquitous or immoral of people—whom God calls to genuine repentance and true faith in his Son. (Luke 15:1-32; 23:39-43)

## ASK, SEEK AND KNOCK

***Matthew 7:7-11***

### MATTHEW 7:7-8

Now, the Lord Jesus teaches his disciples that they must persevere in prayer, and not give up or grow weary when petitioning their Father in heaven. Thus, the Lord says:

> Matthew 7:7-8 ESV
>
> (7) "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.
> (8) For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened." (Cf. Luke 11:9-10)

Earlier in this discourse, the Lord Jesus had taught his disciples how to pray to their Father in heaven. (Matt. 6:9-15) Now, the Lord expands on this theme by teaching his followers to remain faithful and constant in prayer to their heavenly Father, even when their pleas seemed to go unheard. (Luke 18:1-8) Of course, no prayer or petition made to our Father in heaven ever goes unheard. In the good counsels of his will, and according to his express purposes, God may not always answer his people's prayers immediately. Again, the Lord may not answer our prayers in the manner that we had anticipated. Nevertheless, God does answer prayer—and no child of God will ever be refused an answer from their loving, caring heavenly Father. (Matt. 6:6-8; 1 Pet. 3:12)

Having said this, however, it is necessary to exercise faith, patience and perseverance in regard to prayer. Furthermore, it is essential to accept the providential hand of God in answer to prayer, even if this means a delay in answering prayer, a negative answer to prayer, or an answer different to the one

hoped for and anticipated. When God answers our prayers, he does so in a manner consistent with his holy and righteous character—yet in accordance with his love and mercy—and in a manner consistent with the greatest good of his beloved child or children. (Rom. 8:26-28)

However, in petitioning our Father in heaven, we must ensure that we are petitioning him aright—and from a pure heart. (Ps. 24:3-4) God will not answer our prayers if we are harbouring sin in our hearts, or if we are cherishing a grudge against another person. These matters must be confessed first and resolved. (Mark 11:25) Then, the Lord will answer his people's prayers, in accordance with his will and purposes.

To this end, the LORD declared to Solomon:

> 2 Chronicles 7:13-14 ESV
>
> (13) "When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, (14) if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

With the greatest assurance of being heard and answered, the Lord Jesus teaches his followers to ask… '*Ask, and it will be given to you…*' (Cf. Ps. 145:18-19; John 15:7; 16:23; Php. 4:6; 1 John 3:22; 5:14)

We must not hesitate to ask God to help us or to help others in their time of need. We must ask—*and keep on asking*—knowing that God will hear and answer for he has promised to do so. (Luke 18:1-8)

Likewise, the Lord's people must seek…. '*Seek, and you will find…*' (Cf. Prov. 8:17; Jer. 29:12-13; Matt. 6:33)

Having committed the request or petition to the heavenly Father, it is then necessary to watch for answers to that prayer. Yet, watching need not and should not be passive or inactive. Rather, the Lord teaches his followers to seek—to actively see and to search for signs of God's answers to our prayers. This is not to imply that our actions in themselves are God's answers. It is to imply merely that we must be actively watchful for God's answers to our prayers, as he may answer us directly—or indirectly through his acts of providence.

The Lord then adds, '*Knock, and it will be opened to you…*'

Once again, we see that prayer is not necessarily passive or inactive. It requires action or activity on our part, in addition to the bare petitions or requests to our heavenly Father. This is the manner in which God normally answers the prayers of his people: i.e., by means of providential acts or occurrences, rather than by miraculous acts or occurrences. The latter are not excluded, but they are not the usual means that God uses to answer his people's prayers. Where prayer can be answered indirectly (i.e., providentially), the Lord will often use those means to apply his answers.

Thus, we are to 'knock'—meaning, we are to knock, and keep on knocking. Having presented our prayers and petitions to God, we are to do everything within our power or ability to seek God's answers through everyday means or circumstances. We are to knock at any doors (avenues of opportunity) that we believe might lead to an answer from the Lord; and we are to keep on knocking on other 'doors' if one or more doors are closed against us.

Thus, then, we see that God answers his children's prayers through changing circumstances or events in their lives. This, however, is not according to chance or fate, but according to the express providence of God who guides and alters all things in accordance with his divine will and counsels. Thus, circumstances and events are under God's control, and can turn out to be an answer to his people's heartfelt prayer.

Hence the reason the Lord declares unequivocally,

> *"For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened." (v8)*

Of course, there are certain types of prayer that cannot be answered indirectly or through circumstances or events alone. Such may be prayers for those who are seriously ill and perhaps beyond further medical help. Here, an answer to prayer might require God's direct intervention. This kind of answer and intervention is usually termed 'miraculous'; and we have many examples of miraculous answers to prayer in the Bible.

However, what is miraculous to us is not so to God. It is simply a direct exercise of his omnipotence; in this case, on behalf of one who is suffering. Such exercises of God's power are not unusual in the universe; as the very universe itself is sustained by God's omnipotence (not by natural laws alone). Thus, if God deems to demonstrate something of his almighty and sovereign power in order to answer specific prayers of his people, then he will do so—*if it accords with his sovereign will and purpose for those concerned, for their ultimate good, and, above all, for his own sovereign praise and glory*.

## MATTHEW 7:9-11

Matthew 7:9-11 ESV

(9) "Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? (10) Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?

(11) "If you then, who are 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!" (Cf. Luke 11:11-13)

In using this analogy, the Lord Jesus is emphasising the reality and power of prayer, and the certainty of prayer being heard and answered practically.

If a son or daughter asks his or her parents to provide them with basic and necessary food, then it would be incongruous for the parents either to turn a deaf ear or to refuse their child's plea. Likewise, it would be absurd and bizarre for any parent to offer inedible materials (like stone) in place of food, or potentially poisonous food (represented by a serpent) instead of wholesome and nourishing fish. Parents have a responsibility before God to feed and clothe their growing children. They know, before their children ask, what material things are necessary for their health and welfare. And, insofar as they are able, they will provide all that is necessary for the good of their children.

Since no responsible and caring parent would offer to their children anything that failed to meet their necessary needs to nourish and sustain them, then it is certain that God our heavenly Father will not treat his children any differently. Indeed, as the Lord Jesus points out, if we who are evil know how to give good and wholesome gifts to our children, how much more will our Father in heaven, who is infinitely holy, righteous, just and good? (Ps. 84:11; Jas. 1:17)

Yet, as the Lord Jesus makes plain, God gives all that is necessary for our health and well-being—when we ask him. Even although he knows our every need in advance, we are still required to ask our Father in heaven to provide our daily bread, or whatever may be necessary to meet our needs. We can be assured absolutely that God will never offer a stone for bread or a serpent for fish. He will meet our needs in the best way possible—sometimes far above our imaginings—and always in accordance with his own sovereign will and pleasure. (Eph. 3:20-21)

## THE ROYAL LAW

### MATTHEW 7:12

Matthew 7:12 ESV

(12) "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." (Luke 6:31)

Very frequently, this verse has been misunderstood, misquoted and misapplied. All too often, we hear this verse being used as a so-called 'golden rule', which supposedly is applicable to all mankind; and, if practiced, would result in much more peace and tranquillity among people and nations. However, we must remember that, in this discourse, the Lord Jesus is not addressing fallen mankind generally (although, undoubtedly, many sinners would have been present among the multitude). Rather, he is speaking expressly to, and teaching, his own followers—those for whose sins he would shed his blood and lay down his life at Calvary. They alone had experienced the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit and therefore they alone would be able to apply and live by this teaching. Fallen and sinful mankind, however, cannot put this teaching into practise in the manner intended by the Lord Jesus. This is because—without the presence and influence of the Holy Spirit—it is not within a person's power or ability to experience and apply the spiritual qualities of this teaching. (Rom. 8:6-8; cf. Eph. 2:1-3))

Addressing, then, his followers, the Lord commands, *'So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them....*' (Cf. Isa. 1:17; Matt. 22:35-40; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8)

This is the 'Royal Law' or the 'Law of the Kingdom': That is, it is a rule laid down for those who acknowledge Christ as their personal Saviour, Master, Lord and King, and who are the citizens of the kingdom of heaven or of God. It is intended for, and applies to, no other category or class of people.

Here, the Lord Jesus is making it perfectly plain to those who belong to him that they must treat other people in precisely the same manner as they themselves would wish to be treated; i.e., they must respond to others and to their needs from a loving, caring and compassionate heart. This indeed seems a very rigorous law (or principle), and this is why it requires the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to apply it as God intended. The Holy Spirit indwelling and sanctifying the believer creates within him new desires or aspirations, together with the desire or aspiration to honour and please his Lord and Master at all times and in all possible ways. Thus, knowing that the Lord expects his children to treat other people as they themselves would want to be treated, they seek the Lord's help in putting this principle into practice. However, those who succeed most in applying this principle are those who are walking closest to the Lord and who exhibit a loving, kind, humble and contrite spirit in their lives. (Mic. 6:8) These are they whom the Lord delights to honour, for these are they who are endeavouring with all their heart to honour him by their lives, speech and actions.

## THE NARROW GATE

### MATTHEW 7:13-14

Many within the vast crowd listening to the Lord Jesus at this time could not be counted among his true followers. These were outside his kingdom, and still in their sins. However, among those people were a number, known only to God, whom God would yet call to belong to him. Therefore, in order to make known to them the only way of salvation, and to make clear to his disciples what this way entailed, the Lord Jesus proclaims to the crowd:

> Matthew 7:13-14 ESV
>
> (13) "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. (14) For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." (Cf. Luke 13:24; John 10:7,9)

Then, as now, people had different ideas about how to enter God's kingdom or about how to worship him and be accepted by him. For the vast majority of the Lord's hearers, their belief was in their Jewish faith and in the system of Judaism. They professed belief in God, as revealed in the Scriptures (i.e., the Old Testament). They worshipped God according to the teaching laid down in these Scriptures, and observed the necessary rites, ceremonies and sacrifices required by the Old Testament Law. Even now, those who were listening to the Lord's teaching were present in the area because they were on their way from many outlying districts and countries to one of the major Jewish feasts in Jerusalem.

Thus, to those Jews, and to any non-Jews (Gentiles) who might have been present among this teeming throng, the Lord declares, *'Enter by the narrow gate....'* (v.13a)

The Lord, of course, is speaking of a spiritual 'gate', 'door', or way of access into the presence of God. The gate or way of access to God was narrow: i.e., it was restricted exclusively to one single and unique entry point. Access to God's presence could be achieved by no other way or means under heaven except by his appointed Way; and that Way was through his Son. (Acts 4:12) Thus, in John's Gospel, the Lord Jesus declares unequivocally, '*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*' (John 14:6)

This is what the Lord Jesus meant by 'the narrow gate'. He alone was (and is) the only way of access to the Father. No one can ever approach God in or by any other way, or by any other Person than the Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Tim. 2:5) Thus, to enter by the narrow gate means to enter into the Father's presence through his Son.

This means, of course, that the Father in heaven does not promise to hear or answer the prayers of anyone who calls upon him, unless he calls upon God in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who may never have heard of Christ will yet be led to acknowledge him, if they seek the Lord with all their heart. For God will reveal his Son to them so that they may call upon the Father's name through the Son, and thereby enter by the narrow gate into the presence of God. (Deut. 4:29; Isa. 55:6-7)

In verse 14, the Lord Jesus says,

> (14) "For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."

We have seen already what the Lord Jesus meant by the 'narrow gate'. Now, he adds that '*the way is hard that leads to life….'*

This can be understood in two ways:

1) Concerning unbelievers: *'The way is hard that leads to life' because:*

a) For the vast majority of fallen and sinful mankind, it is not the kind of way that they would have chosen; or it is not the way in which they have been brought up, or which their religion has taught them to believe.

b) It is contrary to human reasoning and inexplicable to the fallen, sinful mind; and therefore—to their spiritually-dead mind—it must be rejected.

c) It sets forth one particular way of salvation, through Christ alone; thereby excluding totally, and rendering invalid and unacceptable to God, all other religious faiths or modes of worship. Therefore, argue its opponents, it cannot be accepted.

d) It promises salvation by grace through faith—without taking into account good works, meritorious actions, acts of charity or any other commendable or praiseworthy human effort. Therefore, it is argued, it must be false.

For the above and other reasons, we can see why the Lord Jesus added the words, '*…and those who find it are few.'* Only those called by the grace of God to exercise faith in Christ are able and willing to enter by the 'narrow gate'. The vast majority of mankind cannot, and would not be willing to, pass through that gate. (1 Cor. 1:18-19; 2:14; 3:19)

However, as we have said, the above verse can be understood in a second way.

2) Concerning believers: *'The way is hard that leads to life'*, because:

Although entry by the narrow gate is 'easy' for those whom God calls to believe on Christ, yet walking on the road to life can be fraught with many trials and difficulties.

a) Those who belong to Christ are called not only to believe on him but also to suffer for his sake. (Php. 1:28-30; 1 Pet. 2:21)

b) Suffering may involve difficulties in life, perplexities, physical or mental abuse, afflictions, torture or even death itself. (Mark 13:9; 2 Cor. 11:23-33)

c) Those who would follow the way of righteousness may be despised and rejected by ungodly men and women. (Matt. 10:21-24; John 15:18-23)

d) Those who determine to follow Christ with all their heart and soul may find themselves forsaken by their family and friends. (Matt. 10:21; Mark 13:12-13; Luke 12:51-53; 21:16-17)

These are just a few examples that fulfil the expression, *'…the way is hard that leads to life'*. For those who are called to believe on Christ, it is not hard to enter and experience life abundant and eternal. However, before a person experiences the fullness of joy and blessing in the presence of God, he must first

walk the Christian pathway—the way of suffering, sorrow, pain and grief. It is this way that is 'hard' at times. Nevertheless, it is the only way to life and glory. (1 Pet. 1:1-9; 4:12-19)

The Lord had said,

> (13) "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many."

Those who are not willing to enter eternal life by the narrow gate (i.e., to come to God only through repentance and faith in his Son) must, of necessity, enter the path to eternal death by the wide gate. There are no alternatives. Either a person finds life eternal and forgiveness of sin through Christ, or he remains outside of Christ's kingdom, still in his sins, and bound for a lost eternity. (John 3:16-18, 36)

This wide gate is so called because the greater part of fallen and sinful mankind enters by that gate and is on the road or pathway to final judgment and destruction. (Luke 13:23-28; 2 Thess. 1:5-10)

This applies to all those who will not enter by the narrow gate. It applies to all those who will not accept that Christ alone is the way to God the Father. It applies to all those who hold steadfastly to some other faith or belief and will not submit to Christ as the only Saviour of men and the only Mediator between God and man. (1 Tim. 2:5-6)

Again, it applies to all those who—while denying the existence of any gods—yet cling tenaciously to their futile and foolish idols of atheism, agnosticism or any other philosophy that denies the existence, power and glory of the true and living God and Jesus Christ his Son. (Ps. 14:1-3; Luke 12:20; Rom. 1:21) All alike have entered by the wide gate, and are walking on the road to death and destruction. All alike face the dreadful prospect of final judgment at the hands of Almighty God and a place in hell throughout the ages of eternity. (Matt. 13:40-42; Rev. 21:8)

Even so, it is not impossible for individuals who have started on the road to destruction to realise their folly, to turn back from this evil way and to seek God's mercy. All whom God calls from the road to destruction and whom he brings to repentance and faith in his Son, have—by God's grace and mercy—forsaken the way that leads to death to enter by the narrow gate on the way that leads to life. Prior to his remarkable conversion to Christ on the road to Damascus, Saul of Tarsus (the apostle Paul) had been on the road to destruction and eternal hell. (Acts 9:1-22)

Thus, it is essential that those who would find life, forgiveness of sins, and acceptance by God the Father, do so by entering through the narrow gate: i.e., through repenting and believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. The remainder of fallen and sinful mankind is bound for a lost eternity, where God will deal with them as their sins of wilful unbelief and rebellion deserve. (Mark 16:16; Heb. 2:3; 12:25; 1 John 5:10)

## FALSE PROPHETS

***Matthew 7:15-23***

### MATTHEW 7:15

The Lord Jesus has just made it abundantly clear that there is only one way to God the Father: i.e., through his Son. God will not hear or accept anyone who attempts to approach his most holy presence by any other person or means. Thus, in the Lord's teaching, we see that no other religion or faith is accept-

able in the sight of God except that which he has established and revealed to us through his Son, and in the Bible. The Gospel alone presents to fallen mankind the way of forgiveness, salvation and eternal life; and this way is in Christ alone, to the total exclusion of all others.

Having clarified this point, the Lord Jesus speaks of those who would teach the way of God. This would include prophets, preachers, pastors or anyone else who professed to make known the ways and will of God for men and women. In course of time, the Lord would call, set apart, and commission to his service individuals from among his church. These appointed servants of the Lord were to preach the Gospel and to teach God's Word faithfully and consistently to the people. Thereby, God would bless his people, bring others to a saving knowledge of his Son, and build up his church in their most holy faith.

However, not every prophet, preacher or pastor, etc. would be a genuine servant of God. Impostors would arise within the church, or would infiltrate the true people of God from outside. (2 Pet. 2:1-2). It is to these impostors that the Lord Jesus now turns his hearer's attention when he declares:

> Matthew 7:15 ESV
>
> (15) "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."

In succeeding ages, many false teachers would arise within the church. However, these false teachers would not immediately appear to be so, as they would do everything in their power to conceal their true identity and character from God's people. By devious and subtle methods, they would deceive the church into believing that they were genuine servants of God. Thus, the Lord Jesus describes these evil impostors as 'ravenous wolves in sheep's clothing'. Unlike the innocent and harmless sheep, these individuals are like wolves—ravenous or rapacious wolves—intent only in dividing the flock of God and tearing it apart. (Acts 20:29-30; cf. Ezek. 13:1-10)

This is exactly what these evil individuals would attempt to do within the church of God. Their aim would be to teach false doctrine, or to contaminate the truth with a tissue of lies, misconceptions and misrepresentations. However, they would do this subtly or insidiously, so that it would not appear harmful to those who digested or assimilated their false or distorted teaching. Gradually, they would deceive people in regard to the true teaching of God's Word. They would lead them astray and away from these unchanging truths, and bring them into the pathways of error and heresy. Ultimately, they would cause many to stumble and to fall. These evil individuals would succeed in leading many away from the paths of righteousness into unrighteousness. The only exception would be the elect of God. Although possibly, some of God's elect might be deceived temporarily, in due course they would realise their error and return to the way of truth and righteousness. (Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22; see also John 10:1-15)

Thus, the Lord Jesus warns his followers that such false and evil teachers would arise; acting like avaricious wolves waiting to beguile and destroy those who were seeking the truth. (Matt. 24:11-12; cf. Jer. 23:16) However, if and when they were discovered, such false teachers were to be expelled from among God's people. These were not the servants of Christ. Even although—to all outward appearances—these impostors seemed like angels of light (i.e., as pure and faultless as holy angels), they were in fact the servants of darkness, ministers of Satan, and destined to the same hell as the devil and his fallen angels. (Matt. 25:41; 2 Cor. 11:13-15)

But how were such impostors to be recognised? The Lord answers this at length in the verses that follow.

## MATTHEW 7:16-17

Matthew 7:16-17 ESV

(16) "You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? (17) So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit."

Teachers of God's Word are known by the type and quality of the fruit they bear. No genuine teacher can prove false to the truth of God's Word, or expound it in such as way as denies or questions any doctrinal truth or principle or any revealed fact contained within the pages of God's Word.

One kind of plant cannot produce fruit that belongs to a different kind. This would be contrary to nature. Thus, no true teacher of God's Word can impart any teaching that is contrary to the teaching of God's Word. (Luke 6:43-45)

If, however, any person teaches anything contrary to God's Word or who distorts, misapplies or denies wilfully and consistently any of the truths of God's Word, then that person is no servant of Christ. The fruit that he is producing—in the form of false teaching—demonstrates that he is not part of the True Vine (Christ). (John 15:1-2,6) In fact, it shows that he has originated from another plant or source altogether: viz., from the seed of Satan's sowing. (cf. Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43)

Thus, by their fruit, such false teachers prove that they do not belong to Christ, that they have no genuine concern for Christ, for his kingdom, or for his church, and that their true intention is to poison the hearts and minds of those seeking to learn the truth by feeding them on false doctrine and by denying the essential truths of God's holy and unchangeable Word. These 'wolves' among the flock are determined only to rend apart and to destroy the spiritual lives of God's people—if that were possible. (Cf. Jer. 14:14; Luke 6:26; 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 John 4:1)

Frequently, such impostors or 'wolves' may be found occupying some of the highest positions or offices within the visible church. Yet, they are easily recognisable by the quality of their lives and speech, and by the unbiblical nature of their teaching. Thus, we can see that those who live ungodly, immoral or perverted lives or who approve of, or condone, such behaviour in others—while at the same time professing to be true servants of God—deny by their evil conduct the very God whom they profess to serve. (Rom. 1:18-19,32)

These are just some of the 'wolves' that infiltrate the church in order to waste and destroy the spiritual lives of those seeking to know the truth.

## MATTHEW 7:18-20

Matthew 7:18-20 ESV

(18) "A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. (19) Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

(20) "Thus you will recognize them by their fruits."

In the normal course of events, it is utterly impossible for a healthy tree to bear bad or corrupt fruit. In like manner, it is just as impossible for a diseased or corrupt tree to produce good, healthy or beneficial—i.e., profitable and nourishing—fruit. If a tree is discovered to be riddled with disease, and yet is allowed

to remain, that tree would soon contaminate all surrounding trees with its deadly disease and decimate them. Therefore, to arrest the spread of untreatably diseased trees, they are cut down and the trunk and branches are consumed in the fire. (Matt. 3:10)

So it is with false teachers and impostors within the church of God. These are like 'untreatably diseased trees', or wolves who are incapable of acting contrary to their nature; and, as predators, their nature is to hunt, kill and destroy (morally and spiritually). Therefore, at God's appointed time, these false teachers will be struck down from their present position and destroyed—by God.

As we see from the Lord's teaching elsewhere, to be 'cut down and thrown into the fire' is analogous to being separated from the loving presence, power and glory of God; to be condemned by him, and to be sentenced to eternal separation from him in the everlasting torments of hell or the 'lake of fire'. (Cf. Matt. 25:32-46; Rev. 19:20; 21:8)

Irrespective of their rank, office or status within the visible church, God will judge such evil individuals most severely on the Last Day. The Lord will hold them to account for their ungodly and hypocritical life-styles and fallacious teaching, for bringing the Gospel into disrepute by their evil example and deeds, and for the harm they have caused to so many people by condoning their sins and approving of their vile and unrighteous behaviour.

Therefore, the Lord Jesus makes it clear to his disciples that false teachers would arise and would profess to be his followers. However, they would be wolves in sheep's clothing that would endeavour to seek, kill and destroy, and they would be recognised as such by the nature of their fruit. Such fruit might be determined by:

1. *The ungodliness of their lifestyle*: e.g., by their practise of, or involvement with, anything that God's Word condemns, such as a sexually immoral, unnatural or perverse lifestyle, or any form of speech or behaviour that involves deceit, dishonesty, or a denial of God's Word or of the Lord's teaching, or that participates in any acts or deeds that are inconsistent with true godliness and holiness of life. (Titus 1:15-16; 3:9-11; 2 Pet. 2:1-9; Jude 1:4-19)

2. *The unbiblical nature of their teaching*; teaching that denies God's Word, or that denies the truth of essential doctrines: e.g., the Divine inspiration and infallibility of God's Word in its entirety; the full and true humanity of the Lord Jesus; the full and true deity of Christ and his co-equality and co-eternity with the Father and the Holy Spirit; the miraculous virginal conception of the Lord Jesus Christ, the physical and bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus, or the physical and bodily return of the Lord Jesus in power and glory. (Matt. 10:33; 2 Pet. 2:1)

Anyone who denies such essential truths by their lives or by their words is denying the truth of God's infallible and unchanging Word, the Bible. And anyone in a leadership position who knowingly teaches error, heresy or any other form of false doctrine is not a true servant of God. Rather that person is an unfaithful and unworthy servant, or an impostor or false teacher. Imposters or false teachers, however, must be recognised as such and cut off or expelled from among the people of God. Failure on the part of a church leadership to expel such evil individuals will result in others becoming contaminated by their corrupt or misleading teaching and led into doubt, unbelief, error and sin—sometimes, grievous sin.

But what will be the Lord's response to such individuals at the Last Day? This is answered for us in the verses that follow.

Thus, in verse 21, the Lord Jesus solemnly asserts:

## MATTHEW 7:21

Matthew 7:21

(21) "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

Many people who profess faith in Christ fail ultimately to follow Christ. (Matt. 10:22; 24:8-13) This is because their profession was spurious and not the result of the Holy Spirit's work in effectual calling and regeneration. (cf. 1 Cor. 1:8; Heb. 3:6) A number of these people turn away from the faith and return to the sinful world to which they belong. These people have no inheritance in the kingdom of God or of his Son. (Heb. 6:6-9; 10:39)

However, not all of these false professors turn away from the faith immediately. Indeed, a large number continue to make an outward profession of faith (although they have never been regenerated, justified or sanctified). Some of these unregenerate individuals ultimately assume church office as leaders, bishops, pastors, deacons, etc. Yet, none of these individuals have been called or appointed to these offices by God, but often by spiritually immature men or by 'religious' men completely devoid of the Spirit of God. Thus, these are not genuine servants or ministers of God, but rather another class of impostors—another pack of ravenous 'wolves' among the flock of God.

From this we see that false teachers can infiltrate the church from outside, or they can arise from within the church itself: i.e., from among those professing faith in Christ. These men and women profess Christ as 'Lord'—although, of course, not from their heart and soul, because they are unregenerate and still in their sins. Nevertheless, these same 'church leaders' expect the Lord Jesus to own them and to honour them. Yet, what does the Lord Jesus say? *"'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven…."*

Professing Christ as 'Lord' does not prove that a person belongs to Christ. Indeed, those who say that they acknowledge Christ as their 'Lord' while living an ungodly and sinful lifestyle contradict their profession by their actions. Similarly, many so-called leaders or teachers within the church profess Christ as their 'Lord'. Nevertheless, by living a consistently ungodly lifestyle and by denying the truths that God requires his servants to proclaim or expound, they are denying any knowledge of Christ. Therefore, their profession is tantamount to a false profession. Their position, rank or status in the church has never been given to them by God. Therefore, when they expect the Lord Jesus Christ to welcome them into his eternal kingdom, they will find themselves rejected and disowned—for they have denied his name by their actions and they have failed consistently to do the will of the Father in heaven.

Yet, in their pride, arrogance and utter disbelief, these same individuals will presume to challenge the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the Lord declares:

## MATTHEW 7:22

Matthew 7:22 ESV

(22) "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'"

Not only did these so-called servants of Christ claim to acknowledge him as 'Lord', they also were able to perform miraculous signs. According to them, they had prophesied in the name of the Lord Jesus. They had cast out demons in his name. They had performed many other outstanding and miraculous signs in the name of the Lord Jesus. Surely, only a genuine servant of God could perform such supernatural works!

Those, however, who believe that the ability to perform miracles is a mark of God's approval and favour and proof that the person performing them is a servant and child of God, may be greatly mistaken. In and of itself, the ability to perform miracles is no evidence that a person is acting in the name of Christ or that he belongs to Christ. All miracles are *supernatural* acts, but not all miracles are *Divine* acts: i.e., not all miracles derive from God or from his Son. Although much more limited in power or extent, a person can perform supernatural signs or 'miracles' that have no connection with God or with goodness. Such were the magicians of the Pharaoh's court, and such too were those who cast out demons in Jesus' time, although not by his power or authority. In these cases, the supernatural power or authority to perform such counterfeit miracles derived from the evil one, not from God. (Exod. 7:9-12; 19-22; Deut. 13:1-5; Matt. 24:24; 2 Thess. 2:9-11; Rev. 19:20)

Another example is that of Judas Iscariot. Judas professed to be a believer in Christ. He professed Christ as 'Lord'. He even performed miracles, in common with the other disciples. However, Judas was no child of God. Rather, the Lord Jesus termed this evil man, '*the son* (or child) *of perdition*'. (John 17:12; cf. 2 Thess. 2:3) Notwithstanding his profession of faith, and irrespective of all the miracles that he performed, supposedly in the name of Christ, Judas Iscariot did not belong to Christ. Rather, he belonged to Satan, and he was attempting to deceive others while carrying out the evil one's purposes—albeit, unsuccess-fully.

Thus, many false professors will stand before Christ at the Last Day only to find themselves—and their works—rejected. None of the good that they imagined they had accomplished will avail them in the least on the Day of Judgment: For they had made their profession insincerely, from an unregenerate heart. Furthermore, they had performed their works from an unsanctified life—a life that was still at enmity with God by 'wicked works' or deeds or unrighteousness. For all their protestations to the contrary, these men and women were still in their sins. (Luke 13:24-28)

What, then, will be the outcome for these impostors who masqueraded as church leaders and teachers?

## MATTHEW 7:23

Matthew 7:23 ESV

(23) “And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'”

There will be only one dreadful outcome: Christ will pronounce the terrible sentence of judgment and condemnation upon each of these false ministers of the Gospel, and ministers of a false gospel:

*“...'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'”*

How dreadful it is to fall into the hands of the living God; for our God is a consuming fire: i.e., he searches the heart and mind to the uttermost hidden recesses and he judges each one according to the true state of his heart. Everything that is unworthy of his name is ‘burned up’ or consumed by his righteous and holy justice against sin and upon the impenitent sinner. (Heb. 10:29-31; 12:29)

*“...’I never knew you...’”*

The Lord Jesus is not saying that he was unaware of these individuals or their works. On the contrary, the Lord was fully aware of these false preachers and of all their evil deeds. Rather, the Judge is declaring to these impostors that, finally, their lives and deeds have been exposed as a sham. They have been weighed in the balance, and they have been found wanting. (Dan 5:27) Thus, the Lord will declare most solemnly, *“...’I never knew you...’”* That is, ‘I never knew you as mine’; ‘I never acknowledged you as belonging to me—for you do not belong to me’. ‘You are not, and never have been, mine.’ (Luke 13:25-27; contrast John 10:14,27; 2 Tim. 2:19)

How dreadful is that pronouncement. Yet, it is only the ungodly who will hear such terrible words from the lips of the Lord Jesus. But the Lord has not finished. He has exposed the lives and deeds of these hypocrites and impostors, but he has yet to pass sentence on them. But it is the sentence of eternal condemnation:

*“...’depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'”*

Those who must depart from Christ on the Day of Judgment must of necessity depart to that hell which God has prepared for the devil and his angels. And to this place these false teachers belong, because they were working as Satan’s emissaries and servants—not as the servants of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. (Matt. 25:41; 2 Cor. 11:13-15)

The Lord Jesus calls them, *‘workers of lawlessness.*’ However, the Lord is not referring merely to lawlessness in general, but to a specific type or category of lawlessness: viz., that extreme form of lawlessness or iniquity that is associated with rank ungodliness and wickedness and which is fulfilled to its utmost level of iniquity in the man of lawlessness or the man of sin. (2 Thess. 2:3-12) Thus, the Lord Jesus considers these so-called church leaders and teachers to be guilty of practising the most extreme form of lawlessness. In part, this is because they professed to be servants of Christ, deceiving others in the process, when in fact they were not Christ’s servants. It is also because they turned the truth of God into a lie (Rom. 1:25). They proclaimed evil as good, and good as evil. Furthermore, it is because they promoted the practice of the vilest sins and iniquities, while indulging in such wicked and pernicious practises themselves. And they did this while acting in the capacity of church leaders or teachers. (Rom. 1:32 – 2:11)

Thus, we see how dreadful it will be for those who assume a position of leadership within God's church, but whom God has not called and appointed to that position, and who attempt to teach or preach the Word of God from an unregenerate heart and therefore while still in an unjustified and unsanctified state before God. By the grace and mercy of God, some may be brought to repentance and faith before it is too late—and undoubtedly this has happened in the past with some who subsequently became true and faithful preachers of God's Word.

However, for those false leaders and teachers who never experience regeneration, repentance and true faith in Christ, then the Lord will certainly say to them:

*"…'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"*

## THE TWO FOUNDATIONS

***Matthew 7:24-27***

Now, the Lord Jesus draws his teaching to a close. Before concluding, however, he emphasises the importance of not only hearing his teaching but of putting that teaching into practice. Similarly, the Lord speaks of the foolishness of hearing the truth of God's Word, but ignoring its teaching and application, rejecting it, or by otherwise repudiating the words of the Lord Jesus.

Thus, in verses 24-25, the Lord says:

### MATTHEW 7:24-25

Matthew 7:24-25 ESV

(24) "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. (25) And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock."

The Lord Jesus knew the hearts and minds of all those who were listening to his words that day—and of all those who would hear or read these words in future generations. The Lord was fully aware of the true state and condition of a person's heart or inward life. He knew that the natural (unregenerate) man would not welcome these words. (1 Cor. 2:14) He knew also, however, that even some of his own followers would find it difficult to accept and apply all of these teachings from the Sermon on the Mount.

Yet, it was not the Lord's intention that his own people should pick and choose which parts of his teaching they would accept and which they would reject. All alike was the teaching of God the Son. All alike was worthy of full acceptance, and all alike was applicable to the heart and lives of God's redeemed and holy people. (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

Thus, the Lord Jesus begins by demonstrating the wisdom of building one's life on a sure and unassailable foundation. The foundation stone or Rock, of course, is the Lord Jesus Christ himself. (1 Cor. 3:11; 10:4; Eph. 2:20) When a person believes on Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour, that person must accept and apply to his life all of the Lord's teachings; for they are the teachings of God the Son.

To this end, the Lord declares that the person who hears his words (i.e., his teaching or doctrine), and does them (i.e., who puts that teaching into practice), is like a wise man who lays the foundation of his house on solid rock. (Jas. 1:22-25)

Those who hear *and apply* the teaching of the Lord Jesus to their hearts and lives are building their lives on a rock-solid foundation. Thus, in the day of adversity, trial, tribulation, sorrow, pain, grief or any other adverse circumstance of life (represented by the torrential rain, overwhelming floods and raging wind), their faith will stand. However, it will stand because Christ is the Rock upon which it is founded, and the Lord's teaching is the structure upon which the believer's faith has been built. Therefore, although severely buffeted by the trials of life, those who abide in the Lord Jesus and who love his word will surely stand in the day of adversity—for they have built their lives upon the solid Rock. (1 Pet. 1:6-7)

What, however, happens to those who hear or read this teaching of the Lord Jesus, but who fail to apply it or who reject it completely? The Lord answers this in the next few verses.

## MATTHEW 7:26-27

Matthew 7:26-27 ESV

(26) "And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. (27) And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it." (Cf. Luke 6:49)

The majority of those who heard the Lord's teaching on the Mount were not his followers. Therefore, since they had not experienced the power of new life in Christ through regeneration, repentance and faith, they were still in their fallen sinful condition. As such, they could not appreciate or respond to teaching of a spiritual nature. It was incomprehensible or seemingly impracticable to their unspiritual minds. However, this was no fault of the teaching itself, but rather of their own sinful nature which rebelled against the truths of God's Word and which refused wilfully to seek the Lord or to repent of their evil deeds. (John 3:19; 5:40; 12:37-41)

Granted, they had come to listen to the Lord Jesus. Many indeed may have been genuine seekers after the truth of God—and God would reveal his truth to such people. However, many others were not seeking God's truth. Rather, they were curiosity seekers. They had come to listen to the Lord because they thought that he was a great or remarkable person. They did not necessarily believe that he had come from God. Even some of those people who did believe that God had sent the Lord Jesus, thought that he had been sent as a deliverer from Roman occupation. These people believed (mistakenly) that the promised Messiah would come to deliver them from foreign rule and political oppression and that he would set up his Messianic kingdom on earth. Therefore, these individuals followed him and listened to him, hoping to hear something that would meet their material or political aspirations. With their unregenerate hearts and minds, they could not grasp the fact that the kingdom of God was a spiritual kingdom.

For these and many other reasons, a sizeable proportion of the crowd listening to the Lord Jesus would never accept his teaching or apply it to their lives. Thus, the Lord makes it abundantly plain how foolish is the neglect of these people. They had heard the truth, yet they had no intention of believing or applying the truth. They could not do so because their fallen nature and sinful minds disinclined them to spiritual verities. Thus, because of their spiritual blindness and rejection of God's Word, they have no sure founda-

tion on which to build their lives. They would be left floundering in a world without God and without hope.

Yet, in his unimaginable folly, what does such a person do to establish his place in life? Why, he builds his life on his work, his career, his profession, his pursuits, his interests, or even his family—but all to the exclusion of God in his life. This is folly of the utmost magnitude. To build our lives on anyone or anything other than the Lord Jesus Christ is tantamount to idolatry—but idols cannot save, nor can they ever provide a secure foundation for a person's life. They are fantasies flitting about with every wind of change, and ultimately disappearing into oblivion leaving their adherents without a leg to stand on.

So it is with those who refuse the teachings of the Lord Jesus, or of God's Word, as revealed in the Bible. Whether they build their lives on their family, career, profession or anything else, they are building their lives on sand—shifting sand, or quicksand. As soon as real difficulties arise, or real adversities arise, these people find themselves without any hope of support or deliverance. Their lives and careers may be shaken by events and circumstances (represented by the elements); their hopes may be overturned or dashed to pieces; they may need to forego their cherished ambitions.

Others, however, may succeed very well in this world. Many may appear to be prospering even although they take no thought for God or for spiritual matters. Yet, what will they do in the end thereof? They have rejected the Lord and his teachings only to build their lives on sinking sand. Ultimately, that sand—that precarious foundation—will slip, slide and subside; and then the entire structure of their lives will collapse.

All they have achieved in this life will be of no avail to them on the Day of Judgment. Rather, they will stand before God spiritually naked—not having Christ's righteousness to cover their sin. As such, the Lord will condemn them to spend a lost eternity in hell. Even while they lived, they had been living under the wrath and condemnation of God, since they refused the salvation that God had offered in his Son. Now, on the Judgment Day, they must answer for their refusal to respond to the Gospel and they must pay the due penalty of rejecting Christ and his words.

Such will be the outcome of all those who build their house (i.e., their lives) on sand; i.e., on anything other than the teaching of the Lord Jesus and the Word of God.

## ASTONISHED BY THE LORD'S AUTHORITY

***Matthew 7:28-29***

### MATTHEW 7:28-29

Matthew 7:28-29 ESV

(28) And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, (29) for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

The One who was the Eternal Word (Gk., logoj, *Logos*) of God incarnate had now concluded these words or 'sayings' (Gk., logouj, *logous*) of light and life imparted to the crowd in his Sermon on the Mount. (John 1:1,4; 1 John 1:1; 5:7; Rev. 19:13)

Yet, the effect that the Lord Jesus' teaching produced on this vast assembly of people was electrified amazement or utter astonishment. Never had they heard such powerful, convincing or challenging teaching. (Matt. 13:54; Mark 1:22; 6:2; Luke 4:32; John 7:15,46) The Lord's teaching was completely unlike that of the religious leaders and teachers of the day—the scribes. The scribes taught what had been taught to them in the theological or rabbinical schools, or they taught the Scriptures as they had been interpreted over many generations by the Jewish commentators or rabbis. Therefore, their teaching lacked power, authority and spiritual vitality: for, although they were expounding the (Old Testament) Scriptures, they were doing so in a lifeless manner and in accordance with the traditions of men, with the opinions of the ancients, or with the philosophies common to their age and generation.

However, when the Lord Jesus taught, he did not rely on any human method. Rather, he taught the very Word of God as it had originated from the Father himself. He taught that Word with full power and authority, because he—the Eternal Son of God—was the Eternal Living Word (Logos). This Word was God's final expression to mankind, spoken by his Son. (Heb. 1:1-2) Furthermore, the Lord Jesus taught with full power and authority because every word that he spoke was the word of the Father being applied by the power and person of the Holy Spirit. (cf. Matt. 28:18)

Thus, when the people heard the expressions and teaching of the Lord Jesus, they were hearing the expressions and teaching of God the Father. These were the very words of God delivered in the power of the Holy Spirit through his Son. (John 7:16; 8:28,38; 12:49; 14:10; 17:8) Therefore, there could be no meaningful comparison between the teaching of the religious leaders (scribes or Pharisees) and the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus imparted the very Word of God directly to the people because he was God—God the Son—and because he was the Word, or direct and final expression of God to mankind.

For these reasons, the people responded in absolute amazement to the Lord's teaching. They had just heard the voice of God speaking to them through his Son. How dreadful then was it to reject that voice or that teaching! (Heb. 2:1-4; 10:28-31) On the contrary, how blessed would be those who heard the voice of the Father speaking to them through his only Son, and who responded to that voice by applying the Lord's teaching to their lives! (Luke 11:27-28; Rev. 22:14)

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 8

## JESUS' POWER TO HEAL

In the next two chapters, Matthew gives us an account of some of the Lord's healing miracles. However, the writer does not relate these demonstrations of the Lord's power in chronological order. Some of the acts of healing may have taken place before the Sermon on the Mount, and others afterwards. Matthew's intention is not to provide us with a time line of Jesus' ministry, but to group together particular themes or topics.

## JESUS HEALS A LEPER

***Matthew 8:1-4***

### MATTHEW 8:1-2

After the Lord Jesus had finished his sermon, he descended the mountain—followed by a great crowd of people. The multitude had been overawed by his teaching and works, and they wanted to see and hear more. However, as has been noted previously, most of the throng following the Lord Jesus were not genuinely concerned for their soul's salvation. Some did indeed hunger and thirst after righteousness. However, the majority hungered and thirsted for an interesting story (since they did not accept the moral and spiritual nature of the Lord's teaching), or to see what other works he could perform, or to latch on to a 'popular figure' of the day. Very soon, however, these unbelieving and uncommitted followers would forsake the Lord and return to their accustomed manners and way of life.

Some time after the Lord Jesus had come down from the mountain, an 'untouchable' approached the holy Son of God and fell on his knees before him.

This must have created abject fear, horror and dismay in the hearts and minds of those people then following the Lord. This man kneeling before the Lord Jesus was a leper—a ceremonially unclean person, afflicted with an infectious skin disease. Would this man's presence not contaminate them, and make them ceremonially unclean? Furthermore, had this unpleasant and physically disfigured individual no regard for the law of God or for the teaching of the religious leaders concerning leprosy—bearing in mind that the 'leprosy' in question may have been a much more virulent skin disease than the modern condition known as leprosy? [26]

The law of God forbade a leprous person from appearing in a public place until he had been cleansed from his leprosy. Additionally, when travelling over public highways, lepers had to call out to anyone approaching them, "Unclean!" "Unclean!" Thereby, those people would know that they were about to pass a person or group of people who were leprous and ceremonially unclean.

[26] *leprosy*: In the Scriptures, references to leprosy also comprehended a variety of other types of skin diseases known now under distinct medical names. Leprosy in its modern and more limited sense is known as 'Hansen's disease' (*Mycobacterium leprae)*, and is a chronic and mildly infectious skin condition. However, left untreated, it can cause disfigurement or deformity.

What, then, was this leper thinking of to come before the Lord Jesus—especially when Jesus was being followed by such large crowd of people?

Here we see how much the general population cared for lepers and others like him. However, their selfish and uncaring attitude toward the outcasts of society was not reflected by the holy Son of God.

The leprous man fell down on his knees before the Lord Jesus, exclaiming: *"Lord, if you will, you can make me clean."*

Here indeed was faith! This leprous man may have heard of the Lord Jesus' miraculous healing powers. Perhaps, he had learned of the many types of illnesses and diseases that the Lord had healed. However, could he heal a person afflicted with leprosy? This man believed so. But would the Lord Jesus be willing to heal such a physically disfigured and unclean person? Knowing that the Lord was able, and hoping desperately that he would be willing, the leprous man kneels before the Lord, crying out: *"Lord, if you will, you can make me clean."*

This man knew that Jesus was able to heal. He wondered only whether he would be willing to heal such a vile person. Thus, he cries, "*If you will...you can...*"

## MATTHEW 8:3

The Lord Jesus responds immediately to this man's plea. He stretches out his hand, touches the man, and commands him to be cleansed of his obnoxious disease. Immediately, this man is healed—cleansed entirely of the repelling disease that had afflicted and affected him in body and mind. The Lord had made him whole. Now, he would be an outcast and stranger no longer.

From this we learn that no-one is in too repulsive a state or condition to be received and healed by the Lord Jesus. No matter how shocking or corrupt his condition appears to others, the Lord is able and willing to heal and cleanse all those who come to him by faith. Thus, we observe that the Lord accepts into his kingdom those who are among the outcasts and undesirables of society. Those who are considered too vile, too obnoxious, or too perverse, to be received and forgiven, the Lord Jesus receives and forgives. By the work of the Holy Spirit, all who call upon the Lord Jesus for mercy and cleansing will receive mercy and cleansing—and none who come will ever be excluded.

From this verse, too, we learn that the holy Son of God was willing to reach out and touch the 'untouchables' of society. Their disease-ridden bodies did not prevent the Lord Jesus from extending his arms of love and compassion to those in deep distress. All those who sought his healing power found his healing powerful. They experienced something of the love of God reaching out to them even when no one else would touch them, or receive them into their company.

## MATTHEW 8:4

Jesus now issues the cleansed leper with two commands:

1. The Lord warned him solemnly not to publicize the fact of his healing. Apparently, this healing had not taken place before the large crowd thronging Jesus had dispersed. Probably, they had scattered in unseemly haste when they saw a leprous man making his way toward the Lord Jesus. Therefore, the crowd would not have witnessed this healing, and would not have been able

to spread the news abroad themselves. Thus, the cleansed leper would have been the only person remaining in the Lord's presence who could have made this miraculous healing known to others.

2. The Lord Jesus commanded the man to make his way to the temple in Jerusalem. On his arrival there, he was to declare to the priest that—although previously suffering from leprosy—he had since been cleansed and healed of this vile disease. Then, he was to offer to the priest the gift commanded by Moses, and such as he could afford. (Lev. 14:1-32) The priest would then examine the man on several different occasions over an eight day period, and would make the required sacrifices for his sins. At the end of this period, and assuming he was satisfied completely with the man's cleansing, the priest would announce finally and formally that this man had been cleansed of his leprosy, and that the necessary sacrifices had been offered. Since he was now ceremonially clean, the man would be permitted to associate freely with the congregation of Israel.

The healing of this man provides an incontrovertible witness to the Jewish priests that One had come into their midst who had power over the most obnoxious of diseases. The priests had probably heard of the Lord's other healing miracles. Now, they would learn that no disease was beyond his power to heal. Yet, this ought not to have been strange to their ears, as it was in fulfilment of the OT prophesies concerning the Messiah sent by God.

The priests, of course, were fully aware that any healing that involved ceremonial cleansing was the province of the priesthood, as sacrifices and offerings had to be made for the healed individuals. Thus, to realise that another person was able to heal and cleanse all kinds of diseases may have been considered as a direct challenge to their ministry. What they did not know yet—and would not have accepted—was that the Person performing these miracles of healing was the Great High Priest himself. Furthermore, this Great High Priest would not only offer the necessary sacrifices for sin, but would himself become the full and final Sacrifice of atonement for sin. With the coming of the Lamb of God, the Jewish priesthood and ministry would become redundant, for everything of which the Jewish priesthood spoke was fulfilled in Christ. (Heb. 2:17; 4:14; 6:20; 8:1; 9:24)

To return to the cleansed leper—from Mark's account of this incident, we learn that this man failed to obey the Lord's first command to him. Instead of remaining quiet about his healing, he published abroad what the Lord Jesus had done for him. (Mark 1:45) In and of itself, this action might have been considered commendable—if the Lord had not forbidden it beforehand. However, this man's actions made it virtually impossible for the Lord Jesus to enter any town as the people were thronging around him wherever he went. Yet, these people were not interested primarily in things spiritual and eternal but only in things material, physical or earthly.

However important it may have been, the Lord Jesus had not come into the world only to heal people of their illnesses and diseases. These were demonstrations of his power; but, more importantly, they were signs of his power to heal a far greater disease—the disease of sin which afflicted and contaminated the soul. In this context, the Lord had come into the world to carry all our diseases and to bear them to the Cross (v.17b).

## THE CENTURION'S FAITH

***Matthew 8:5-13***

### MATTHEW 8:5-6

On returning to Capernaum, a Roman military officer approached the Lord Jesus. This man was a centurion, or commander of a century (or '*centuria*'); nominally, a group of one hundred soldiers in the ancient Roman army.

We observe that this officer was a man who cared: for he had travelled to Capernaum seeking Jesus' help for his suffering servant. The centurion's servant was suffering from some form of paralysis that was causing him great pain and distress. Believing that Jesus could heal his servant, the centurion appealed to the Lord for help.

### MATTHEW 8:7-9

When the Lord Jesus heard the man's plea, he assured him that he would come to help his servant. However, the centurion did not think himself worthy to have Jesus enter his house. Furthermore, the Roman officer believed that it was unnecessary for the Lord to visit his servant in person. Indeed, all that the Lord needed to do was to speak the word and his servant would be healed.

The centurion points out that he too is a man under the command of superior authorities; and that men in the lower ranks are subservient to him. When he issues a command to his soldiers, that command is obeyed at once. Likewise (he reasoned), when the Lord Jesus issued a command, that command would be obeyed at once.

This demonstrates remarkable faith—and that by a Gentile. Here, a non-Jew was appealing to the Jewish Messiah for help, convinced not only that the Messiah could heal his servant, but that he could do so from a distance.

### MATTHEW 8:10-12

However, would the Lord Jesus respond to this plea from a Gentile? Surely, he had not been sent to the Gentile nations but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. (Matt. 10:6; 15:24)

This is answered by the Lord's words to the centurion:

> Matthew 8:10 ESV
>
> (10) When Jesus heard this, he marvelled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.

Here, then, is our answer: This 'Gentile sinner' exhibited greater faith in God's Messiah than any person then in Israel—causing the Lord Jesus to express astonishment (Gk., qaumazw, *ethaumasen*, 'to marvel') (v.10). By and large, those to whom the Messiah had come, had refused to believe on him; and those who did believe still did not exhibit the degree of faith exemplified by this Roman officer. This centurion was prepared to believe wholeheartedly that the command spoken by the Lord from a distance would

result in the healing of his paralysed servant. Although he would not see his faith in the Lord Jesus rewarded until he had returned home, the centurion believed with all his heart that the Son of God was able and willing to heal his servant.

However, the Lord had not finished addressing this Gentile centurion. Jesus then adds these most solemn words:

> Matthew 8:11-12 ESV
>
> (11) "I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, (12) while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

The love, grace and mercy of God must never cause us to overlook the holiness, justice and righteousness of God. The meek and lowly Lord Jesus utters these chilling words to warn people of their very great danger if they despise or neglect God or his Son, if they disbelieve or repudiate his written and living Word, or if they profess falsely to belong to Christ or to his church.

This theme is repeated frequently elsewhere by the Lord Jesus. In the two verses before us, the Lord is making it plain that the kingdom of heaven will not be confined to the Jewish race alone. People from others nations, too—and from around the world—would take their places in the kingdom of heaven. These, too, would sit at table with (or would enjoy eternal blessings and fellowship with) the Jewish patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This is in keeping with the words of John the Baptist in reply to those relying on their descent from the patriarchs, *God is able of these stones to raise up children for Abraham.* If the supposed 'sons' of the kingdom will not believe and accept the Messiah, then God will raise up sons or children who will believe and accept his Son—according to his eternal purposes and by his sovereign grace in redemption.

The Lord Jesus, however, also makes it very plain here what will happen to those people who are convinced that they are included already in God's kingdom; who are certain that they are numbered among his people, and that they are the recipients of his promises of salvation blessings made to and through Abraham.

Many indeed claimed to belong to the kingdom of heaven; they claimed to know the Lord God of Israel, but their claim was without foundation. They may have been very religious people; they may have attended religiously to the rites and ceremonies of their professed faith. However, their religion was outward and formal. They knew nothing of the inward change of heart and life brought about by the grace and mercy of God, nor of the life of trust and obedience, contrition and humility required by the Lord God. Unlike Abraham, Isaac and Jacob whom they claimed as their forefathers, they failed to exhibit the faith and obedience of their forefathers.

What, then, happens to such false professors of religion or faith?

In verse 12a, the Lord Jesus tells us that *"the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness."* This, of course, does not refer to those who are truly the sons of the kingdom, or the children of God, but to those who profess falsely to be so. Any person can claim to be a believer in Christ and a child of God. However, if this claim is contradicted by his words or lifestyle, then clearly it is a false claim. The fate of such a person will be the same as the false Jewish claimants to God's kingdom.

The Lord refers to the place of eternal separation from the Father as *'outer darkness*'. In other words, it is a place where the light of Christ and of his truth will never shine again. This, in turn, means that those cast into that place will have no hope of salvation throughout the eternal ages, but will be subjected to abject misery, grief and pain, and to an ever-accusing conscience, throughout eternity.

To this end, the Lord Jesus adds these solemn words: *"In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"* (v.12b).

Verse 12 emphasises several truths:

- The place of '*outer darkness*' is a place of conscious existence. From comparing this passage with other related passages of God's Word, we learn that those cast into this place cannot cease to exist throughout the eternal ages.
- It is a place of unremitting pain, sorrow and grief; of constant weeping over past sins and the failure to seek God's mercy while time remained.
- It is a place where the body will be tormented endlessly and the soul will be reminded constantly of the fact that their personal sin and rebellion against God and against his Christ has brought them to this place of torments.
- However, before they are cast into this place of outer darkness, all finally impenitent and unbelieving mankind will fall down before the Lord on the Day of Judgment, acknowledging his righteousness and holiness, confessing his Sovereign Lordship over all mankind. They will be constrained to confess that—in justice and righteousness—the Lord is condemning them to a lost eternity in hell only on account of their own wilful sins, their repeated refusal to repent of their evil deeds, and their wilful neglect or rejection of the one and only way of salvation provided through the Lord Jesus Christ.

In passing, we should note that the purpose of using such expressions as 'outer darkness' and 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' is not to define the exact nature of eternal hell but to use easily understood expressions to illustrate the reality, extent and perpetuity of hell's torments. Even if these expressions are metaphorical, the point remains that the reality must be equal to or greater than the expressions employed to illustrate or describe it. No human mind or language can aptly comprehend or express fully the terrors of that place or state spoken of as 'outer darkness' or a 'lake of fire'.

## MATTHEW 8:13

Turning again to the centurion, the Lord Jesus commands him to return to his home. The Lord assures this Gentile that his plea for help has been heard and answered—according to his faith. The centurion's servant had been healed—at the very moment the Lord Jesus spoke the word. Thus, when the officer reached his home, he would find his faith rewarded, and his servant recovered completely from his painful and distressing attack of paralysis.

Thus, we are reminded that if our family member, friend or neighbour is unable to help themselves, we ought to help them or to seek help on their behalf.

## JESUS HEALS PETER'S MOTHER-IN-LAW

***Matthew 8:14-15***

### MATTHEW 8:14-15

Now, the Lord Jesus enters the house of his disciple Simon Peter, only to find Peter's mother-in-law afflicted with a fever. However, the Lord needed only to touch her hand and instantly his healing power made her well. Mark tells us that the Lord Jesus took her by the hand and lifted her up. (Mark 1:31) At that moment, she rose and began serving her Guest and those with him.

Thus we learn that—while ministering to the needs of others—we ought also to minister to the needs of our families and friends.

In passing, we note that Peter was a married man. Elsewhere, the apostle Paul tells us that Peter's wife accompanied him on his travels around the churches. (1 Cor. 9:5)

## JESUS HEALS THE DEMON OPPRESSED

***Matthew 8:16-17***

### MATTHEW 8:16

At sunset that day, people began bringing to the Lord Jesus those who were suffering from demon oppression or possession, together with many sick people. Mark relates that the 'whole city' gathered around the doorway (Mark 1:32-33)

With a word of command, the Lord Jesus expelled the demons (or 'unclean spirits') and delivered those formerly bound by the emissaries of the devil. On several occasions, the vile spirits attempted to protest or to speak out. (Luke 4:41) However, the Lord Jesus commanded them to remain silent, expelling them by his almighty power from the bodies and minds of the sufferers.[27]

One of the reasons that the Lord Jesus commanded the demons to remain silent was because they knew who he was: viz., the eternal Son of God and the Saviour or Deliverer from Satan and sin. However, the Lord Jesus would not permit these depraved spirits to confess publicly that he was the Son of God. He did not need, nor would he accept, the word of the enemy to testify to the truth. Nevertheless, it is amazing that these vile and evil beings knew without question that Jesus was the Son of God, but that the people to whom the Lord came doubted his divine Sonship, his Messiahship, and his very connection with God the Father.

[27] We must note here, that Matthew is not speaking of psychological conditions as such, although those who were being oppressed by these evil spirits would suffer no doubt from secondary psychological symptoms. However, primarily, these people were afflicted with a spiritual condition—not a medical condition. Their minds were being attacked and manipulated by these demons, causing them to act bizarrely and irrationally. This is not synonymous with the psychotic or schizophrenic conditions known to psychiatry, but is distinct from those conditions. Schizophrenia involves a personality and behavioural disorder that, as a rule, is unconnected with demon oppression or demon possession. Again, unlike demon possession, schizophrenia may be controlled to some extent by antipsychotic drugs.

## MATTHEW 8:17

These events occurred to fulfil that which Isaiah had spoken many centuries beforehand:

Isaiah 53:4a ESV

(4a) Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows... (See entire chapter)

The Lord Jesus had been healing the sick and delivering the demon oppressed or possessed. He had met the devil's emissaries head on, and had overcome them. Nevertheless, this conflict would continue until, finally, the Lord Jesus defeated Satan at the Cross and laid waste his kingdom and his power over sinful mankind. Nevertheless, to achieve this, the Lord would need to pay in his own body the full penalty for our sins. Only thus could we be delivered finally from Satan's claims over us based on our sinful lives and alienation from God. Only then could we be forgiven and reconciled to God. Therefore it was essential that the holy Son of God bear upon his own body the penalty due to us for our sins and iniquities. He had to bear our griefs and carry our sorrows in order to make atonement for the sin of our soul.

The sins and griefs common to all mankind resulted from Satan's fall and the entry of temptation into the world, and of Adam's fall and the resulting curse on the earth. It was the griefs and sorrows resulting from sin that the Lord Jesus would bear in his own body to the tree when he—the sinless One—died as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of his people.

# COUNTING THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

***Matthew 8:18-22***

## MATTHEW 8:18-20

As the Lord Jesus continued to heal the sick and deliver the demon oppressed, the crowd around him began to grow. Of course, many of these people had not come for healing or to hear the Lord teaching. Rather, they had come out of curiosity and had no real desire for things spiritual or to learn of the causes and consequences of sin. Eventually, when the size of the crowd had increased considerably, the Lord decided to leave that location and cross over the Sea of Galilee.

Some time after his arrival on the other side, a scribe or expert in Jewish religious law approached Jesus. This man would have been well acquainted with rabbinical teaching, and with the teaching of the Law and the Prophets. He would have known that the rites, ordinances and ceremonies enshrined in the Mosaic Law spoke of atonement associated with the coming Messiah. The scribe would have known also that the prophets spoke frequently of the coming Messiah or Anointed of God.

Thus, possibly believing that the Lord Jesus was the promised Messiah of Israel, this scribe told the Lord that he wanted to become his follower (or disciple). Indeed, he claimed that he would be prepared to follow the Lord Jesus anywhere—under all circumstances.

Clearly, this man did not know what he was saying, nor had he counted the cost of discipleship. Salvation comes as a free gift of God. However, discipleship leads a person by the way of the cross. Suffering and sorrow, hardships and harrowing experiences, may be the lot of those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord knew this man's heart. He knew his motives for wanting to become his follower, and he knew that he was choosing to follow him for the wrong reasons. Therefore, in reply, 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."*

This was a direct challenge to the scribe to count the cost of discipleship. Each of the animals that God created had its own place in which to shelter and rest. However, he through whom the Father created all things had no shelter of his own on this earth and no place to rest. Such might be the case for all those who followed him. They would have no certain dwelling place on this earth and no guarantee of rest so long as they lived on this earth.

The scribe, however, would not have been accustomed to such hardship. As a respected religious teacher among the Jews, he would have enjoyed certain privileges and comforts, and a certain degree of reverence from the people. The Lord Jesus knew that the scribe was not prepared to forsake these things to follow him. Perhaps, unlike other religious leaders, this man was seeking to enhance his own reputation as a scribe by being associated with this great Teacher, the Lord Jesus. Thus, by his answer, the Lord Jesus declared to this would-be follower that his heart was not right with God, that his priorities were in the wrong order (he had sought to become a disciple before seeking forgiveness of his sins), and that he would not have been prepared to commit himself wholeheartedly to the Lord Jesus Christ and to his cause.

So it is with all those who want to follow the Lord Jesus, but with the wrong motives, with an insincere heart, without a deep sense of sin and guilt and their need of forgiveness, or with no real desire to become wholeheartedly committed to the Lord and to serve him unreservedly.

## MATTHEW 8:21-22

On another occasion, a man approached the Lord with a specific request: *"Lord, let me first go and bury my father"* (v.21b).

At first sight, this request might appear reasonable and in accordance with the Jewish custom of taking care of the diseased and of showing kindness to their families during a time of grief and mourning. However, we are not exactly certain of the circumstances surrounding this request. Some commentators believe that this man's father had just died and that the son was requesting permission to attend to his funeral arrangements. However, other commentators believe that the man had not yet died, but was elderly and frail. Thus, the son would be requesting permission to remain at home with his father until he had passed away.

Whatever the circumstances, the Lord does not grant permission. In verse 21, the man making the request is described as a 'disciple' (not as a would-be follower, like the scribe before him). In other words, the Lord Jesus had specifically called this man to follow him and to serve him in the proclamation of the Gospel. Thus, the Lord replied: *"Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead"* (v.22). In other words, let the *spiritually* dead bury the *physically* dead.

The fact that this man had been called by the Lord Jesus to follow and to preach is stated explicitly by Luke in his account of this incident, where he writes:

Luke 9:60 ESV

(60) And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

Thus, we see that proclaiming the Gospel takes priority over even the closest of family ties—*when a person has been commanded specifically to fulfil this task at the expense of all others* (as here). Under other circumstances, pastors, preachers or other servants of Christ are not prevented from fulfilling their duties and responsibilities toward family members, unless it would bring them into direct conflict with an express command of the Lord.

The fact that following Christ and preaching the Gospel must be afforded the highest priority even over family commitments is expressed again by Luke, where he writes:

Luke 9:61-62 ESV

(61) Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.”

(62) Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

This passage emphasises the priorities required of those disciples whom the Lord Jesus has appointed to serve him in some capacity. Those called to serve—by preaching, teaching or by some other means—are called to dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to the Lord and to the work of the Gospel. Those wishing to spent time with their families—*at the expense of their religious calling or commitment*—are not worthy of the Lord's service. Again, those beginning to serve the Lord in some capacity and who then hesitate in the work or abandon it to return to secular employments, are not fit for the kingdom of God. The work of God's kingdom and the service rendered to the King of kings must come above all other commitments and responsibilities.

This is not to suggest that family duties and responsibilities ought to be neglected by those in the Lord's service, nor is any excuse being afforded here for doing so. The issue is about priorities, not about mutually exclusive concepts. The Lord Jesus is using apparently absolute language or expressions to emphasise the need for putting him and his service first, and for maintaining these priorities. Elsewhere in God's Word, the apostle Paul warns professing believers that those who neglect their families or fail to help them in times of need are worse then unbelievers.

## JESUS CALMS A STORM

***Matthew 8:23-27***

### MATTHEW 8:23-24

When the Lord Jesus had finished this period of ministry on the far side of the Sea of Galilee, he entered a boat with his disciple to return to the opposite side. Clearly, this vessel must have been large enough to

accommodate the Lord Jesus and his disciples. Indeed, it may have been one of the disciple's fishing boats that had been used for the occasion.

The Sea of Galilee was notorious for its sudden fierce squalls. As the Lord and his disciples made their way across the lake, one of these storms arose with very little warning. Soon, the boat began to ship water. With the wind howling fiercely around them, the disciples found it extremely difficulty to keep their boat from being overwhelmed.

We should remember that several of these disciples were experienced and hardened fishermen—well accustomed to the storms on the Sea of Galilee. Yet, here were these same highly experienced men unable to cope with this storm and to keep their boat from taking on water. Admittedly, it is possible that the extra men in the boat (above that of a normal fishing crew) would have caused the vessel to sit lower in the water.

At any event, when the boat began to founder the disciple began to panic. Looking toward the Lord Jesus, they were dismayed to see that he was sleeping peacefully on a pillow—apparently unaware of their imminent danger and great distress. Immediately, the disciples woke the Lord Jesus, and—almost in desperation—the cried out: *"Save us, Lord; we are perishing"* (v.25).

These rugged men of the sea had come to an end of their own resources. For all their experience as mariners and fisherman, they were unable to cope with the extreme conditions on this occasion. And if they did not receive help immediately, they would without doubt drown beneath the waves.

Fortunately, in their distress, they cried out to the right person. For the One on whom they called was not only their Lord and Master but also the One who exercised power over nature and the natural elements. Before responding, however, to their cries for help, the Lord Jesus puts a searching question to them:

## MATTHEW 8:25-26

*"Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?"*

What possible reason could the disciples have had for being afraid? Under the circumstances, they could have none. Yet, all of us can be like the disciples in times of crises, or in extremely distressing situations.

However, the reason that the disciples had no cause to fear was because they had seen the Lord's power at work on many previous occasions. They had witnessed multitudes of people being healed of all kinds of diseases and conditions; and they had been healed by a word of command from the Lord. Therefore, they knew that the Lord Jesus had power and authority over physical and spiritual afflictions. And since he could deliver from physical conditions caused by illness and disease, could he not deliver also from physical conditions caused by the natural elements—which, by his omnipotence, he created and controls? Therefore, the Lord Jesus rebukes them with the words: *"Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?"*

Here we should note that the Lord who created and sustains the universe by his powerful word also exercises sovereign control over the natural elements. This will become evident in the following verses. However, it becomes evident also that the Lord Jesus ordained this storm to test his disciples' faith. Thus, although the onset and ferocity of the storm surprised the disciples, it did not surprise the Lord. On the contrary, the coming of the storm at that moment in time, and while the disciples were in the boat with the Lord, was according to the Lord's express will or command.

From this we learn that—from the Lord's perspective—the storms or trials of life do not come upon us unexpectedly. They are known to our Lord and Master before they ever assail us, because he has ordained or permitted them. Therefore, from beginning to end, they are under his control; and he will determine the outcome according to his sovereign will and pleasure and in accordance with his loving purposes for our lives and for those of our loved ones.

As soon as the disciples appealed to him, the Lord Jesus arose from the pillow-bed. Standing upright in the teeth of the raging storm, he rebuked the winds and the sea. Immediately, a great calm swept across the sea, as wind and waves ceased to roar. Thus, the disciples learned that the Lord Jesus exercises sovereign and almighty power over the natural elements. Even these are under his control, and must obey him—immediately.

When Matthew says that the Lord 'rebuked' the wind and the waves and that they 'obeyed' him, this is to be understood not merely as the result of a verbal command but as an exercise of the Lord's sovereign will or as an expression of his divine power or omnipotence. The Lord needed only to will these events to occur and they would have occurred. He did not need to express himself verbally, but did so for the benefit of his disciples so that they could connect the calming of the storm with this demonstration of his sovereign power.

## MATTHEW 8:27

Upon witnessing the Lord's ability to control the wind and sea, the disciples expressed astonishment and bewilderment. They could not understand how a mere man (as they considered the Lord) could exercise such power or authority. Surely only the omnipotent God could control the natural elements!

Thus, they asked: *"What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?"* (v.27)

"'What kind', 'What sort' or 'What manner' of man is this...?"

Clearly, the disciples had much to learn. However, they should have been aware of the Lord's miraculous powers, having witnessed him healing so many different kinds of diseases and casting out demons. Yes, they had seen these events. However, they remained sceptical. As yet, they did not realise that Jesus was using divine power to effect these miracles. Perhaps (in their estimation) the Lord was just a religious teacher who had remarkable powers as a man. This would be in keeping with their faulty concept of the Messiah—that he would be a man like King David who would set up a kingdom on earth and rule on earth like the former kings of Israel.

In time, the disciples would learn that the Messiah or Christ was none other than God the Son or God incarnate, and that his kingdom was not of this world.

Thus, when these disciples saw the Lord Jesus calm the raging storm, they were awe-struck. They realised that no ordinary man could exercise such power, and they did not know what to make of Jesus.

## JESUS CASTS OUT DEMONS IN GADARA

***Matthew 8:28-34***

### MATTHEW 8:28

(Cf. Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39)

Now that the wind and waves had subsided, the disciples made their way with ease to the other side of the lake. They landed their boat at the country occupied by the Gaderenes,[28] part of the Decapolis which was situated south-east of the Sea of Galilee. The nearest sizeable town in this vicinity was Gadara. Gergesa (*Kersa*) was a small obscure village lying closer to the Sea of Galilee than the town of Gadara.

Matthew then relates that, as the Lord Jesus and his disciples made their way into this country from the boat, two demon possessed men rushed out to meet him. Both Mark and Luke mention only one man. However, these evangelists may have chosen to concentrate on one man because he was the more ferocious of the two or because he was possessed by a multiplicity of demons whereas the other was not.

Mark describes them as being possessed with an '*unclean*[29] *spirit'.* (Gk., πνεύματι ἀκαθάρτῳ) (Mark 5:2) This is the expression used normally in the Bible when referring to the vile, wicked and grossly impure beings or evil spirits associated with Satan.

Normally, these two dishevelled, demented and completely naked individuals were to be found living among the tombs. So ferocious were they that people were afraid to pass by. Indeed, these wild men could not be restrained even with chains, for they broke these asunder and succeeded only in striking abject fear into anyone who attempted to approach them. In the past, attempts had been made to subdue these two men, or to exercise some degree of control over them. However, these attempts had failed and the demon possessed men appeared to be getting worse.

So tormented had these souls become that they would rush about the hillsides day and night crying and wailing. As they went, they would seize stones and inflict wounds on their bodies with the sharp points and edges. This illustrated something of their terrible desperation as they attempted to 'cut out' the evil spirits that possessed their bodies and controlled their minds, causing them utter torment of body and soul. This must have been the closest approach to hell on earth that any living person has had to endure.

### MATTHEW 8:29

However, while in this demented state, one or both of these men caught sight of the Lord Jesus approaching in the distance. Immediately, the men ran from the tombs to meet the Lord Jesus, falling at his feet in worship. (Mark 5:6)

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[28] *Gadarenes:* known also as *Gerasenes* or *Gergesenes*.

[29] *unclean*: i.e., morally unclean (and also ceremonially unclean). In this context, the word translated 'unclean' (ἀκαθάρτῳ) has the meaning of being thoroughly polluted, impure or vile and is often used in connection with the sins of fornication and adultery, and also the vilest forms of impurity and perversity.

Enraged that the men had sought the help of Jesus, and had actually acknowledged and worshipped him as Lord, the evils spirits cried out. However, their cries were shrieks of terror. They knew that these men were standing before the Son of God, for even demons believe that Jesus is the Son of God—and they tremble. (Jas. 2:19)

At that moment, the Lord Jesus commanded the evil spirits to come out of the man. In response, these evil beings screamed desolately, "*What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?"*

These vile spirits knew that the Lord Jesus not only could exercise control over them and all their evil activities, but also that he could condemn and commit them to hell there and then. Thus, in utter terror, the demons cried out: "*What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?"*

Note the confession on the part of these vile beings: They acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God, for – unlike many of the people—the emissaries of the evil one were completely convinced that Jesus was indeed God's Son.

In anguish, they appealed to the Lord to tell them what he was about to do to them—fearful that he would cast them into the lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (Matt. 25:41) They knew too that they were about to lose the bodies that they had so long possessed and cruelly abused and tormented. But rather than face their certain destiny in hell at this moment in time, they were seeking for another body to possess (cf. Matt. 12:43-45).

The Lord Jesus commanded the evil spirits to disclose their name; which was '*Legion*'—so profuse were the evil beings that then possessed the tormented men's bodies and minds.

## MATTHEW 8:30-34

However, the Lord Jesus had commanded this horde of vile spirits to come out of their victims, and this they were forced to do. The Lord had given them permission to enter a herd of pigs on the hillside. Ultimately, the pigs rushed down the hillside into the sea. Thus, the evil spirits who sought possession of other bodies very soon lost the bodies that they were given.

As soon as the herdsmen saw the swift and unseemly demise of the pigs, they rushed into the town to inform the owners, telling the townspeople how the Lord Jesus had delivered the demon possessed men. Consequently, the citizens flocked to the Lord Jesus, to see for themselves what the Lord had done. However, the primary focus of their concern was not for the two former demoniacs, now sitting on the ground, clothed and in their right mind. Rather, they were more concerned over the loss of the pigs and their potential food supply (clearly, they were not orthodox Jews!). Similarly, the pigs' owners were more concerned over the loss of their livestock and livelihood than the deliverance from evil and cruelty of two fellow human beings. Thus, as a body, they besought or pleaded most earnestly with the Lord Jesus to depart from their country.

How fatal a mistake this was! Those who ask the Lord of mercy to depart from them may forever close the door on the mercy of the Lord. It is not recorded that the Lord Jesus ever visited that region again.

At least one of these men wanted to follow the Lord Jesus. However, Jesus commanded him to return home to his own people and tell them how much the Lord had done for him.

Thus, we see that there is no case too extreme, too corrupted, or too degraded for the holy sinless Son of God to intervene and to deliver. These two men had been possessed by the vilest forms of evil imaginable. In consequence, their behaviour would have been not only uncontrollable and irrational but also expressive of some of the grossest forms of moral impurity, corruption and perversity. Yet, from this vile condition, the Lord delivered them. When they saw him as their Saviour, worshipped him as their Lord, and sought his mercy they found his mercy and his grace.

So it will be for everyone who turns to the Lord with all their heart and soul—regardless of their vile or impure lifestyles up to that point. (1 Cor. 6:9-11) Thus, we see that those today whom others may despise and condemn for their impure or unnatural behaviour, can and will be received and delivered by the Lord Jesus. If they come to the Son of God acknowledging him as Lord and Saviour; if they repent of and confess their sin and sinful lifestyles; and if they seek God's mercy and salvation, they will most certainly experience his love and his almighty power to save—and to save to the uttermost all those who come unto him by faith. (Heb. 7:25) For, whatever their condition, the Lord Jesus never drives away anyone who comes to him, and who has been given to him by the Father. (John 6:37)

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 9

## JESUS' AUTHORITY TO FORGIVE SINS

In this chapter, Matthew continues to relate some of the Lord Jesus' miracles of healing and also his power and authority to forgive sin—much to the consternation and dismay of the religious leadership. This same religious leadership criticises the Lord Jesus for associating with 'tax collectors and sinners'—not realising that repentant and believing tax collectors and sinners were entering the kingdom of God ahead of them.

Matthew also records one of the instances where the Pharisees attempted to counter the Lord's miraculous powers over the demons by attributing these powers to Satan—a scurrilous accusation which the holy Son of God refutes. However, this gives some insight into the depths of iniquity to which certain religious leaders will stoop if they feel that someone is acting in the name of God, but without their [the religious hierarchy's] express approval or sanction; or if they believe that their own position or office is being threatened by someone who is genuinely called and appointed by God—unlike themselves.

## JESUS FORGIVES A PARALYSED MAN

***Matthew 9:1-8***

### MATTHEW 9:1-2

(Mark 2:1-22)

Leaving the Decapolis (or the 'Ten Towns'), the Lord Jesus and his disciples sailed across the lake again, this time landing near the Lord's place of residence in Capernaum, on the north-west side of the Sea of Galilee.

While at Capernaum, some men carried a stretcher-bed with a paralysed friend on it to the Lord Jesus. Clearly, they believed that the Lord could heal their friend, and the paralysed man believed also in the Lord's power to heal. Thus, seeing their faith, the Lord granted the paralytic what he had not expressly sought, but which was more important than the healing of his body: viz., the healing of his soul, or the forgiveness of his sins. Thus, Jesus declared to this man: "*Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven*" (v.2).

The Lord Jesus brought hope and encouragement to this afflicted man's soul, by saying, *"Take heart, my son...."* What greater words of assurance to a man confined to his bed or home day and night, and unable to use his limbs! *"Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."* Even if this man had not received healing for his body, he had received an eternal inheritance in heaven and a place among those who are being sanctified by faith in Christ Jesus.

It may be objected that the man had not come for the forgiveness of his sins but for the healing of his body; but the two are connected inextricably. As in many other situations involving sickness, disease or physical affliction, personal sin may not have been the direct cause of this man's paralysis. However, are not all afflictions of the body the result of Adam's fall from original righteousness into sin and of the re-

sultant curse on the earth? The Lord Jesus would demonstrate this very connection in his reply to his objectors.

## MATTHEW 9:3

Standing within earshot was a group of scribes.[30] When these religious lawyers heard the Lord Jesus declare the paralysed man's sins forgiven, they reasoned immediately within themselves, "*This man is blaspheming."* Although Matthew does not record it, the unspoken thoughts of the scribes would have been, *"Who can forgive sins but God alone?"*—as indeed the religious leaders questioned elsewhere. (Cf. Matt. 2:6-7; Luke 5:21)

Notice the audacity of the scribes: "*This man...."* speaking of the holy Son of God as though he were just a common man. These scribes must have heard of or seen other miracles of healing performed by the Lord Jesus, as the paralysed man was probably in or near Capernaum where the Lord had healed previously. Therefore, the scribes knew of Jesus' power or authority to heal all manner of ailments and diseases, and yet they refused to believe that Jesus was the Messiah of God. However, in their eyes, the Lord had committed blasphemy. For, according to their own Scriptures, no one except God himself had the power or authority to forgiven sins.

In this, of course, the scribes were right: Only God could forgive sin. Thus, Jesus meets their unspoken condemnation of him in these words:

## MATTHEW 9:4-5

The very fact that the Lord was able to say to the scribes, *"Why do you think evil in your hearts,"* (v.4) should have demonstrated to the scribes beyond all doubt that Jesus was no common or ordinary man but One who knew the secrets of their hearts.

Before the astonished scribes could respond, the Lord continues: *"For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'?"* (v.5)

Had the Lord commanded the man merely to rise and walk, there would have been no indication that his sins had been forgiven. Although healed physically, he might yet have remained in a sinful state spiritually. However, if the Lord declares to this paralysed man that his sins are forgiven, and then commands him to rise up and walk, then it is evident to everyone that the power of God is at work. And if the power of God is at work to heal physically by the command of the Lord Jesus, then the power of God must also be at work to heal him spiritually or to forgive the man's sins—at the command of the Lord Jesus. The reality of the one act of divine power and authority proves the reality of the other.

[30] *scribes*: The scribes occupied themselves with writing out the law of God, with transcribing it, with interpreting doctrinal issues, and generally with ensuring that every jot and tittle of the Mosaic Law was preserved and practised. However, under the influence of the Pharisees to which party many of them belonged, certain scribes had become guilty of adding their own interpretations to God's Word, and of elevating their office and teaching above that of the Word of God. Belonging either to the school of Shammai or that of Hillel, the scribes were punctilious in the extreme. It was from their ranks that the Jewish rabbis came.

Thus, to demonstrate this, the Lord declares to the scribes:

### MATTHEW 9:6-7

> *"But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he then said to the paralytic—"Rise, pick up your bed and go home."*

The scribes had challenged the Lord Jesus' authority to forgive sin. Jesus has just demonstrated his power and authority over sin by commanding this paralysed man to rise, to pick up his bed and to return home. The scribes had implied that God alone could forgive sin. Jesus has demonstrated that his power and authority is the same divine power and authority as that of God the Father—for he has shown that this man's sins have been forgiven by healing him of all his diseases—spiritual and physical.

For now, the scribes have been silenced. However, like so many self-righteous, carping and outwardly religious individuals, they will return very soon with further objections and criticisms against the Lord Jesus.

In the meantime, the formerly paralysed man returns rejoicing to his home. How grateful he ought to be to the Lord that he has been healed—in body and soul! Thus, those to whom the Lord has shown love and mercy ought to praises and magnify his holy name, and to show love and mercy to others.

### MATTHEW 9:8

However, it was not only this man who had cause to praise and glorify the name of the Lord. The crowd of onlookers who had been present when this man had been healed of his paralysis were astonished at the Lord's power and authority. Furthermore, these onlookers were awestruck and afraid. They could not comprehend how Jesus (an ordinary man as they considered him to be) could have received such power and authority from God. Yet, they could not deny that the power of God was working in him and through him. They had just seen the Lord Jesus forgive the paralysed man's sins; and Jesus had demonstrated the reality of his power and authority to forgive sin by healing this man of his paralysis and causing him to walk.

Thus, the crowd were overcome with fear and amazement; and, for the time being at least, they praised and glorified God who had given such power to men. Before long, however, their reverent fear would diminish and disappear. As time progressed, many of those who praised and glorified God for granting such power to the Lord Jesus would be calling out to the Roman powers to have him crucified.

## JESUS CALLS MATTHEW

***Matthew 9:9***

### MATTHEW 9:9

(Cf. Luke 5:27-28)

When the Lord Jesus had left this crowd, he came to a man named 'Levi' (or 'Matthew'—the writer of this Gospel). Matthew was sitting at his booth in the village collecting taxes on behalf of the Roman-appointed rulers. Thus, tax collectors (KJV, '*publicans*') were despised by the people, since they were tak-

ing the people's money and feeding it into the coffers of their detested occupiers and overlords. However, for the office of tax collector to be occupied by a Jew, such as Matthew, was incomprehensible and unforgivable. How could any orthodox Jew, with a love for his country and race, ever collaborate with the occupying forces? Thus, just as collaborators in other situations were despised and ostracised, so Matthew may have been despised and ostracised by many of his fellow Jews.

Yet, the Lord Jesus came for Matthew. Others may have considered this tax collector as among the lowest of the low, and as beyond redemption. However, the Lord had come not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. He had come to seek and to save that which was lost. Thus, the Lord Jesus approaches Matthew's booth.

*"Follow me,"* the Lord commanded. Immediately, Matthew rose from his seat, left his booth and followed the Lord Jesus.

Matthew may have seen or heard of the Lord Jesus previously, and may have been aware of his preaching and of his call to repentance. Thus, when he responded in obedience and faith to the call and command of the Lord Jesus, Matthew would have been a vessel prepared in advance by God's Holy Spirit—as indeed are all his people, since they have been predestined unto salvation from before the creation of the world.

## JESUS EATS WITH TAX COLLECTORS AND 'SINNERS'

***Matthew 9:10-13***

### MATTHEW 9:10

For the connection of the following passage with the preceding verse, we quote the relevant words from Luke's Gospel:

> Luke 5:29 ESV
>
> (29) And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.

From the verses that follow, we learn that the 'others' mentioned in the above verse are those whom the religious leaders termed 'sinners'.

Although not stated by Matthew in his Gospel (perhaps because he did not want to name himself as the host) Luke tells us that the feast which Jesus attended had been prepared for him by Matthew (or Levi). Matthew, however, had not only invited the Lord Jesus and his disciples to this feast, but also many of his associates and acquaintances. These were fellow tax collectors; a group that probably associated with one another since they may not have been accepted in society by many of the stricter Jews.

Also present with the Lord Jesus at this feast were those whom the scribes and Pharisees[31] labelled as 'sinners': That is, in the eyes of the religiously scrupulous Jewish teachers, these people were among the

[31] *Pharisees*: We should remember, of course, that the Pharisees were known sometimes as 'separatists': That is, they formed an exclusive Jewish sect which sought to rise above the moral contamination and pollution of the world.

most iniquitous and vile of offenders. They included those whose conduct and lifestyles were questionable at least, if not outright ungodly and immoral, such as those who defrauded the people, prostitutes and others of this category. To the religious leaders, these people were real 'sinners'—not like the scribes and Pharisees whose lives were pious and above reproach and who could not be guilty of any such vile sins!

How much do people need to have their eyes opened spiritually to see how great is their depravity and how great their need of God's salvation—whether they be 'religious' or irreligious people!

These, then, were the people who now were reclining at table in the presence of the holy Son of God. Perhaps Matthew had invited them because—like himself and his fellow tax collectors—these people were not welcome in society, and indeed were despised, condemned and ostracised by most of the people.

Thus, we see that Matthew was a compassionate man; because he did not invite only his fellow workers, but also those whom he knew would not find a welcome anywhere else—except among their own kind.

Yet, Matthew had invited these people into his home for a reason. He had been called to follow the Lord Jesus and he had experienced the grace of God in his life. Now, he wanted other outcasts of society to experience that same love, mercy and grace of God. Matthew must have cared genuinely for these people, for he brought them into his home knowing that he would be bringing them into the presence of the Saviour of lost men and women.

Thus we learn that those who follow Christ should show love and compassion not only to their own, but also to those whom society rejects, condemns and ostracises. The Lord Jesus did not disassociate himself from particular types or classes of sinners. Rather, as we see from this example, he met with them and ate with them. Thus, we—the Lord's redeemed people—must not disassociate ourselves from certain types of people. For how can we know that Christ has not come to save them, as he came to save Matthew, a despised tax collector, and also many prostitutes and other people whom society belittled and reviled? It is, however, essential that those whom the Lord has redeemed keep themselves unspotted from the world (Jas. 1:27)—as did the Lord Jesus. (Heb. 9:14; 1 Pet. 1:19)

## MATTHEW 9:11

However, a banquet of this size could not pass unnoticed by others in the town. Very soon, the Pharisees learned of this feast at the home of Matthew the tax collector. Of course, this would have been of no

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The Pharisees believed that the written word of God (the OT Scriptures or Scrolls) were not sufficient in and of themselves. These written Scriptures had to be interpreted in the light of the oral law passed down through the generations. To men such as the Pharisees, this oral law ultimately became more important than the written word of God (the OT Scriptures); and to this law they appended their own traditions, rules and regulations—thus distorting the pure word of God.

The Pharisees did not separate themselves entirely from the world. Indeed, they were influential members of the Sanhedrin or Jewish Council in Jerusalem. As such, they came into contact with many other people. However, they considered themselves above other people—a distinct religious class, superior to other religious classes and separated from the 'common herd' of mankind. In practise, however—although with a few notable exceptions—the majority of them were avaricious, dissolute, and ungodly men. In due course, the Lord Jesus would show these hypercritical religious leaders in their true colours.

concern to them—especially, since Matthew was not a strict Jew. However, when the Pharisees heard that the Lord Jesus was present at this feast—and that Matthew had packed his house with tax collectors and notorious sinners—these long-robed religious authorities were deeply shocked. Their tassels must have been shaking violently as 'righteous' indignation coursed through their bodies!

Enraged by this apparent utter disregard for the moral and ceremonial laws, and for their own well-established traditions, these long-robed dignitaries proceeded with undignified haste to Matthew's house. As soon as they had witnessed for themselves that Jesus was indeed eating with tax collectors and sinners, the Pharisees turned on the Lord's disciples and demanded of them: "*Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"*

We note that the religious authorities and members of the Sanhedrin or august Jewish Council do not have the courage to address the Lord Jesus directly. They turn their venom on the Lord's disciples, all the while intending to strike at the Lord himself. Such is the way of Satan's emissaries. It is often easier and more hurtful for the evil one to approach God's people through their family or friends, than to do so directly. Thus, to the Lord's disciples, the Pharisees expostulate: "*Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"*

Flummoxed by their wanton aggression and arrogant pride, the disciples were dumbfounded, overawed by these imposing and sombre-clad figures and quite unable for the moment to respond to such a question. The disciples should have been concerned less about the Pharisees' dark robes and more about their dark hearts. As yet, however, these followers of Jesus had still to learn of the Pharisees real character.

Nevertheless, the Lord Jesus himself answers the question. The Lord was under no obligation to reply to these hypercritical leaders, but he had a very important lesson to teach them.

## MATTHEW 9:12-13

Matthew 9:12 ESV

(12) But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."

It was most appropriate that the Lord Jesus be found among the lost. A physician is not required by those who are healthy, but only by those who are ill. The Lord had come into the world to carry our sorrows and bear our diseases. (Isa. 53:4,-12) However, if this Great Physician did not reach out to the sick and dying, how would they be healed and restored? And did not the prophets foretell of the One who would perform these very actions when he came?

The Pharisees would not have fully comprehended all that Jesus was saying to them, because the vast majority of them were spiritually unregenerate men and incapable of understanding spiritual truths. However, they were capable of understanding the analogy that Jesus had just used. Therefore, to have repudiated the truth underlying this statement would have been a wilful disregard for the truth—but this was exactly what they did. They showed absolutely no signs of remorse or repentance, but only of dismay and disgust because the Lord had humiliated them in public and put them to shame.

The Lord Jesus then continues with these words:

Matthew 9:13 ESV

(13) “Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Cf. Matt. 12:7; 1 Sam. 15:22)

The Pharisees placed great emphasises on observing every last rule, regulation, and ritual of the law. Like the scribes, they were meticulous about applying religious ceremonies and approving of sacrifices to be offered by the priests. However, everything that they said and did in this context was said and done in accordance with their own cherished traditions. Therefore, essential as they were, they placed offerings and sacrifices above love for God. Similarly, they elevated rites and ceremonies above love for one's neighbour, and they exalted obedience to their own precepts above mercy and compassion toward others—including foreigners or strangers.

Therefore, Jesus commands them: *“Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.'”*

The passage quoted is from Hosea, where the LORD declares through this prophet:

Hosea 6:6 ESV

(6) “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

This truth should have been self-evident. A holy God would far rather that people show love, mercy and compassion to others than that—by failing to do so—they sin against God and against their neighbour, therefore finding it necessary to confess their sin to God and to offer him the necessary sacrifice for their sins. Furthermore, those who seek the knowledge of God and who live in communion with him are not nearly so likely to have need of burnt offerings for their sins.

Again, the prophet Micah asks:

Micah 6:6-8 ESV

(6) “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? (7) Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

(8) He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

This was what the Pharisees had failed to learn. For justice, kindness and humility did not characterise their lives or influence their relationship with other people. However, these things were foreign to them because they were foreigners to God. Their learning was not of the Spirit, but of the flesh alone. Their appointment to religious office was not of God, but from men alone. They served not the Spirit of holiness, but their own sensual appetites.

Regardless of their rank or status in the church, or in the affairs of the Christian faith, such is the state and condition of all those today that lack the fruit of the Spirit because they are strangers to grace and to

God. Like the 'pious' Pharisees, religious pretenders or hypocrites have no part in the kingdom of God. If they remain impenitent to the end, they face eternal judgment and separation from God in hell.

The Lord had said,

> Matthew 9:13 ESV
>
> (13) "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

*"For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."* The Son of God had come into the world not to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners. Clearly, those who are righteous *need no repentance*; those who think they are righteous, *seek no repentance*, and those who are self-righteous, *desire no repentance*.

Of course, no one is righteous or sin-free but God alone. Those who do not seek repentance have been deceived into believing that they are morally upright and intrinsically good, and therefore acceptable to God in their present state. Those who are self-righteous are outright hypocrites with no sense of sin and guilt, of their need of forgiveness, or of the necessity of repentance and faith. So long as they remain spiritually blind, these people have no hope of experiencing God's salvation. Yet, as with the bigoted Pharisee, Saul (later, to become Paul the apostle), no one in this state is beyond God's power to save.

Thus, Jesus makes it abundantly clear that his mission in the world is to save *sinners*. He would suffer on the cross to save sinners. And he would rise on the third day and be exalted to glory to justify saved sinners.

The Lord Jesus, then, finds himself in the company of sinners—people who make no pretence to righteousness of any kind, but who know that their iniquities have separated them from God. Yet, they must have heard that Matthew had been called to follow Jesus. They must have heard that Jesus forgives sins. And they must have accepted Matthew's invitation to dine at his home not merely for the food for their bodies but for the food for their souls. Thus, each one of these tax collectors and 'sinners' accepted Matthew's invitation, believing that they would meet with the One who could forgive their sins, cleanse them of their vile impurities and redeem them for God. In this, they would not be disappointed.

## JOHN'S DISCIPLES ASK JESUS ABOUT FASTING

***Matthew 9:14-17***

### MATTHEW 9:14

On one occasion, some disciples of John the Baptist approached the Lord Jesus to question him about fasting. To the Jews, fasting had become an important religious discipline; although the Law had enjoined only one period of fasting—on the Day of Atonement. (Lev. 23:26-32; cf. Acts 27:9) However, during their captivity, the Jews observed four annual fasts. (Zech. 7:1-7; 8:19) In addition to these public fasts, however, the Jews also observed private fasts. (Ezra 10:6; Neh. 1:4; Dan. 10:2-3)

Periods of fasting may have been associated with grief and mourning over personal sin or national sin. Fasting was associated also with periods of prayer, or preparation for God's service. In this latter sense, the Lord Jesus fasted before being tempted by Satan. (Ezra 8:23; Dan. 9:3; Luke 2:37; Matt. 4:2)

The Pharisees fasted regularly; although they made a great show of their fasts, to demonstrate publicly just how punctilious they were at observing the law. (Cf. Matt. 6:16; Luke 18:12)

John the Baptist and his disciples fasted in connection with their ministry of repentance. However, John's disciples had noted that—to their knowledge—the Lord's disciples did not fast. Therefore, they approached the Lord Jesus to ask him about this.

John's disciples may not have intended any criticism of the Lord Jesus or of the Lord's disciples. Perhaps, they simply could not understand why Jesus' disciples would not engage in periods of fasting, like other Jewish teachers and their disciples. The Lord Jesus was not about to discourage fasting in principle. However, there would be a time when fasting was appropriate and a time when it was not. At the time Jesus' was ministering on earth, fasting would not have been appropriate. To this end, the Lord Jesus replies to John's disciples:

## MATTHEW 9:15

*..."Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?"*

This was not the time for fasting; for fasting of this kind implied mourning and sorrow; or—in the case of preparation for the Lord's service—waiting on God or preparing mind and body for what lay ahead. None of these were appropriate to the Lord Jesus or to his disciples. The Lord had prepared himself already for the work that lay ahead of him. Now, he was in the process of carrying out that great work—to the glory of his Father.

Furthermore, how could the wedding guests (Jesus' disciples) think of mourning while the bridegroom (the Lord Jesus) remained with them? Rather, this was a time for great rejoicing. The Lord had come to seek his bride (the church); to set up his kingdom; to call sinners to repentance, and to grant to those who believed on him eternal life and glory.

However, a time would come when the bridegroom departed. Then, periods of fasting might be appropriate. Then, the Lord's followers might mourn for the sins of the people; they might give themselves to prayer and fasting for the state of their country or nation, for personal matters, and as preparation for the Lord's service. Thus, the Lord Jesus answers his question by adding: *"The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."*

When the Lord returned to his glory in heaven, then his followers might fast. However, it would be a *voluntary* fasting, since the only fast actually required by God's law—the fast on the Day of Atonement—would no longer be applicable. Nevertheless, after the resurrection, the early church did practise periods of fasting, together with prayer—although not on a regular or formal basis.

Therefore, the Lord's answer to John's disciples is that fasting has its place, but—for the Lord and his disciples—not at the present time.

The Lord, however, uses another analogy:

## MATTHEW 9:16

*"No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made."*

Here, the Lord Jesus is pointing out to John's disciples that the present order was not about to continue exactly as it did previously. The Law was a temporary institution; given by God until the time of reformation: i.e., until the establishment of the New Covenant through the once-for-all atonement for sin achieved by the shedding of Christ's blood. (Jer. 31:31; Heb. 8:8,13; 12:24)

Now that Christ had come, he would fulfil all the rites, rituals, and ceremonies of the Mosaic Law. Again, now that the promised Messiah had appeared, he would establish a new kingdom—a spiritual realm—over which he reigned. His redeemed people would be the citizens of that kingdom and the subjects of that realm. In other words, the Jewish faith, its temple and ordinances would give way to the Christian faith, its church and ordinances. Then, the Jewish mode of worship would be replaced by the Christian mode of worship—true spiritual worship devoid of the rites, rituals and regulations of the ceremonial law (although, not of the precepts and principles of the moral Law or Ten Commandments). (John 4:23-24)

The rituals and ceremonies of the Law were akin to an old garment. No one would attempt to patch an old garment with a piece of unshrunk cloth; for, once the new cloth had shrunk, it would rend apart the old garment, making it useless. In the same way, the Lord was not about to add his new teaching or the message of the Gospel to the old Jewish form of religion. Although being in complete harmony with the teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures, and the fulfilment of them, the teaching of the Lord Jesus, and the message of the Gospel, would involve the institution of a New Covenant in his blood. (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 12:24)

This is the far better or superior Covenant, which would supersede and replace the Old Covenant of sacrifices and offerings, rituals, rites and ceremonies according to the Mosaic Law. (Heb. 8:6; 12:24) Thus, the old form of religion or the Jewish mode of worship involving the temple, priesthood and sacrifices would be replaced by the once-for-all sacrifice of our Great High Priest, the Lord Jesus, as an atonement for sin forever. (Heb. 4:14) By that shed blood, a New Covenant would be established and ratified. Thus, the New Testament church and its mode of worship was to be wholly distinct from the Old Testament congregation of Israel and its mode of worship.

Using another similar analogy, the Lord declares:

## MATTHEW 9:17

> *"Neither is new wine put into old wineskins. If it is, the skins burst and the wine is spilled and the skins are destroyed. But new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved."*

The 'new wine' is the new message: i.e., the Gospel or Good News of salvation through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The message or Gospel is 'new' in that salvation through faith in Christ had never actually become a reality until now—although it had been promised from the time of Adam's fall, and every Old Testament believer had been justified through faith. (The Old Testament sacrifices were

offered up to cover over sin in anticipation of the coming once-for-all sacrifice for sin that would take away sin finally and forever.)

However, this new Gospel message of salvation in Christ could not be appended to the existing Jewish religion. That religion was only until Christ came. However, now that Christ had come, he would fulfil everything of which the Law spoke, and which was enshrined in the Jewish Scriptures. And, having fulfilled the law of ceremonies and ordinances by offering himself a once-for-all sacrifice for sin, the Lord would set aside forever the old covenant by establishing the new. (Heb. 7:18; 8:8)

Attempting to augment Judaism with the Gospel, however, was like attempting to put new wine into old wineskins, with the result that the skins rupture. This is because the temporary and fading Old Covenant ordinances with their repeated sacrifices for sin can never accommodate themselves to the permanent and forever resplendent New Covenant ordinances with their once-for-all Sacrifice for sin. (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 7:27; 9:12,26; 10:10)

Thus, the Gospel must be placed in 'new wineskins': i.e., When Christ established his New Covenant or New Testament church, and ratified it with his blood, his redeemed people would be found in that church alone—both from among the Jews and from among the Gentiles. No other body of Christ would exist on earth, and no other faith—including the Jewish faith—would be acceptable to God or would offer the means of experiencing God's salvation in Christ.

## A RULER PLEADS WITH JESUS TO RAISE HIS DAUGHTER

***Matthew 9:18-19***

### MATTHEW 9:18-19

(Mark 5:21-43; Luke 8:40-56)

While Jesus was giving this teaching, a man rushed into his presence with a plea for help. This man is described as a ruler.[32] From Mark and Luke, we learn that he was a ruler of the synagogue at Capernaum, and that his name was Jairus. (Mark 5:22; Luke 8:41)

At this point, we should observe that this man was not only a respectable and orthodox Jew, but also a leader (perhaps a rabbi) in the Jewish synagogue. The Jewish rulers were among the most hostile and antagonist to the Lord and to his work. Nevertheless, there were some exceptions, such as Jairus who were prepared to consider seriously the teaching and claims of the Lord Jesus, and who permitted the Lord to preach in their synagogues. Now, when a dire crisis arises in his life—or, rather, in the life of his beloved daughter—Jairus does not appeal for help to his Jewish counterparts for he knew that they would be powerless in this situation. Yet, he is convinced that one Person is able to help him, and so he leaves his home and makes his way in great haste to the Lord Jesus.

According to the ESV, verse 18 says that the ruler knelt before Jesus. Some versions say that the ruler 'worshipped' him. However, depending on the context, the word rendered 'worship' (Gk., prosekunei)

[32] *ruler*: Gk., arcwn, *archōn:* An official, ruler (or chief ruler), administrator, magistrate, etc.

can refer to divine worship, to adoration, to bowing down (to a superior), to show the utmost respect to, or to show submission or obeisance to.

Assuming that the Lord Jesus was unaware of his daughter's situation, the ruler cried out to the Lord in anguish, *"My daughter has just died..."* Then, immediately, he adds: *"...but come and lay your hands on her, and she will live."*

This Jewish ruler expressed complete confidence and absolute faith in the Son of God. He was fully persuaded that the Lord Jesus could not only heal the sick but that he could also raise the dead.

This is a most remarkable instance of faith. For the most part, the Jews discounted Jesus' miracles and disregarded them as signs to his appointment by and commission from God. However, here was a respected Jewish synagogue ruler expressing unreserved faith in the Lord Jesus. He was convinced that the Lord Jesus needed only to lay his hands on the dead girl and she would arise. Whether, in truth, the girl was dead or in a coma is immaterial. Mark says that the ruler's *'little daughter is at the point of death'* (Mark 5:23), and Luke says that *'she was dying'* (Luke 8:42). The ruler believed her to be dead, or virtually so; and her family also believed her to be dead. On that basis, the ruler appealed to the Lord Jesus and expressed his faith in the Lord's ability to restore the girl to life, health and strength.

According to Luke, this girl was 12 years of age, and was Jairus' only daughter.

As soon as the Lord heard this man's plea, he and his disciples began following the ruler back to his home.

## A WOMAN FINDS HEALING

***Matthew 9:20-22***

### MATTHEW 9:20-21

(Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48)

While he made his way to the ruler's home, a woman approached the Lord Jesus from behind, and unnoticed—or so she thought. For 12 years, this woman had suffered from chronic haemorrhaging; a persistent condition which must have left her weakened, and in great distress. No one had been able to heal her of her malady, even although she had spent her savings seeking medical help.

Perhaps this woman had witnessed the Lord Jesus healing others, or had heard of his healing works. At any event, she believes that Jesus is able to heal her long-standing condition, even although all others have failed. However, possibly because of the nature of her condition and potential embarrassment, she does not want to ask the Lord to heal her or even to mention her condition to him. This, of course, would be in keeping with the culture of that day. More significantly, however, it would be because the woman was afraid that—since she was ceremonially unclean—she should not be in a public place, seeking help of a religious teacher. However, after 12 years of considerable distress and discomfort, this woman had decided to disregard culture and convention to seek the healing of the Lord—albeit, discretely.

Thus, making her way through the crowd surrounding and following the Lord Jesus, the woman managed eventually to approach him from behind. Then, stooping or kneeling to the ground—perhaps as though to

retrieve something that had fallen—the woman furtively stretched out her arm and very gently made contact with the fringe of the Lord's long flowing garment. Her reasoning was, “Jesus has power to heal people. That power must flow out of his Person and into the people that are being healed. Therefore, if I interrupt this flow of healing power by touching just the fringe of his garment, I too will receive healing.”

This should not be understood as a superstitious belief or action on the part of the woman. The woman acted in genuine faith. She was convinced in her own mind that the Lord Jesus had power to heal her. Yet, because of the nature of her condition, she was understandably afraid to ask the Lord directly. Of course, her condition would not have concerned the Lord in the least; for he was already fully aware of her condition. However, the woman did not know this.

Knowing that the woman was behind him, and that she had touched the hem of his garment, the Lord Jesus turned round. Speaking these words of great comfort and assurance, the Lord declared to her:

### MATTHEW 9:22

*“Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.”*

This confirms that the woman was not acting superstitiously. The Lord encourages her and assures her that she has been made well—through her faith. With all her heart, she had believed that Jesus was able to heal her; and her faith in the Son of God had been rewarded. She had been healed the instant she had touched the Lord's garment. By doing so, she was expressing faith in the Lord's power to heal, not in any supposed intrinsic powers within the garment. Now that she had been healed, she would never again suffer from this chronic and debilitating condition.

## JESUS RAISES THE RULER'S DAUGHTER

***Matthew 9:23-26***

### MATTHEW 9:23-24

The Lord Jesus had been delayed for a short time, while talking with the woman. While the Lord was still speaking, the synagogue ruler received an urgent message from his home informing him that his daughter had just died, and that it was pointless to trouble the Teacher any further. (Mark 5:35) Nevertheless, Jairus believed that the Lord could raise the dead.

Eventually, the Lord Jesus and his disciples arrived at the ruler's home. As they approached, they were met by the professional mourners, weeping, wailing and playing dirges, or funeral hymns, on their flutes. Joining in this great commotion, were the family and friends of the departed girl.

Immediately, the Lord entered the house, he dismissed these mourners and others not directly connected with the girl. Then, to the onlookers' astonishment, the Lord said, *“…the girl is not dead, but sleeping.”* (v.24)

Yes, the girl had passed away. Now, she was beyond the help of any physician—except the Great Physician. But the One who had power over life and death, and who held in his hands the life of every living thing, knew that death could not hold this girl, or thwart his sovereign control over life and death. To the

Lord Jesus, this girl was sleeping—sleeping the sleep of death. However, from that state he would restore her, for he was Lord over death itself, and the power of death must yield to his almighty sway.

Nevertheless, the people present laughed him to scorn. They had watched over this child while her condition continued to deteriorate, and now they had just witnessed the girl breathe her last. They knew that she was dead. How, then, could the Lord Jesus say otherwise? (Luke 8:53)

### MATTHEW 9:25-26

The Lord commands that the sceptical crowd be removed outside. Now, only the girl's father and mother, and Jesus' disciples, Peter, James and John, remain in the room. Then, taking the girl by the hand, the Lord declared (in Aramaic) *"Talitha cumi"*, which means "Little girl, I say to you, arise." (Mark 5:40-41) Immediately, the girl arose from her bed and began walking. The Lord Jesus then instructed that she should be fed. (Mark 5:42-43)

The girl's parents were amazed at this demonstration of Jesus' power over death. Although Jairus had expressed faith in the Lord's ability to restore his daughter, he and his wife were overwhelmed nevertheless at this act of divine power, and overjoyed to receive their beloved daughter back into their arms.

The waiting crowd, too, were astonished. They knew that this girl had died. Now, they could see her walking about and in perfect health. Therefore, they could not deny that Jesus had performed a remarkable and miraculous sign. Perhaps, they had witnessed the Lord's power to heal the sick. Now, probably for the first time, they witnessed the Lord's power to raise the dead. Therefore, a report of this further and greater demonstration of the Lord's almighty power soon spread abroad throughout the entire region.

## JESUS RESTORES SIGHT TO THE BLIND

***Matthew 9:27-31***

### MATTHEW 9:27

(Cf. Mark 8:22-26; 10:46-52)

As the Lord Jesus moved on from there, two blind men began to follow him.

We can only speculate on how these blind men were able to follow the Lord. Perhaps, they did so with the aid of friends (cf. Mark 8:22), or by listening for the Lord's voice as he spoke to his disciples, or by attaching themselves to the crowd or to the disciples. If at least one of these blind men still retained some residual sight, then of course he would be able to guide his friend.

As the men tagged along behind the Lord Jesus, they cried out to him, "*Have mercy on us, Son of David!"*

It seems remarkable indeed that the only recorded utterances of the title, 'Son of David', come from those who were blind; whereas, those who were sighted were blind to the fact that Jesus was the Son of David and the Messiah of Israel. (See also Matt. 20:30-31)

'Son of David', of course, was not just a reference to someone's descent from King David. To the Jews, 'Son of David' was a Messianic title. (Cf. Matt. 12:23; 15:22; 21:9; 22:42 ) It spoke of that royal descendant of King David who would come in fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham and to the other patriarchs. This was the Seed of the woman; the Righteous Branch, or the LORD's Anointed (or Messiah).

Although there were some exceptions, the ordinary Jewish people did not believe that Jesus was God's promised Messiah or the Son of David, and the religious leadership rejected this proposal outright. Yet, here two men who could not see could see that Jesus was the Son of David, or the Messiah promised to Israel.

## MATTHEW 9:28

At first, the Lord Jesus did not appear to be responding to their urgent pleas for mercy. So the two blind men continued after the Lord, crying out behind him until he entered into a house, followed by these two men. Turning toward them, the Lord Jesus asked, *"Do you believe that I am able to do this?"*

The Lord did not ask, "Do you believe that I am *willing* to do this?" but, "Do you believe that I am *able* to do this?"

Having heard of others being healed, the blind men probably believed that the Lord would be willing to heal them also. However, the Lord tests their faith by asking them if they believed that he was able. Yes, many others had been healed of all kinds of sicknesses and diseases. But, to these men's knowledge, none had been healed of blindness—and there must have been many blind people in Israel. Therefore, did they believe that the Son of David was able to restore sight to the blind?

Perhaps, these blind men had heard of this prophecy in the book of Isaiah:

> Isaiah 35:4-5 ESV
>
> (4) Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you."
>
> (5) Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped..."

Without hesitation, the two men replied to Jesus, *"Yes, Lord."* Whether or not the Lord Jesus had restored sight to the blind previously, was of little or no concern to them. They were convinced that he was able to restore sight to the blind, and that he could do so for them.

Here, is an example of faith to follow:

- First of all, these blind men believed that Jesus was the Son of David or Messiah of Israel. Even although the vast majority of the population—including the religious leadership—rejected this view, these two men were not afraid to express their faith publicly and to stand by their belief in Jesus as the Christ of God.
- Secondly, when their faith was put to the test, they demonstrated by their answer that theirs was no empty faith but a genuine belief in the power of Christ to heal—and to heal them of their particular condition, even if no other person known to them had been healed previously of that condition.

## MATTHEW 9:29

The Lord Jesus responded immediately to the unwavering trust and belief of these two blind men: *"According to your faith be it done to you."* Reaching out, the Lord Jesus gently touched their eyes.

As they had believed on the power of Jesus the Christ to restore their sight, so they found their sight restored completely. Their faith in Jesus as the Anointed of God, and the Son of David, had been rewarded. Now, they could see the LORD's Messiah. Now, they stood before the King descended from David who had come not only to heal sicknesses and to restore sight to the blind, but also to heal spiritual sicknesses, to forgive sins and to bear these sins on the cross.

## MATTHEW 9:30-31

Now, these two men could see. However—and possibly so that his ministry would not be impeded elsewhere—the Lord Jesus had commanded these men explicitly not to spread abroad the fact that he had healed them. However, contrary to the Lord's command, and in disobedience to his word, the two men began to blaze abroad what Jesus had done for them.

This type of 'witnessing' to the power and glory of the Lord Jesus might have been commendable if the Lord had not expressly forbidden it beforehand. There are circumstances and situations in life, however, where it is more appropriate to remain silent about the Lord Jesus, when it is clear that—to speak out—would hinder or harm rather than help the Lord's work.

This is exactly what happened here. Because these men disobeyed the Lord's express command, they would have alerted other people—including those hostile to Jesus and his work—to his presence in that area. Furthermore, when the news reached Judea, it would have given greater reason for (unjustifiable) complaints against the Lord and for (unjust) condemnation of his person and work, by the scribes and Pharisees in Jerusalem.

Additionally, the men's testimony to the healing power of the Lord Jesus—*given at an inopportune time, and in disobedience to the Lord's express command*—would have had the effect to drawing many others to Jesus simply for physical help or material aid. This, in turn, would have made it increasingly difficulty for the Lord to preach the Gospel in the larger towns and cities—unfettered by crowds seeking healing for their physical ailments alone.

Thus, we learn that it is possible to have faith in the Lord Jesus and yet to be disobedient to his Word. However, this should not be. Those who profess faith in the Lord Jesus must learn to obey his Word immediately and wholeheartedly.

# JESUS HEALS A DEMON-POSSESSED MAN

***Matthew 9:32-34***

## MATTHEW 9:32

Just as the Lord Jesus was about to leave that area, some people approached him accompanied by a man unable to speak. In many such cases, this is because the individual is suffering from a hearing im-

pediment or impairment, and therefore has never been able to hear words or to learn language. Such sufferers are known commonly as deaf-mutes.

However, unlike the usual deaf-mute case, this particular man was being 'demonized';[33] i.e., hostile spirits were exercising control over his body; in this case, the nerves, etc. controlling his tongue or vocal chords. Therefore, this particular man may not have been deaf. However, the controlling influence of the evil spirits[34] over his organs of speech rendered vocal communication extremely difficult if not impossible.

Thus, the man brought to the Lord Jesus was indeed being oppressed by demonic powers. The Lord Jesus himself recognised this, as is evident from the next verse.

## MATTHEW 9:33

Had this man being suffering from a physical condition alone, then the Lord Jesus would have healed him of that condition—as he did in numerous other cases. However, the method used by the Lord Jesus in healing this man indicates very clearly that his condition was far more complex than merely a physical or psychological condition.

Matthew relates that the Lord Jesus cast out the demon that had been severely afflicting this man and semi-paralysing some of his bodily functions. Therefore, this was not merely a case of demon-oppression, but of demon-possession or demonization—the more severe of the two categories.

The proof that this man had been delivered from an evil spirit was abundantly afforded to those who stood by when he began talking freely—much to the astonishment of the many onlookers. The amazed crowd began talking among themselves, declaring, *"Never was anything like this seen in Israel."*

Yes, there had been miracles in Israel performed by the prophets in the name of the LORD. However, none of these miracles or demonstrations of God's power could compare with the miracles being performed by the Lord Jesus, who here demonstrated his power and authority over the powers of evil. The supernatural powers of evil represented a far higher and more dangerous form of power than any natural or human power. Yet, the Lord Jesus would destroy these evil powers on the cross, and bring to naught the evil one himself when he won the victory over him and his evil works at Calvary.

[33] *demonized*: Gk., daimonizomenon, *daimonizomenon*; lit, demonized or demon-possessed.

[34] *evil spirits:* We are not, of course, considering the superstitious beliefs concerning evil spirits held to by remote and unenlightened tribes. Although there may be a prevalence of demons and demons worship among such tribes, on many such occasions afflictions, illnesses and other misfortunes among them have nothing to do with demons or evil spirits but arise from a perfectly natural and identifiable source. However, this is not the case here; nor is it the case in any other example of demon oppression or possession recorded in the Bible. Unless stated to the contrary within the Word of God itself, these are genuine cases of oppression or possession by evil spirits and emissaries of Satan. Those who deny the existence of Satan, demons, or evils spirits do so because they are being deluded and deceived by the very one whom they seek to deny. However, the Son of God and the Word of God assert the reality and malignant power of these evil beings. It is folly, therefore, for mortal, fallen and fallible man to deny what the immortal, eternal and infallible God asserts to be true.

## MATTHEW 9:33

The crowd stood in awe of the Lord Jesus and of his mighty works. However, the more the crowd wondered at the wonderful works of the Lord Jesus (without necessarily believing on him), the more the scribes and Pharisees were being irritated and infuriated. No matter how much they had tried to discredit the Lord Jesus and his works, the people kept on listening to him and continued to be amazed by his miraculous powers.

Now, however, the Lord Jesus had just delivered a man possessed by an evil spirit. This was too much for the Pharisees to bear. In the minds of the Pharisees, anyone who was able to cast out demons derived their power and authority from one of two sources—God or Satan. No other sources could impart such power to men. Therefore, reasoned the Pharisees, since Jesus is not from God (or so they claimed), then he must derive his power over evil spirits from Satan. Thus, in blasphemous calumny, the Pharisees asserted, "*He casts out demons by the prince of demons.*"

It did not seem to occur to these highly educated but spiritually unenlightened Pharisees that their statement was illogical—for a divided house cannot stand. Satan cannot cast out Satan—or his emissaries! However, probably, in their rage, this would not have concerned these self-righteous religious leaders. They knew within themselves that Jesus was not receiving his power from Satan, but from God. However, to have admitted this would have meant admitting that they had been wrong about Jesus being the Messiah; that they had been wrong about repudiating and discrediting his claims as the King of Israel, and that they had been wrong in telling the people that Jesus was receiving his power to work miracles from the evil one himself.

This was blasphemy of the utmost magnitude, and a direct attack on God the Holy Spirit, in whose name and by whose power the Lord Jesus performed these miraculous works. These Pharisees had come to the very verge of hardening their hearts fatally and finally against the things of God. If they failed to acknowledge their vile sin and repent of their evil deeds, no hope remained for them. On the contrary, a lost eternity awaited them.

# SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD

***Matthew 9:35-38***

## MATTHEW 9:35

Matthew tells us that the Lord Jesus travelled around the cities (or towns) and villages in that region: i.e., Galilee and its environs.

During his travels, the Lord Jesus taught in the Jewish synagogues. Thus, we observe that the synagogue rulers or rabbis of these regions must have permitted to Lord to expound the Scriptures and to proclaim the Gospel. Therefore, at this stage, some rabbis were tolerant of, or sympathetic toward, the Lord's teaching. Perhaps many of them would have remained so, if they had not been incited by the scribes and Pharisees to repudiate the teaching of Jesus. Of course, the hostility typical of many of the scribes and Pharisees was not confined to these Jewish religious leaders alone. Such hostility has always arisen, and still arises, from religious leaders (including certain 'leaders' within the church) who have never experi-

enced spiritual regeneration and who do not have the Spirit of Christ within them. The church must learn to identify such imposters and to deal with them as the Scriptures require.

As the Lord Jesus moved from place to place, he preached the Gospel of the kingdom, or the message of salvation through repentance and faith in himself. The Jews, of course, would have been thinking of a physical and earthly kingdom, over which the Messiah would reign. In this, they were to be disappointed, for the Lord's kingdom was not earthly but spiritual. (John 18:36) Those would become its citizens who entered that kingdom through faith in Christ and acknowledged him as Lord and King of their lives—as he was also of all creation. The kingdom of God (or the kingdom of heaven) would be within them. (Luke 17:21)

As was his practice, the Lord Jesus healed all those who were afflicted with sicknesses and diseases, so that none who approached him for healing of the bodies or souls were ever turned away.

## MATTHEW 9:35

Nevertheless, the Lord observed just how hapless and helpless were those who flocked around him—like sheep without a shepherd. They were hungry—for spiritual food; but they had no one to lead them to the green pastures or nourish them on the Word of God. They were thirsty—for the water of life; but they had no one to lead them to the still waters, where they might drink from the streams of living water or from the well that never runs dry. They were in great discomfort from the heat of the day; but they had no one to lead them to the shelter of the Rock or to bring them out of the midday sun and to the Son of Righteousness. They were indeed like sheep without a shepherd. Thus, the Lord had compassion on this lost and wandering flock.

Where were the shepherds? Some were feeding themselves, and neglecting God's flock. Others were not true shepherds of the flock at all, but merely hirelings who had no concern for the flock. Thus, the flock languished, because none cared enough to seek them and search for them, to bring them back to the fold, and to lead them out to the safe pastures—feeding and nurturing them on the Word of God.

## MATTHEW 9:35

Seeing how great was their distress, and how little their shepherds or leaders cared for them, the Lord declared to his disciples, *"The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest."*

Changing the metaphor, the Lord sees the large crowds—representatively encompassing mankind—as a vast harvest field. The crop is ready now for reaping, and it is a plentiful harvest field. Where the seed had been sown, the harvest will be abundant. Nevertheless, the labourers to gather in this harvest are few indeed. This is like the sheep without a shepherd: so few are the genuine shepherds of the Lord that large numbers of these sheep go unfed and with no one to guide them in the right way.

Since the labourers are few, the Lord Jesus exhorts his disciples to pray to the Lord of the harvest—and to pray most earnestly—that he will send out labourers into the harvest field.

From this we learn, that those who are the genuine servants of the Lord—whether shepherds, pastors, evangelists, or any others of this nature—must be called and appointed by God, the Lord of the harvest, to that office. Those, therefore, who hold any of these offices without being raised up and appointed by

the Lord, are not genuine servants of God. And if not called and appointed by the Lord, they are wolves in sheep's clothing with nothing of value to offer to the sheep and nothing but spiritual ruin or destruction to bring upon them.

Thus, the Lord's people are to pray earnestly and persistently for labourers to go forth into the harvest fields. God will bless their endeavours, and he will reward their faithfulness to him.

Yet, although these labourers are to harvest the fields among all mankind, this will not be the final harvest. There will be another harvest—at the end of the age. Then, the Lord of the harvest will appear; the reapers will be the holy angels, and they will separate the wheat from the chaff. The wheat will be gathered into the Lord's granaries, for the wheat represents his redeemed and holy people. However, the chaff will be separated from the wheat and gathered into bundles for burning in the fire. The chaff represents the ungodly and the finally impenitent among mankind; and they will be extracted from among the most wicked people on earth to among the most 'righteous' of people on earth, and even from among the church itself—for in its holy precincts the angels of God will discover many false professors; many who professed to know the Lord, but of whom the Lord will say, *"Depart from me, I never knew you..."* (Matt. 3:12; 13:30; Luke 3:17; 13:27-28)

How essential then to preach the truth, to teach the truth, and to bring forth consistently the truth in our lives, as exemplified by the fruit of the Spirit.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 10

## JESUS COMMISSIONS HIS TWELVE DISCIPLES

***Matthew 10:1-42***

In this chapter, the Lord Jesus instructs his twelve disciples before sending them out to preach. Much of the material refers to their conduct and to the effects of their preaching when sent forth with the Gospel on this particular occasion. However, the Lord takes the opportunity to include some material that would be more relevant to the disciples when preaching the Word on subsequent occasions. It would be relevant also to future followers of the Lord when proclaiming the Gospel not only throughout Israel but also in other lands. Therefore, the principles of these instructions remain valid until the end of the present age.

### MATTHEW 10:1

(Mark 3:13-19: Luke 6:12-16)

Matthew now relates the calling and commissioning of the twelve disciples. We must remember, of course, that Matthew is not necessarily relating certain parts of his Gospel in strictly chronological order, as we noted from the preceding two chapters.

After the Lord Jesus had called his disciples, he granted to them the necessary power and authority to cast out evil spirits, and to heal all kinds of illnesses and diseases. Of course, in and of themselves, the disciple had no power or ability to exorcise demons or to heal sicknesses and diseases. They derived this power entirely from the Lord Jesus. Only by acting in his name and by his express authority, could they actually heal the sick and deliver the demon possessed. (Matt. 28:18) Thus, we observe that the twelve disciples (and others acting in the Lord's name) received this power and authority from the Lord Jesus himself—unlike the sham healers of the day, or the false miracle workers who received their supernatural powers from essentially evil sources.

Since all the disciples were now commissioned and equipped to perform miracles in the name of the Lord Jesus, this would have made it possible to work individually with the growing crowds who came for healing or deliverance. From this we learn that those whom the Lord has called to his service have been equipped with a variety of gifts, talents or abilities for use in the Lord's service. Thus, the church should recognise these gifted individuals and use them as the Lord has intended—for his service and glory. (1 Cor. 12:4-11)

It is of paramount importance to note, however, that not everyone called to Christ belongs to Christ. Many are called, but few are chosen. (Matt. 20:16; 22:14; cf. 1 Pet. 2:9) Likewise, not everyone able to perform miracles in the name of the Lord belongs to the Lord. On occasions, the Lord may work through someone to achieve his own purposes, without that person being saved or sanctified. Even worse, not everyone who is numbered among the Lord's people, who preaches his word, who teaches in his name, and who participates in the sacraments and other church ordinances and services, is a child of God. On the contrary, some apparently very religious and gifted people may turn out to be the children of the evil one.

Why do we say this? Because numbered among the twelve disciples was one who did not belong to Christ. Christ had called him to service, but Christ had not chosen him to eternal life. Christ had commissioned him to cast out demons and to heal the sick, but this same man had never experienced regeneration or sanctification of heart and life—nor would he ever do so, for he was the 'son of perdition.' (John 17:12; cf. with 2 Thess. 2:3)

We are speaking of Judas Iscariot, who had no part or lot in the kingdom of God—even although he associated with the Lord and with his followers for about 3 years and was accepted by the other disciples (although not by the Lord) as a genuine believer. Despite his close associations with the Lord and with his people, this man was never a believer. Consequently, Judas Iscariot was excluded from God's kingdom and from an inheritance in heaven.

So it is with certain people in the church today. Like Judas who deceived others into believing that he was a genuine believer, so these people will deceive the church into believing that they are genuine children of God. God, however, cannot be deceived—and these same false professors will be excluded from God's glorious heavenly kingdom and from the new creation. (Matt. 7:21-23; Luke 13:23-28)

## THE NAMES OF THE TWELVE

### MATTHEW 10:2-4

Matthew now provides us with the name of the Lord's twelve disciples. These were as follows:

Simon Peter:

> Simon (Peter) was a married man (Mark 1:30), who had first been introduced to the Lord Jesus by his brother, Andrew. (John 1:40-42) When Jesus met Simon, he had declared to him, *"So you are Simon the son of John?* "...*You shall be called Cephas"*[35] (which means Peter) (John 1:42)
>
> > "Alluding to the meaning of his name, Jesus would make Peter a rock upon which he would found his church. This, however, was never intended to mean that Peter would become the Patriarch or Ruler over the church universal. Nor did it imply that Peter would have any successors in this office, deriving their authority from the apostle or from the Lord Jesus. If such had been intended, this would have been taught unequivocally in the New Testament, especially in the epistles. Again, had this been intended, Peter would have made clear reference to this in his own epistles. However, in his epistles, Peter classes himself as a servant of the Lord Jesus, and an apostle in exactly the same manner as the other apostles. (1 Pet. 1:1; 5:1; 2 Pet. 1:1)
> >
> > "Peter was a 'rock' in the early church, in allusion to his name. (Matt. 16:15-20) He was also one of the leaders of that church, along with James and John. (Gal. 2:9) He was a foundation of the church—in common with all other holy prophets and apostles. (Eph. 2:20) However, the Rock of Ages upon which the

[35] *Cephas*: In Aramaic, the name '*Kephas'* (or *Cephas*) means 'rock' (i.e., large rock fragment or detached mass or rock) or 'stone'. In Greek, the name Petroj, *Petros ('Peter')* has the same meaning.

Church is founded is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one and only foundation and cornerstone of his Church worldwide. (Matt. 21:42; Acts 4:11; 1 Cor. 3:11-12; Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet. 2:6-7)

"When the Scriptures refer to the apostles as the 'foundation' of the church, this should not be understood to mean that the church was founded upon the apostles as individuals. (Eph. 2:20; cf. Rom. 15:20; 1 Cor. 3:10-11; Heb. 6:1) The church was founded upon Christ as a Person and an individual. However, when we speak of the foundation of the apostles, we are not referring to the apostles as individuals but to the foundation that they laid by their preaching and teaching. The apostles proclaimed and exalted the Lord Jesus Christ. They preached the Gospel; they taught the way of the Lord; they established and built up the churches, and they carried the Gospel to foreign lands. Thus, by their preaching and teaching, the apostles were establishing, strengthening and building up the church, the true and sure foundation of which was laid on the Person and work of Jesus Christ himself. The Lord Jesus was, and is, the Chief Cornerstone or the Head of the Corner. (Isa. 28:16; Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet. 2:6)"[36]

Andrew:

Andrew, a fisherman whose name means '*manly*' or '*manliness*', came from the small village of Bethsaida on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee. (Cf. Matt. 4:18-20) Originally, Andrew was one of John the Baptist's disciples. However, Andrew left the Baptist to follow Jesus (John 1:40), together with another of the Baptist's disciples—probably, John; later to become the apostle.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee:

James, and his younger brother John, were the sons of Zebedee and Salome. Both brothers were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. When called to follow the Lord Jesus, the two men left their nets immediately. (Mark 1:19-20) The Lord Jesus surnamed James and John '*Boanerges*' or 'the sons of thunder'; perhaps on account of their impetuous nature. (Mark 3:17). James was to become the first martyr among the apostles, when he was beheaded by Herod Agrippa. (Acts 12:1-2). John was to become the longest living apostle and evangelist, the writer of the Gospel of John, the three Epistles of John, and the book of Revelation.

(In passing, we should note that James, the Lord's brother, was not one of the Twelve; and, at this time, he was not a believer—although, following his conversion, he became a leader in the early church.)

Philip:

Philip, whose name means '*lover of horses*', also came from the village of Bethsaida in Galilee. It was Philip who introduced Nathaniel to Jesus. It was he of whom the Lord asked in connection with the feeding of the multitude, "*Philip, Whence shall we buy bread?*" (John 6:5-6) Of his later life, however, little is known.

[36] The preceding three paragraphs have been quoted from *Expository Notes: Gospel of John* (chapter 1:42) ed. 1.1.05 by Gordon Lyons.

(This Philip is not the same as Philip the evangelist, who was one of the 'seven' in the early church. (Acts 6:5; 21:8-9))

Nathanael or Bar Tolmai (i.e., Bartholomew), the son of Tolmai (or Talmai):

Nathanael, whose name means '*gift of God*' or *'God (has) given*', came from the town of Cana in Galilee. The three synoptic Gospels never mention Nathanael, and John never mentions Bartholomew. Therefore, it is believed that the two names belong to the same person. (John 21:2; Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13)

When first told about the Lord Jesus, Nathanael was singularly unimpressed: *Nathanael said to [Philip], "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"* (John 1:46) Ultimately, Nathanael, would be overawed by the Lord's detailed knowledge of his personal circumstances, confessing Jesus thus: *..."Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel."* (John 1:49)

Thomas (Gk., Didymus, a Twin):

Very little is known about Thomas' background, trade, or family connections. Despite his reputation as 'doubting Thomas', he was a sincere believer. He had not been present when the other disciples had met with the risen Lord, therefore Thomas expressed scepticism and disbelieve. However, as was apparent from other encounters with Thomas, he seemed slow at times to believe or understand the truth. However, when fully persuaded of something in his own mind, the held resolutely to his faith. When he finally witnessed the risen Lord Jesus, Thomas would worship him as his Lord and his God.

Matthew or Levi, the son of Alphaeus

Matthew, who came from Capernaum and whose name means *'gift of God'* lit., *'gift of Yahweh',* (or Levi) was a former tax collector ('publican') or customs official appointed by the tetrarch of Galilee. Matthew was also the writer of this Gospel. Judging by the feast that he laid on for the Lord Jesus and his disciples, and for a number of other invited guests, Matthew seems to have been a man of some wealth.

From his position as a tax collector or customs officer, Matthew must have been an educated man. Possibly, he could speak Greek in addition to his native Aramaic. In the course of his work as a tax collector, he would be meeting and talking with many different people and nationalities passing through his customs post either from across the Sea of Galilee or from the Damascus road—one of the main arterial roads between Syria and Judea, and beyond.

James (the Less), the son of Alphaeus

At the outset, we should note that Matthew and James are probably not sons of the *same* Alphaeus: in other words, they were not brothers. A number of the older commentators believed that the Alphaeus of whom James was a son, was the same as Cleopas or Clopas, the husband of Mary, who was a sister of the virgin Mary. (Luke 24:18; John 19:25).

Again, although some commentators believe otherwise, it seems unlikely that this James was James the Lord's brother: For, at this time, "*not even his brothers believed in him*." (John 7:5)—although they did so later. (Acts 1:14) James, however, may have been the Lord's cousin.

Thaddaeus (i.e., Lebbaeus or Judas), the brother (or son) of James:

Thaddaeus was the surname of the disciple named Lebbaeus or Judas (not Iscariot). There is some difficulty in ascertaining whether Lebbaeus (i.e., Judas) was the son or the bother of James, as the text is omitted in the Greek, the reading being '*Judas of James*'. However, apparently Lebbaeus Thaddaeus was known also as Jude or Judas.

Simon (the Cananean, or the Zealot):

Simon is so designated to distinguish his name from that of Simon Peter. He is termed, 'Simon the Cananean (Gk., Σἰμων ὁ Καναναῖο) not to connect him necessarily with Canaan, but to refer to him as a Zealot (from "Kanaim" meaning "Zealots"). Apparently, Simon was associated with a religious faction with extreme moral standards (to the point of killing those who broke the moral code). These Kainim or Zealots professed (hypocritically) to be preparing the people for Messiah's appearing. When called by the Lord Jesus, Simon forsook his former associates and religious extremists to follow the Lord Jesus.

Judas (Iscariot, or Man of Kerioth), son of Simon Iscariot:

Of the Twelve disciples whom the Lord Jesus called, one was to become a thief, a traitor and the betrayer of the Lord Jesus. This was Judas Iscariot. Unlike the other disciples of the Lord Jesus, Judas had never experienced the grace of God in his life. He was an unregenerate man, and would remain so throughout his time with the Lord Jesus. Yet, we observe that—in common with the other disciples—Judas Iscariot was commissioned to preach the Gospel, to heal the sick and to cast out evil spirits. This demonstrates unmistakably that even the worst of men can be used to fulfil the purposes of God. But it demonstrates also that their gifts and their association with the Lord, with his followers and with the church will not save them from eternal condemnation.

From the outset, the Lord Jesus had been aware of Judas Iscariot's treacherous character. Indeed, in John's Gospel, the Lord declares, *"Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil."* (John 6:70-71) Judas had been called or chosen to apostolic office, but not to grace and salvation. Therefore, we are reminded very forcefully that not everyone who occupies high office in the church has been called and chosen to eternal life through the grace of God. Like Judas, many deceitful and wicked imposters exist and flourish among the people and church of God. In due course, the Lord Jesus will consign them to a lost eternity in hell.

## THE TWELVE SENT FORTH TO PREACH

### MATTHEW 10:5-6

Now, Jesus commands these twelve apostles to begin their journey. However, the Lord charged them strictly to avoid all Gentile locations and all Samaritan towns and villages. This was not because Gentiles and Samaritans were to be excluded from God's kingdom, but because of a prior commitment and promise to God's chosen people. Thus, the Lord declared, "...*but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" (v.6; cf. Matt. 15:24)

From the beginning, God had chosen Abraham and had promised to bless him, to make of him a great and mighty nation, and to send his Anointed from the descendants of this one man. (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1ff)

This was to be the Messiah of Israel. To the lost sheep of that House, the Messiah was to appear—as prophesied in the Scriptures. Thus, the Lord Jesus sends forth his disciples to preach the Gospel to these lost sheep of Israel, calling them to repentance and faith in their now present Messiah.

## MATTHEW 10:7

As they journeyed throughout Israel, and among the Jewish people, the disciples were to proclaim the kingdom of heaven. They were to assert that this kingdom was now at hand—at the very door. This was to emphasise the imminence of God's kingdom, and also the urgency of responding in faith and obedience to the Gospel message. This was the Day of the Lord; the day foretold by the prophet when the Messenger of the Covenant would appear suddenly at the temple. (Mal. 3:1) That Day had almost come, and the people who sought their Messiah ought to have been prepared to meet their Messiah, and to seek his love and mercy.

## MATTHEW 10:8

As a sign of their authority to act in the name of the Lord, the disciples were to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and to cast out demons. These demonstrations of power ought to have proved to the people that the disciples were acting by the authority and in the name of God—for only God could perform such miracles. They certainly could not have been performed by the disciples' own power. So, in they eyes of the people, the Lord would be magnified and his name glorified.

The Lord Jesus also tells his disciples not to expect remuneration or reward for their labours. Granted, the labourer is worthy of his hire; but he has not been called and appointed to serve by the people, but by the Lord God. Therefore, God will be his reward. God will ensure that his needs are met by whatever means he considers appropriate—but without necessarily placing any obligation on the people who were being reached with the Gospel, at least until these people respond to the Gospel message. To them, the Gospel was to be free—for it was the Gospel of God's free grace and mercy.

## MATTHEW 10:9-10

The Lord Jesus enlarges on this thought when he declares,

> Matthew 10:9-10 ESV
>
> (9) “Acquire no gold nor silver nor copper for your belts, (10) no bag for your journey, nor two tunics nor sandals nor a staff, for the labourer deserves his food.”

The Lord's servants were not to seek to profit personally from their preaching of the Gospel or ministering to the sick. These services were to be provided free of charge of any kind. Thus, the disciples were not to accumulate money to take with them in their money belts, nor were they to carry with them a traveller's bag. Even their clothing was to be limited to what they were wearing for the journey, with no additional top coats or tunics, sandals or staff.

When the Lord declares that "*the labourer deserves his wages*", he is alluding to the Old Testament precept which says that one was not to muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain, and the labourer or workman is worthy of his hire. Thus, the apostle Paul writes to Timothy:

1 Timothy 5:17-18 ESV

(17) Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching. (18) For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The labourer deserves his wages." (Cf. Lev. 19:13; Deut. 25:4; 1 Cor. 9:9-10)

It is a clearly defined principle of God's Word that those who serve at the temple should get their living from the temple: i.e., from a share in the offerings brought to the temple. Thus, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 9:13-14 ESV

(13) Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings?

(14) In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

Those who preach the Gospel are entitled to be supported by those who benefit from that preaching. Today, this would be the church or the members of the church who would be responsible to God for supporting those whom the Lord had called and commissioned to his service. In Jesus' day, it would be those who gave of their means willingly to support the Lord in his ministry, together with those who contributed voluntarily to the needs of the disciples as they brought the Gospel to the towns and villages, as commanded by the Lord. Subsequently, the early church would assume this responsibility with their gifts and collections.

Thus, the Lord Jesus was assuring those whom he had called and commissioned to his service that they need not be concerned about their food or material support—for the Lord would provide: That is, by his providence and grace, the Lord would ensure that every need would be met, usually by means of certain people in various locations who would be raised up for this purpose.

## MATTHEW 10:11

Upon arrival at a particular town or village, the disciples were to enquire which person or family in that town was worthy or of good reputation. Of course, in these days, many people were willing to offer hospitality to strangers, but not everyone making this offer did so with pure or honest motives. Therefore, the Lord's servants needed to establish who in that town was honest and reliable.

Having located a trustworthy household which was willing to show them hospitality, the disciples were to remain there for as long as they ministered in that town or village. This may have been to prevent the disciples going from house to house, and possibly giving concern to each household about what might have been discussed about them with other households: In other words, it was to forestall any anxieties about gossip or tale-bearing from house to house. (Cf. 1 Tim. 5:13)

## MATTHEW 10:12-13

When the disciples entered a home, they were to greet ('welcome' or 'salute') that household, pronouncing peace upon it. This was a conditional and revocable blessing; because, under certain circumstances, it could be annulled or withdrawn.

(In passing, we should note that the word used for this greeting of peace (Gk., εἰρήνη, *eirēnē*) is distinct from the common Jewish blessing of peace, welfare, or prosperity: i.e., *Shalom*.)

If, indeed, the household turned out to be worthy and honourable as the disciples had been led to believe, then their greeting or blessing of peace was to remain upon that household or family. If, however, it transpired during their stay with that family, that they were in fact an unworthy or dishonourable household, then God's blessing upon that family was to be revoked or withdrawn.

It is a dreadful matter to lose the blessing of the Lord, once bestowed. It had been better for those people not to have experienced the presence of the Lord, in his servants, than to have despised the Lord by acting unworthily or dishonourably toward his appointed servants and ministers of the Gospel. The apostles were acting in the name and by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. Those, however, who disregard, reject, or misuse Christ's servants, do so to the appointed ministers of Christ himself; and, therefore, to Christ they will be held accountable.

## MATTHEW 10:14

How dreadful for those who despise and repudiate Christ and his Gospel!

The Lord Jesus realised that his disciples would not receive a welcome in every home, or in every town and village which they visited. Indeed, when they sought to preach the message in certain locations, they would find that the Gospel would be rejected and they themselves despised by the local population. Where this occurred consistently, the disciples were to withdraw from that home, village, town or city. To have continued preaching the Word to such people, and under such circumstances, was useless. These people were under God's judgment. Thus, elsewhere, the Lord Jesus declared:

> Matthew 7:6 ESV
>
> (6) “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.”

It is clear from the teaching of the Lord Jesus and his apostles that people of all kinds can be brought to repentance and faith in Christ—regardless of their former sins or sinful way of life. However, there is one category of people to whom this no longer applies, or to whom it will cease to apply; for they have put themselves beyond the pale of redemption. These are the people who—consistently, repeatedly and maliciously—despise and repudiate Christ and his Gospel. However, unlike Saul of Tarsus (the apostle Paul) they do not despise, reject and blaspheme Christ *in ignorance*, but with a sufficient knowledge of the truth and of what they are doing. Therefore, as Paul says in Romans, such people are without excuse. (Cf. Rom. 1:18-22; Heb. 10:26-31)

Like the wicked and impenitent peoples of the world in Noah's day, these categories of people who repeatedly despise and repudiate the Gospel are people who have hardened themselves finally against the

things of God. Furthermore, as he did to the Pharaoh of Egypt, God has hardened their hearts and minds to the truth concerning himself. As in Noah's day, the Spirit of God (in common grace) ceases to strive with such people, so that they can no longer respond to the truth. They are beyond repentance, and only one outcome remains for them: eternal perdition. (Gen. 6:13; 7:23; 2 Pet. 2:5)

Thus, whenever the Lord's disciples encountered such wicked and sustained opposition to the Gospel, they were to leave that home, town or village. As a token of God's disapprobation, the disciples were to shake off the dust from their feet against that place. This signified the ultimate withdrawal of God's mercies from these individuals, and of the ministers of God's salvation from their homes, towns and villages.

These may sound dreadful words—and so they are. Yet, the Lord Jesus himself declares what will become of such impenitent individuals and peoples.

## MATTHEW 10:15

Matthew 10:15 ESV

(15) “Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.” (Cf. Luke 10:12)

Sodom and Gomorrah were notorious for their vile iniquity, and especially for their unbridled sexual immorality, and for the wanton and flagrant practise of homosexuality. (Gen. 13:13; 19:4-5) On account of these sins, the LORD had destroyed these towns and everyone within them, with the exception of Abraham's nephew, Lot. (Gen. 19:15-29)

Many people of Jesus' day could understand why God destroyed the wicked and perverse people of these towns and their surrounding villages. Nevertheless, God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone—not even such sinners as those found in Sodom and Gomorrah; nor does he seek their destruction without just cause. Rather, in his righteousness, holiness and justice, God destroys sinners (of whatever kind) *only when they refuse wilfully and repeatedly to seek and accept his truth—the very truth which could have led them to repent of their sins, to confess them to God and to renounce them completely*. (Ezek. 33:11)

However, having refused wilfully to seek the knowledge of the truth, to confess and renounce their sins, and to call on the LORD for mercy, the people of Sodom and Gomorrah persisted in these vile iniquities until God's temporal judgment fell upon them. Even so, greater punishment awaits these impenitent people on the Day of Judgment yet to come. (Jude 1:7)

Nevertheless, the Lord Jesus asserts categorically that the coming judgment upon those who reject him and his Gospel will be even greater than that to be endured by the people of Sodom and Gomorrah; a punishment that Jude alludes in his epistle:

Jude 1:7 ESV

(7) just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

Sodom and Gomorrah had become guilty of the vilest depravity. Like the same kinds of people today, this sinful condition had come upon them by degrees, and over a prolonged period, because they had repudi-

ated the knowledge of God. Yet, *their* knowledge of God was not to be compared to the knowledge of God revealed to the present generation by Christ in his Gospel. Those who reject and repudiate this much greater knowledge of the truth, or the messengers who bear that truth, must inevitably face greater judgment. So it will be for all those who despise Christ and the Gospel on the Judgment at the Last Day.

Yet, this need not be. For all those who seek the Lord will find the Lord. And his mercies are to all those who seek him with a pure heart, and who call upon his name in truth. The immoral and the practising homosexual people of Sodom and Gomorrah could have experienced the mercy of the Lord, together with his everlasting love and forgiveness. If, by his grace, they had sought him with all their hearts, *renouncing their sins*, they would have been found him abundant in mercy, and able and willing to save; and to save to the uttermost all those who came unto him by faith. (1 Cor. 6:9-11)

## MATTHEW 10:16

Having charged his disciples concerning the Gospel and how to deal with its rank opponents, the Lord now cautions the apostles with these words:

> Matthew 10:16 ESV
>
> (16) “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

The word translated '*Behold*' is intended to mark what follows as of particular importance, and therefore as requiring a ready and receptive ear (or heart or mind).

The regions into which the Lord was about to send his disciples were hostile to the things of God, such as truth, righteousness and other moral or spiritual values. As everywhere else, many people cherished their sin and delighted in iniquity. The lived in spiritual darkness, but they preferred that darkness because the light of God's truth would expose their sins and their sinful lifestyles, making God's judgment upon them more apparent. (John 3:19-20) Thus, whenever anyone attempted to speak to them of righteous, truth and judgment to come, they would rail against such matters and seek to criticise or discredit its source.

Knowing what fallen human nature was like, the Lord Jesus warns his disciples that they would be like sheep amidst wolves. Ravening wolves attack sheep, seeking to destroy them. Similarly, many of the people would act like wolves or other wild beasts towards the Lord's disciples—his sheep. Nevertheless, the Lord's sheep would be protected by the Shepherd of the sheep. Therefore, although exposed to great danger from an evil and hostile world, the Lord's servants were to go forth into that hazardous and potentially life-threatening situation with the Lord beside them in the way.

The Lord Jesus then tells his disciples to be *“wise as serpents...”* Serpents were considered to be subtle or cunning (and, in Satan's case, devious and deceptive). However, their subtlety or cunning was considered to arise from their greater instincts, or 'higher wisdom'. Therefore, just as a serpent appears to exercise great acumen in the presence of danger or when about to strike, so the Lord's disciples were to act likewise. In the presence of danger, or in other potentially hazardous situations, the disciples were to use the spiritual wisdom and common sense given them by God, and to act accordingly.

Then, the Lord Jesus says that his disciples were to be *“innocent as doves.”* In other words, they were not to seek to give offence unnecessarily, but to be as harmless as doves among the people. They were

not to become involved in debates or arguments unnecessarily over the truths of the Gospel, but were to present these truths in meekness and reverent fear; leaving God the Holy Spirit to bring the message home. They were to be courageous but not contentious; persistent but not pretentious; meek but not malleable.

## MATTHEW 10:17

Now, the Lord Jesus tells his disciples what kind of treatment they might expect at the hands of evil men. The Lord advises the Twelve to *'beware of men'*. The Lord knew men's hearts. He was aware of the malice and wickedness that lay concealed within the depths of men's hearts—even in the hearts of the most 'pious' or 'religious' people. He knew how certain of these individuals would react toward his disciples when challenged with the Gospel message.

Hostile reactions against the Lord's servants might include verbal or physical abuse. It might involve the arrest of the disciples by the religious or civil authorities on the pretext of disturbing the peace, of proclaiming teaching contrary to Jewish law, of proclaiming a kingdom contrary to that of Caesar, or one of many other false and malicious charges. The aim of the authorities would be to silence the message by detaining and incarcerating the messengers.

Yet, again, the Lord warns the disciples to expect physical punishment for preaching the Gospel—inflicted by those who were the ministers or agents of God in the civil realm!

The disciples might be arrested and brought before the courts—religious or civil. On the basis of the false charges levelled against them, they might be flogged in the synagogue; or—if before the Roman courts—they might be lashed with the cruel metal and thorn-studded Roman flail. These, of course, were only some examples of the unjust and unjustifiable sufferings and punishments that awaited the Lord's servants when they preached the Gospel and ministered in the name of Christ. The apostle Paul was to endure many afflictions of this kind when he proclaimed Christ.

## MATTHEW 10:18

If all this were not enough, the disciples would suffer even more by being dragged[37] before civil governors and other rulers (tetrarchs, ethnarchs or kings). Had they been given the opportunity, these disciples might have gone willingly with their accusers to face the governing authorities, and to give an account of their ministry. However, the Lord says they will be 'dragged' (transferred while in custody) before these rulers.

However, the disciples would suffer these hardships and inconveniences for a purpose: to bring glory to God and to further the Gospel. What seemed like a hindrance to the Gospel message would in fact further the Gospel message. The disciples would stand before rulers and governors, witnessing to the truth and power of the Gospel. Perhaps, this would turn out to be one of the most effective ways of making Christ and his message known to the royal courts and their households, and to the representatives or officers of the civil government. In due course, the Lord Jesus himself would testify both before the supreme religious council or Sanhedrin and to the Roman government under Pontius Pilate.

[37] *dragged*: to be led away (under arrest). The word does not necessarily mean to be dragged literally or by force, but simply to be brought, led, or carried [from one place to another] while in custody.

The Lord adds that—under these situations—his disciples would be bearing witness also to the Gentiles. When the Lord had sent them out to preach, he had charged them to preach only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and not the Gentiles. However, if by the providence of God, they were to be arraigned before Gentiles governors and rulers, or other non-Jewish officers of the law or of the civil government, then the disciples were to bear witness to Christ on those occasions.

## MATTHEW 10:19-20

The Lord Jesus knew also that—when arrested and brought before judges or rulers—his disciples would become anxious. Emboldened by the Holy Spirit, who would empower them at Pentecost, the disciples would not fear being known as the Lord's followers or of witnessing in his name to these authorities. (Acts 2:1-36) However, they would fear lest they should not witness effectively, or should know not what to say or how to say it.

Thus, the Lord assures them that they need have no concerns. For, at the time they would be required to give an account of themselves and their actions, it would be given them what to answer. This was because it would not be they alone who answered, but the Spirit of God who answered through them. This does not mean that the Holy Spirit would speak instead of the disciples, but that the Holy Spirit would influence the minds of the disciples, causing them to provide the most appropriate and powerful answers. (Mark 13:11; Luke 12:11-12; 21:12-15)

## MATTHEW 10:21

Yet, the disciples were to expect hostility not only from strangers such as those mentioned, but also from those known to them—even from their own families and friends. So antagonistic would some relationships become because of the disciple's faith in Christ and witness for Christ that even their own relatives might rise against them. Perhaps because they believed that the disciples of Jesus had betrayed their Jewish roots or faith, brother would turn violently against brother—even delivering their own kin over to death. (Luke 21:16-17)

Similarly, parents would utterly disown or repudiate their own children because of the children's faith in the Lord Jesus. Likewise, children would rise up against their own parents because their parents had become committed followers of the Lord Jesus. So bitter would be their hatred against Christ and his cause that these children would seek to have their parents put to death; and likewise fathers with their children. (Mark 13:11-13; Luke 12:51-53; 21:16-17)

Thus, the Lord Jesus shows to his disciples just how great would be cost of following him and of serving the cause of the Gospel. This was true especially in the early days of the church, and during various periods since that time. It is true also in certain lands today, where parents or children can seek to have their closest relatives put to death because of their commitment to Christ and to his cause.

## MATTHEW 10:22

If this were not bad enough, the Lord now tells his followers of the hatred that they will experience at the hands of hostile and bitter men and women. The Lord says that they will be hated or despised by '*all*': i.e., not everyone without exception, but people of all kinds from all strata or segments of society.

Yet, this hostility and bitterness was not so much aimed against the disciples, as against the One who had commissioned and sent the disciples to preach. The hatred of the world is directly, firstly, against Christ and his Gospel, and then, secondly, against his followers because they are the Lord's representatives.

Unregenerate men and women do not like to be reminded of their sin and of the coming judgment on unrepentant mankind. Therefore, when the light of God's truth shines into their hearts and lives, those who prefer to live in spiritual darkness do all in their power to extinguish the light—aided by the 'prince of darkness': That is, by denying God as the source of this light; by rejecting the Light of the world (Christ), and by abusing and falsely accusing those who bear the message of light and truth (the Gospel), they attempt to deny what God has plainly revealed to them. (Rom. 1:18-32)

We must remember, of course, that the root of this hatred and bitterness against the Lord and his people does not come from sinful men and women alone. Yes, they harbour such evil within them. However, they are being influenced by Satan—'the prince of the power of the air' (Eph. 2:2)—to direct their hostility against the Lord and his people. The malice of the evil one knows no bounds. However, because he is powerless to attack Christ directly, he attacks the Lord's people instead. He induces sinful men and women to give vent to their hatred and bitterness toward Christ and his Gospel by attacking the Lord's servants, by maliciously accusing them, or by attempting to discredit them or their testimony for Christ. Throughout the ages, this is one method that the devil has employed to attack the people of God. Therefore, the Lord's people need to be aware of this danger in order to repel these attacks and stand their ground—by God's grace.

Then, the Lord adds: "*But the one who endures to the end will be saved.*"

Under such severe persecution, many who claim to be the Lord's servants will apostatise or abandon their profession of faith. They may have been associated with the church and the Lord's people for a considerable time. They may have served in the Lord's name for many years. However, if—when faced with persecution of such magnitude as that just described by the Lord Jesus—they then turn away from the faith rather than suffer for the sake of his name, then they have denied the faith.

Yet, those only can deny Christ and his cause who never truly belonged to him; but whose profession was merely external or superficial. Such people will not stand under persecution. *"But the one who endures to the end will be saved."* Those who continue to stand by their faith regardless of the cost, demonstrate that they are the true children of God. And those who are God's redeemed children must persevere to the end—for they are being sustained by God's almighty hands. Thus, those who endure will be saved: not merely through persecution, for persecution may cost them their lives, but unto eternal salvation or eternal life.

## MATTHEW 10:23

Nevertheless, when the disciples encountered sustained persecution, they were not to remain in that town or village. Rather, they were to make haste to the next town or village with the message of eternal salvation. The precious seed of God's Word was not to be wasted on those who trampled the life-imparting seed beneath their feet. Instead, the seed was to be sown in other fields: the Gospel was to be proclaimed in other locations; and if that location also repudiated the message of life, then the disciples were to continue moving further afield with the Word of life.

Ultimately, the entire land of Israel would be visited with the Gospel. Those who had received the Gospel would be saved by the Gospel, but those who had repudiated the Gospel would be judged by the Gospel in the last day.

By extension, these instructions applied to the Lord's servants or missionaries throughout succeeding generations, and up to the present time. The servants of God today are to observe these principles when taking the Gospel to other lands. They are to remember that they are bearing precious seed and that this seed must not continue to be sown in ground that has shown itself consistently unreceptive and hostile to the message of Christ or to his servants. Indeed, this compares with the stony ground of the Lord's parable, where there is no root and no life. (Matt. 13:20-21)

In the latter part of this verse, the Lord adds: *"...for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes."*

By beginning this sentence with the words, "...*truly, I say to you*..." the Lord is intimating that what he is about to say is of the utmost significance. Frequently, the Lord prefixed certain statements with these words, 'Truly, Truly' or 'Verily, Verily' (*lit*., 'Amen, Amen') to stress the importance of what followed.

Then, the Lord asserts: "...*you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes."*

These words have been understood by commentators in at least five ways:

1. The Lord Jesus is declaring to the Twelve that they will not have completed their missionary enterprise throughout the land of Israel before he comes to, or appears much more publicly, in the Temple—as prophesied by Malachi. (Mal. 3:1)

2. The Lord Jesus is referring to his resurrection, when he would reappear, or come back, to his disciples before his ascension to glory. (John 20:16-29)

3. The Lord Jesus is referring to the end of the Jewish economy and mode of worship at the overthrow of the temple during the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D.70.

4. The Lord Jesus is referring to his coming to the church in the Person of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, together with the formal establishing of God's kingdom and sovereign rule over the church and its continuance until the end of time. (Acts 2:1ff)

5. The Lord Jesus is asserting that the great commission to carry the Gospel to the entire world—of which the nation and towns of Israel represented a significant part—would still be in progress when the Son of Man appeared (i.e., at his Second Coming). (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15)

Bearing in mind the words of the verse immediately preceding: *"But the one who endures to the end will be saved"* (v.23b), the Lord would appear to be alluding to the end of the age, and not merely to the end of the Jewish economy or mode of worship, or even to the beginnings of the church.

Regardless of how these words should be understood—and as the context makes plain—we observe that this teaching was not intended for the Twelve exclusively, but would remain appropriate for the Lord's servants in all succeeding generations, until the Lord's Second Coming.

## MATTHEW 10:24-25

Now, the Lord Jesus instructs his disciples in relation to their connection with himself. Jesus is their Lord and Master, He is their Teacher above all others. In relation to their Lord and Master, the disciples were servants—and so they must remain. However, as the name 'disciples' infers, they were also 'learners' or 'pupils' under instruction. By the very nature of the case, they would remain learners of pupils in Christ's school, always learning more but never attaining to a full or complete knowledge of Christ during this present life.

Thus, the disciples were to remember that Christ alone was Lord and Master. No disciple could ever attain to that office or that distinction, for then they would cease to be disciples, learners or pupils of Christ. The disciples were to strive to emulate Christ by their lives and to follow his teaching wholeheartedly. Nevertheless, they were not to strive among themselves for a place of eminence or pre-eminence. This distinction and this office in the church belonged to Christ alone. All whom God called and appointed to church office would remain servants of God and of the church: not lords or masters over the church.

Then, the Lord Jesus warns his disciples of the cost of being associated with their Lord and Master. Just as the name and reputation of Christ would be abused, misrepresented and maligned, so too Christ's followers would suffer similar abuse. Their names and reputations would be besmirched and scandalized—even although they were guiltless of any offence. Yet, because they bore the name of Christ, and preached his Gospel, the enemies of Christ would do all in their power to denigrate that holy and glorious name and to disparage and discredit the messengers of his Gospel.

Yet, if this were not obnoxious enough, the enemies of the Cross would seek further to malign the name of Christ and of his servants. As a mark of their utmost disapprobation and contempt, the Lord himself would be associated with '*Beelzebul*'[38] (although not so called explicitly). Nevertheless, this vile and wicked inference was actually drawn by the Pharisees. (Matt. 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15)

Therefore, the Lord Jesus is warning his disciples to expect a comparable degree of hostility, contempt and vile abuse from the hands of sinful men and women. The Lord was reviled, despised and rejected during the period of his ministry on earth. However, for the most part, the disciples would serve for a much longer period; they would be considered easier targets for abuse and contempt since they were followers of Christ and not Christ himself; and they would experience that abuse from a much wider area than the Lord had been able to cover while on earth.

[38] *'Beelzebub'* (which sometimes appears incorrectly in place of *Beelzebul*) means, 'lord of the house', 'lord of heaven', or 'the god of flies'. Beelzebub was a god of the Ekronites. (cf. 2 Kings 1:2) However, *'Beelzebul'* (Gk., Βεελζεβοὺλ, *beelzeboul*)—perhaps a corruption or modification of the above—derives from a word meaning 'god of dung' or 'god of filth'. As a sign of their extreme contempt and aversion, the Jews applied this latter name to Satan. However, by applying the same epithet to Christ, they became guilty of the most vile and wicked blasphemy against the holy and sinless Son of God.

## MATTHEW 10:26

(Luke 12:2-9)

Nevertheless, the Lord Jesus encourages his disciples to press on with the Gospel. He tells them explicitly not to fear those who oppose them or who blaspheme the name of Christ. Such is bound to happen; yet the Gospel of the kingdom and of eternal salvation must be preached—to all kinds of people.

Yet, those who despised the Word of life and repudiated the Way of salvation would be held to account. Those who cherished their sins and refused to come to the Light would find that their darkness would be exposed at the last day; that the secrets of their evil hearts would be revealed, and that they would be judged as their ungodly life and wicked deeds deserved. But, until that time, the Lord's servants were to prove faithful to their calling—calling upon people to repent of their sins and to believe the Gospel. Regardless of the hostility or abuse encountered from certain quarters, the disciples were to persevere—withdrawing from certain locations only if the criteria given to them by their Master were met.

## MATTHEW 10:27

The Lord Jesus was not about to send out his disciples to preach without first having instructed them thoroughly concerning the Gospel. These instructions took place partly when the Lord was teaching the crowds; but, more particularly, when the Lord spent time alone with his disciples. Thus, they were being sent forth to preach in the full knowledge of the Gospel message and of the Lord's requirements for sinful men and women in responding to that message.

So it should be for anyone who preaches the Gospel today. They ought not to go forth unless called and sent by Christ to this great work; nor ought they to go forth with the Gospel without being fully prepared in advance for this service and acquainted thoroughly with the Word of God. Although formal training can be of great value, it is paramount that any would-be servant of Christ has first spend a significant amount of time privately in the presence of Christ, learning his will and studying his Word seriously and prayerfully.

Thus, having taught his disciples in private, and also on more public occasions, the Lord Jesus has prepared and equipped them to bear the light of the Gospel to others. Yet, they were to remember that they were preaching the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ—he who is the Light of life and the Light of the world. This Light outshines all other lights, overcoming the darkness of ignorance and sin. (John 1:4-5,9) Thus, when preaching Christ, the disciples were to proclaim boldly and clearly all the truths of the Gospel that they had learned at the feet of the Lord Jesus. They were to conceal none of these truths from the people, even although God's Word might prove unpalatable at times to many. The disciples were to proclaim fearlessly, and without respect of persons, the full counsel of God to the people. So too must those today who would preach Christ and his Gospel faithfully.

However, the disciples were not to preach merely under favourable circumstances or only in favourable surroundings within a circumscribed area. The Gospel was to be preached to everyone to whom they came, and in every area to which they journeyed. They were to proclaim the most detailed truths of this Gospel from the housetops—i.e., in the most public of places—so that all could hear this message and be challenged to repent of their sins. Only in those areas that threatened to despise the Word of life and showed contempt for the Gospel and its messengers were the disciples to withdraw to other areas. Otherwise, the Gospel was to be preached uncompromisingly to everyone in every part of the land that they

visited. Those who—by God's grace—responded to the Gospel message were enabled to express repentance toward God freely and willingly, and to believe wholeheartedly on the Lord Jesus Christ.[39]

## MATTHEW 10:28

The Lord Jesus has just warned his followers that they would become the objects of abuse, vilification and other forms of persecution. Sometimes, this persecution would take the form of severe physical abuse, perhaps resulting in the death of the body. Yet, the followers of the Lord were not to be afraid of those who so persecuted them. They were being abused and maligned for the sake of Christ and his Gospel. The greatest harm that these evil persecutors of Christ could do was to kill his disciples. Yet, those who lost their lives for the sake of Christ and his Gospel would not lose thereby. Rather, they would enter into their heavenly reward, safe forever in the presence of their Lord.

Yet, although the disciples were to proclaim the Gospel boldly, fearing no one regardless of the cost, yet there was One whom they must fear. This was the One who had power not only over physical life and death but also over spiritual and eternal life and death. God alone could cast a person—*body and soul*—into hell. Men could kill the disciples' bodies; but they had no power or authority to harm the disciples' souls. Their souls were in the hands of Almighty God, and no one could remove them from God's hands, nor could any man alter the destiny that God had determined for his followers in eternal glory.

Thus, the followers of the Lord Jesus are required to 'fear' God. This does not mean that the children of God were not to be afraid of their Father in heaven. It means, rather, that they were to stand in reverent awe of his power and authority over all mankind (including themselves); realising that their immortal souls were being kept secure in God's hands. (Heb. 12:28-29) At the same time, however, the immoral souls of their persecutors were also in God's hands and would be cast into hell, together with their bodies—if they refused wilfully and consistently to repent of their evil deeds.

In passing, we should observe that the Bible never teaches the annihilation of body or soul in hell or anywhere else. Those consigned by God to hell are committed to a place of eternal sufferings, anguish and torments where the body will have been changed so that it is incapable of perishing. Thus, immortal soul and adapted body will suffer endlessly in that dreadful place.

## MATTHEW 10:29-31

Now, the Lord Jesus reassures and comforts his disciples. They may suffer much at the hands of evil men, but their Father in heaven will never leave them nor forsake them.

To illustrate the extent of their Father's concern for them, the Lord tells his followers to consider one of the least significant of creatures: a common sparrow. Sparrows may be reckoned of very little value in

[39] When the Lord Jesus commissioned his apostles to preach this Gospel (later, to all nations), the general call to repentance and faith was to all who heard, or to all mankind (just as it was in Noah's day). But, by his Holy Spirit, God would effectively call from among all those who heard (or from among all mankind) those whom he had given to his Son and had predestined to eternal life from before the creation of the world. These alone would constitute his true (invisible) church, or his redeemed and holy people. These alone would enter the kingdom of heaven of which the Lord Jesus was speaking.

the eyes of men. Indeed, one such bird was sold for one penny. Yet, although so devalued in the eyes of men, they were not so with God. Not a single sparrow could fall to the ground or perish apart from the will of the Father in heaven. Therefore, the Lord Jesus was stating categorically that God in heaven not only created all that is, but also that he sustains all that is. Therefore, if and when the Father in heaven ceases to sustain a single living creature, that creature must cease to be. Therefore, God exercises sovereign control not only over all mankind but also over every living thing, and all of nature itself.

Thus, even this little sparrow could not die except this was decreed by God its Creator, and at the time so ordained by God. And, if God so exercises sovereign control over the life of an insignificant sparrow, how much more will the Lord exercise his sovereign control over the lives of those whom he loves with an everlasting love? (Ps. 103:17)

In verse 31, the Lord tells his followers that their Father in heaven knows even the number of hairs on their head. If God so concerns himself with such minute details, how much more will he concern himself with all other details in the lives of his redeemed children?

Thus, in verse 32, the Lord tells his disciples to have no fear, for they are of more value than not only a single sparrow, but of many sparrows. The world may abuse the followers of the Lord; they may vilify their name and persecute them severely. Yet, everything was known to God, and everything—including the lives of his children—was in the hands of their Father in heaven. Nothing could set upon them to touch them or harm them unless expressly permitted by their heavenly Father. And he who permitted the trial or affliction would sustain his people during their greatest adversities. If, however, the saints of the Lord were persecuted even unto death, then this death could not occur unless expressly determined by God in heaven, and not before the time so ordained by him. And those whom he so called into his immediate presence would enjoy his presence and loving care throughout the eternal ages—far beyond the malice and wrath of man.

## MATTHEW 10:32-33

The Lord Jesus has declared plainly just how hard it will be to follow him. Those who were seeking comfort and ease would not find it as followers of the Lord Jesus. Those who sought progress and advancement in this life with minimum discomfort would not find it as a disciple of Christ.

Those who would follow Christ must be prepared for hardship, sorrow, grief and pain. They must be prepared for misunderstanding, rejection, scorn and derision. They must be prepared to be counted among the least significant and least esteemed people on this earth.

This would happen because the followers of the Lord Jesus were not of this earth. They lived in this world, but their citizenship was in heaven. (Php 3:20; cf. Eph. 2:19; Heb. 12:18-29) Therefore, because they were not of this world, and their values were not worldly, the world would despise and reject the followers of Christ.

Nevertheless, the disciples of the Lord Jesus must remain faithful to Christ and to his cause. Regardless of the persecution, they must not be tempted to deny his name or to abandon his cause. Thus, the Lord Jesus asserts that all those who confessed the name of Christ publicly—and stood by their faith—would be acknowledged before the Father in heaven. Effectively, this means that the Lord Jesus owns these faithful followers as the true children of God—for they have not denied his name.

Conversely—as we see from verse 33—those professing followers of Christ who deny the name of Christ when persecuted or for any other reason have effectively denied any connection with Christ and his Gospel. Many such people would be found among the professing people of God. Those who claimed to belong to the Lord Jesus, but who denied all knowledge of him—either by what they would say or by what they would do. (2 Tim. 2:12)

However, unlike Peter who—as a true believer—denied his Lord in the heat of the moment, and later was restored, the people of whom the Lord is speaking here are those who deny Christ because they have never truly known his saving and sanctifying power. They profess faith in Christ, but it is an empty profession. When their faith is put to the test, it is shown to be worthless. Thus, of such people, the Lord Jesus declares most solemnly: *"...but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven."* (v.33)

Here, the Lord is simply affirming that those who do not truly belong to him will be identified as imposters or false professors before God. Every one of these false professors will be excluded from God's presence in heaven and consigned with all other unregenerate, hypocritical and impenitent mankind to that place prepared for the devil and his angels. (Matt. 25:41)

Yet, we must realise that this will include many people who are presently to be found within the church, taking part in its holy ordinances, sharing in its corporate worship, and perhaps actively involved in the services or activities of the church. A significant number of these false professors may be found among pastors, bishops (elders), deacons or other leaders or ministers of the church. Yet, their rank or office will not save them on the day when Christ will say concerning them: *"...but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven."* (v.33)

This denial need not assume the form only of denying the name of Christ. It includes also all those who deny certain teachings of Christ, who modify his words or teaching, or who attempt to discredit certain elements of his teaching or of the Bible more generally—while acting as bishops, pastors, ministers or other leader of the church. Of these, too, it will be said: *"...but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven."* (v.33)

These are solemn words indeed. Thus, whatever our position in the church, we ought to ensure that—by the genuineness of our faith and lifestyle—we are making our calling and election sure.

## MATTHEW 10:34

(Luke 12:49-53)

The Lord now declares that is was not his aim primarily to establish peace on earth. The kingdom of which he spoke was the kingdom of heaven—not of earth, or of the world. Yes, one day, God would establish peace on earth—together with righteousness. But this would not take place until God created a new heaven and a new earth. This time was not now, and the Lord Jesus had no intention of becoming involved in political kingdoms or political policies for this present world, which was passing away.

Thus, having made it plain that he had not come to set up a kingdom on earth or to reign on earth as a ruler who would establish peace among the nations, the Lord reveals the true nature of his kingdom and of the effects of the Gospel message on the hearts and lives of those who heard. Far from this message being a unifying and peace-imparting message, the Gospel would divide and create hostility. This is be-

cause truth itself divides: it divides right from wrong; good from bad; justice from injustice. Furthermore, the truth of the Gospel would create divisions when some accepted it and others did not.

Effectively, therefore, a sword would be wielded among people: cutting asunder or separating truth from error; believers from unbelievers. This sword is the Word of God; either as spoken by the Lord Jesus (The Word or 'Logos') in his teaching, or as preached or read from the written Word, the Bible.

## MATTHEW 10:35-36

In verse 35, the Lord shows us some of the consequences of his teaching or preaching. The Lord declares that family members will be set against one another as a result of the Gospel. The Lord is not saying that he has come to divide families for the sake of causing division. Rather, he is declaring that the Gospel will have this effect on people's lives. Some will believe the Gospel and will respond wholeheartedly to the call to follow the Lord Jesus. Others, however, will reject the outward call of the Gospel and will continue in their present unregenerate and sinful way of life.

Among those who accept the call and those who reject it will be many from the same families. Therefore, household division will result from those committed to following Christ and his righteousness and those who reject him to follow the way of unrighteousness. Thus, potentially, hostility could exist between father and son, mother and daughter, and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.

In verse 36, the Lord emphasises this truth when he asserts that a man's enemies will be those of his own household. Nevertheless, elsewhere, the Lord Jesus has declared that we must love our enemies. Furthermore, God's Word tells us that we must love, care for, and provide for our families. Whatever the spiritual state or standing before God of other family members, God's people are not being excused from taking care of their families, by loving them, by providing for them, and by praying for them.

## MATTHEW 10:37

When God issued his Ten Commandments to the Hebrew people on the mount, he laid down explicitly how they must honour and worship him and how they must honour their parents. Priority had to be given to the worship of God and to the honouring of his name—to the exclusion of all other objects of worship or affection. The LORD had to be worshipped and adored above all others. (Exod. 20:3-6; Deut. 5:7-10)

This was not to say that Israel was to neglect or despise family relationships: For, in these same Ten Commandments, the LORD declared how children were to honour their parents. (Exod. 20:12; Deut. 5:16) So it is in this passage now before us. The Lord Jesus is not saying that sons and daughters should cease from loving and honouring their parents—for God requires that they do. The Lord is setting forth priorities. The fact that he says, *'more than'* makes this clear. The Lord Jesus must take first place in a believer's life; and this means that Christ and his cause must take precedence over one's parents or other family members and their interests. However, it does not mean that family members should be neglected as a consequence of one's prior commitment to Christ—for that would be contrary to the teaching of God' Word elsewhere. (Eph. 6:2) Rather, it means that a person's commitment to his or her family ought to be enhanced by their prior and superior commitment to Christ.

Nevertheless, the Lord Jesus warns his followers that—should they fail to give him first place in their hearts and lives—then they cannot be his disciples. Those who put other people—even their own fami-

lies—or other interests before the Lord Jesus Christ are not worthy of Christ. The Lord Jesus demands wholehearted allegiance from his followers; and those who follow him must give him the foremost place in their lives—without neglecting their God-given responsibilities towards the families and neighbours. (1 Tim. 5:8)

## MATTHEW 10:38

(Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23)

The Lord continues this theme in verse 37 by telling his followers to count the cost of discipleship. (Luke 14:25-33) If any person is not willing to follow the Lord wholeheartedly, then that person is not worthy to be the Lord's disciple.

This does not mean necessarily that a person cannot be a follower of the Lord Jesus unless he leaves home, family and friends behind, and takes on some form of full time service for the Lord. Those called to such work are called and equipped specifically by the Holy Spirit; then, almost invariably, they are appointed by the church to serve in such a capacity. To '*take up his cross*' is a metaphor illustrating a real situation which is attended by self-sacrifice, suffering, pain, affliction and sorrow in greater measure than that experienced by the world.

Nevertheless, with suffering for the sake of the cross comes joy in the Lord. Yet, this joy cannot be experienced except by those who deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow their Lord and Master. That is, they must seek at all times to be subservient to his will and purposes for their lives, regardless of how much this might cost them or how much suffering or affliction it may bring into their lives. Thus, we see that it is possible to take up one's cross to follow the Lord Jesus whether one is living at home among his family and friends, or whether he has been called and appointed to serve the Lord in some other area or land.

Yet, those who are not willing to suffer for Christ and his cause in this way are not worthy to be his disciples. This means, of course, that—even although these people may profess to belong to Christ—the Lord Jesus will disown them at the Last Day. (Matt. 7:21-23)

## MATTHEW 10:39

The Lord has just mentioned the cost of discipleship. Now, he adverts to the consequences of not following the way of the cross.

Remembering that the Lord Jesus has been addressing his disciples at this point, this verse should be understood as being addressed to them also. Those who prefer a life of comfort and ease while enjoying the safety and security of God's salvation might find themselves greatly disillusioned. Those who seek an easy life, stand to lose their reward in the presence of the Lord. At the very least, they stand to lose the peace and joy that they might have experienced in this life—and therefore the quality of their spiritual life on earth. However, if it transpires that these comfort and ease 'believers' are not truly the children of God, then they will lose all hope of eternal life. They may find life and enjoyment in this world, but they will lose it in the next.

Therefore, we must ensure that we are not living for the comforts and pleasures of this world, but for the glory of God and the world to come. Those who seek God's glory set their hearts on his kingdom and on

his heavenly realm. Whatever it may cost them, they determine to serve him and follow the Lord wholeheartedly. Thus, ultimately, they may lose many transient pleasures on this earth, but they will gain eternal glory. They may lose their life on this earth, or all that they possess, but they will inherit life eternal with its riches in glory. By their self-sacrificing and self-giving life they have shown that they are truly the Lord's disciples and the children of God.

## MATTHEW 10:40

Now, the Lord Jesus speaks of the reception that the disciples might receive from different peoples. Those who welcomed the disciples into their areas and homes, in effect, were extending that welcome to the Lord Jesus himself. For the Lord's name was being represented officially by those who preached his Gospel. For them, there would be an abundance of blessing: For those who receive and believe the Gospel, inherit the kingdom of heaven. (Luke 10:16; John 13:20)

However, in this verse, the Lord Jesus is saying much more: Not only do those who welcome and receive Christ's servants welcome and receive the Lord Jesus himself, they also receive the Father; for it was the Father who sent his Son into the world. It is impossible to receive Christ or to be accepted by him without also being received and accepted by the Father; for whoever sees the Son (or believes on him) sees also the Father (or believes on him). (John 14:8-11)

However, the corollary to this is that those who reject Christ's messengers or spurn his Gospel also reject God the Father. They have rejected the one and only way of life and salvation. How dreadful it will be for those who hear the Word of life—perhaps on many occasions—and yet neglect or reject the life-giving Word. They have come so near to the kingdom, but yet have disdained the King. At the Last Day, those who neglected or rejected Christ will stand before the King in his glory, speechless, and unable to offer any defence. Then, will the King say to them, "*Depart from me...*" (Matt.7:23; 25:41; Luke 13:27)

## MATTHEW 10:41

In the present context, a prophet is one who preaches the Gospel, or who teaches the truths of God's Word to others. Following on from his previous remarks concerning those who received and welcomed the Lord's servants, Jesus is saying now that those who recognise the preachers or teachers of God's Word for what they are will receive a blessing from God. They will be blessed or rewarded by listening to and receiving the truths of the Gospel—and of God's Word more generally—as these truths are expounded or explained to them by the prophet (preacher or teacher). Furthermore, they will be blessed or rewarded by responding in faith and obedience to the Word of God. As these individuals apply to their lives the teaching or preaching of the prophet, minister, pastor, evangelist or other servant of Christ, they will be accumulating rewards in heaven.

The expression concerning a righteous man is probably not intended to be understood of a person other than the prophet or preacher of whom the Lord has just spoken. Rather, it follows the typical rabbinical form of expression (and typical Hebraisms more generally) in that successive phrases or sentences repeat a particular theme with similar or parallel expressions to emphasise or clarify certain points (a mode of expression that is used commonly in the Psalms). A prophet of God, or a preacher called by God, must be 'a righteous man' if he has been called and appointed by God to this office. Righteousness here is taken in its wide sense to comprehend regeneration, justification and sanctification—all of which must charac-

terise any true servant of God. Therefore, the reward spoken of is that blessing or reward that accrues to those who hear the Word of God, as preached by his righteous and faithful servants, and who obey it.

## MATTHEW 10:42

(Mark 9:41)

Taken in its immediate context, the *'little ones'* spoken of here are the Lord's disciples. Irrespective of their years or maturity, they were yet little more than babes in Christ. Granted, they had been making some progress toward spiritual growth, but they had still much to learn at the feet of their Master. Therefore, the Lord Jesus refers to them tenderly as '*these little ones...'* (Cf. Matt. 25:40)

Yet, the Lord was about to send out these same 'little ones' with the Gospel message. Thus, he assures those who receive his disciples, and who offer to them even the most basic of necessities (represented by *'a cup of cold water'*) that their kindness would not pass unnoticed or unrewarded. Those who minister to the servants of the Lord minister to the Lord himself. And those who minister to the needs of Christ (in his servants) will receive the reward of their righteous acts. (Matt. 25:31-46)

This does not mean that the performance of good deeds or righteous acts can somehow contribute toward a person's salvation. However, it is an assurance to those who are saved that their righteous deeds will be remembered and counted toward those rewards granted to faithful servants or for faithful service.

Thus, when considering the needs of those whom God has called and appointed to serve us in the ministry of the Gospel, we ought to remember that they are they are the representatives of Christ. How we minister to their needs, is a reflection of our ministry toward Christ. And, if we withhold any necessary thing from Christ's servant, then we are withholding of ourselves from Christ and denying him his due. Therefore, let us ensure that we support the needs of genuine servants of Christ as though we were ministering unto the Lord Jesus himself.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 11

## JESUS FINISHES TEACHING HIS DISCIPLES

***Matthew 11:1***

### MATTHEW 11:1

Once he had finished teaching his disciples and otherwise preparing them to preach the Gospel, the Lord Jesus resumed his teaching of the people. Probably, this verse belongs to the end of the previous chapter, as a new theme begins from verse 2 of this chapter.

## JOHN THE BAPTIST SENDS MESSENGERS TO JESUS

***Matthew 11:2-6***

### MATTHEW 11:2-3

(Luke 7:18-35)

By this time, John the Baptist had been arrested and imprisoned by Herod Antipas because of his forthright condemnation of Herod concerning Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. John had denounced Herod's conduct, declaring: *"It is not lawful for you to have her."* (Matt. 14:3-4)

Ultimately, John the Baptist would be put to death for remaining faithful to the truth of God's Word. However, at this time, he was being held in prison. Therefore, the Baptist instructed some of his disciples to approach the Lord Jesus and say to him, *"Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"* (v.3)

It seems incredible that John could ask such a question. He personally had witnessed the coming of the Lord to the desert of Judea (where the Baptist was preaching). John personally had baptised the Lord Jesus—even although he acknowledged freely his total unworthiness to baptise the Lord of Glory. Again, John personally had seen the Spirit of God descend on the Lord Jesus after his baptism. Furthermore, God the Father had testified in the very presence of John the Baptist that the one on whom the Spirit descended and remained was His Anointed One (or the coming Messiah). (Matt. 3:13-17)

How, then, could John send his disciples to ask the Lord Jesus, *"Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"* (v.3)

The text does not tell us. Perhaps, John could not fathom why the Messiah would permit him to be arrested and imprisoned for preaching the truth if he had really come to Israel, as John had believed at first. Perhaps, he could not understand why the Christ of God would permit his faithful servants to suffer at the hands of evil men (and women), if the Christ of God was really present among his people.

We really do not know the reason for John's question. However, it does demonstrate that even the Lord's true and faithful servants can become disappointed, despondent or discouraged when things do not appear to be going to plan—especially, when they are convinced that they are acting in accordance with the

Lord's will and purposes for their lives. Yet, we must remember that God's ways are not our ways. In his sovereign love, God has determined the direction of our lives. However, in his infinite wisdom, the Lord has determined also the path that we must follow to achieve his plans and purposes. Earlier, the Lord Jesus had told the Twelve that they must expect suffering, or the way of the cross, before they could experience the fullness of blessing in the consummation of the Messiah's kingdom. John the Baptist, too, had to learn that the presence of the Lord Jesus with his people did not mean that he would deliver them immediately from all toil, pain, suffering and distress. This would not occur until the consummation of the present age and the renewal of all things, according to the will of the Father. (Cf. 2 Thess. 1:4-12)

## MATTHEW 11:4-5

Jesus' answer to John's disciples is straightforward. If John was beginning to entertain doubts concerning the Lord Jesus, then let events speak for themselves. Jesus instructs the disciples of John to pay very close attention to what he was doing among the people. Then, John's disciples would become witnesses of the fact that Jesus restored sight to the blind; that he caused the lame to walk; that lepers were cleansed of their loathsome condition; that the deaf had their hearing restored, and—if this were not sufficient to convince the most sceptical—the dead are raised again to life. Furthermore, the poor in spirit hear the riches of God's grace in the Gospel proclaimed to them, together with the assurance of eternal life to all who repent and believe on Christ.

What further evidence did John need? No more convincing proof could be given. Those who would not believe the truth in spite of this overwhelming evidence were acting irrationally. Indeed, they were refusing wilfully and inexcusably to believe the truth even when faced with incontrovertible evidence. The great danger here is that such continued repudiation of the truth will render a person insensitive to further light, and incapable of responding in future to the general call to repentance. By hardening their hearts like the Pharaoh of Egypt, these people have become insensitive to the truth of God. In spite of irrefutable evidence, they have refused to believe. By their repeated refusal to accept God's Word, they have hardened or steeled their hearts against God's truth. Consequently—and as a result of their wilful and repeated unbelief and rebellion—God has hardened their hearts *permanently or finally* to the truth, so that they can no longer respond. This is God's judgment on people who repudiate his truth—*wilfully and repeatedly*.

Nevertheless, the majority of fallen and sinful mankind are living in spiritual darkness and ignorance, and are therefore susceptible of responding to the truths of the Gospel, as the Holy Spirit enables them. The people mentioned above are the minority of sinners who have refused repeatedly—and in the light of better knowledge—to respond to God's call to repentance given in common grace; and indeed who have repudiated the message of grace and despised the One who could have redeemed them. Among such people were individuals such as Pharaoh, the wicked and impenitent sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah and also of Noah's day, some of the Pharisees of Jesus' day, and others of this kind.

We have absolutely no reason to believe that John the Baptist had come anywhere near this frightful stage of wilful unbelief and rebellion. As we have said, this may have been true of some of the Pharisees or other religious leaders, and it can be true of anyone today who wickedly and consistently repudiates the truth of God's Word and who rebels against irrefutable evidence revealed in the Word of God and also in the natural creation. John, however, was simply entertaining some doubt about whether Jesus was the coming Messiah, not about whether the Messiah would actually come nor about Jesus as a prophet sent by God. However, John needed to understand that Jesus was much more than a prophet

sent by God. Indeed, Jesus was Prophet, Priest and King *par excellence*; but he was also the Anointed or Messiah sent by God—as John should have known, if he had believed God's testimony. (Isaiah 61:1-3; Acts 10:37-38)

Thus, having witnessed at first hand the power and authority of the Lord Jesus not only over all forms of disease, disability and even over death itself, John's disciples were left in no doubt that Jesus was indeed the Anointed Servant of the LORD, or the expected Messiah. Thus, following Jesus' instructions, they would return to John the Baptist and tell him of all of the mighty deeds that the Lord Jesus was accomplishing, and of the Gospel that he was proclaiming to the poor in spirit.

### MATTHEW 11:6

Then, Jesus adds these words: *"And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."*

Happy indeed, greatly favoured, or privileged in the sight of God, are those who take no offence at the name of Christ or at the message of his Gospel. By its nature, the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ would offend many. Christ himself would be to them a rock of offence and a stone of stumbling. In unbelief, they would stumble over the preaching of Christ—and so be offended by the preaching of the Cross. ((Rom. 9:33; 1 Pet. 2:6-8)

Nevertheless, those who believed the Gospel and welcomed Christ into their hearts and lives would find their lives richly blessed because of their commitment to Christ. In this life, they may not hold great possessions; but they would inherit the riches of glory through their faith in Christ and through their unashamed public testimony for their Lord and Master. These are the ones who are blessed because—far from being offended by the things of Christ—they rejoice openly in Christ and in the power of the Gospel to save repentant and believing men and women. (Eph. 1:18)

## JESUS SPEAKS TO THE CROWDS ABOUT JOHN

***Matthew 11:7-15***

### MATTHEW 11:7

(Luke 7:24-30)

Turning now to the crowd, many of whom had heard John preach in the desert, the Lord asks them, *"What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?"*

The Lord knew how fickle the people could be at times. Therefore, he challenges their motives for going out to listen to the preaching of John the Baptist. If they had gone merely out of curiosity to hear the Baptist, then they would have been disappointed to hear the challenge to repent and to believe on the One whom God would send. And If they had expected to hear a preacher who would mollify their conscience and encourage them to remain uncommitted to God and to his coming Messiah, then these people too would have been sorely disappointed.

Jesus alone knew the hearts of these people. Many had professed repentance and had been baptised by John. Thus, many had had their hearts or minds prepared for the coming of the Lord Jesus. Others, however, went only to hear the Baptist preach, but not to receive or believe the Baptist's message. But John

was no *'reed shaken by the wind'*—as they might have supposed. He was upright, firm and steadfast. His message was uncompromising. He was a true prophet of God, and he proclaimed the full truth from God, calling men and women to repent and to show their repentance through baptism. (Matt. 21:25; Luke 7:28) Nevertheless, large numbers of these people would have been happier with a 'shaken reed': i.e., a 'prophet' with no backbone, who told the people only what they wanted to hear and what was acceptable to their current uncommitted or ungodly lifestyles. Yet, these 'shaken reeds' or doctrinally unsound and compromising preachers would not be found among the true servants of God, as was John. Rather, they were to be found only among the false prophets or false preachers—and so it has been from that day to this.

### MATTHEW 11:8

Yet, perhaps some of those who heard John preach had gone to examine his as a person—with little interest in his message. Perhaps, they expected so renowned a preacher to be associated with the royal house of David, or with the royal courts of ethnarchs and tetrarchs (puppet kings). If they did, then these people would have expected to find John attired in the regalia of the court. They would have expected his wardrobe to have surpassed by far that of royalty or even of the magnificently-dressed priests who served in the temple.

Yet, if they expected such illustrious finery, they were to be greatly disillusioned. For such finely robed individuals were to be only within the royal courts or within the precincts of the temple. Prophets of God, such as John the Baptist, did not so attire themselves. Rather, in keeping with their office and message, they wore meagre attire: clothing that symbolised humility and contrition before God, and that spoke figuratively of the need for repentance. Thus, like the faithful prophet Elijah before him, John was not clothed in fine garments but in a garment of camel's hair, with a leather belt about his waist. (Matt. 3:4; Mark 1:6; cf. 2 Kings 1:8)

## 'THIS IS MY MESSENGER'

### MATTHEW 11:9-10

Many of the people had not gone to see and hear John out of curiosity or with ulterior motives, but because they believed that John the Baptist was a prophet from God. That generation of people had never heard a true prophet; because none had been sent to Israel for the past 400 years. Therefore, desiring to hear God's Word, they went to listen to John's message of repentance and call for baptism.

Yet, none of these people appreciated fully John's position in the plan and purposes of God. John was not just another prophet like the many Old Testament prophets whom God had sent. He was much more than that. Thus, in verse 9, the Lord declares of John that he was '*more than a prophet.'*

By this, the Lord did not mean that John was somehow superior in person or office to the earlier prophets, but that his appearing to Israel at this moment in time was the culmination of all God's plans leading up to the coming of his Messiah. John was the last prophet before the ultimate Prophet from God—the Lord Jesus himself.

Thus, quoting the prophet Malachi, the Lord Jesus declares: *"This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you'."* (v.10)

In Malachi, the full passage reads:

> Malachi 3:1 ESV
>
> (1) "Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts."

Also speaking of this same occasion, the prophet Isaiah had declared:

> Isaiah 40:3 ESV
>
> (3) A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

Both Malachi and Isaiah spoke of a messenger who would appear to prepare the way of the Lord. John the Baptist was this messenger—the one sent by God to prepare the way of the Lord. 'The Lord whom you seek' (spoken of by Malachi) is the Lord Jesus Christ or the Messenger of the Covenant. Thus, John had been appointed to be the immediate forerunner or herald of the Messiah; an honour that no previous prophet could share. He was the voice crying in the wilderness, *"...prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."*

At this point, we must observe that the prophets were speaking of the coming of the LORD (i.e., God) to his temple. Isaiah 40: 3 makes it abundantly clear that it would be the LORD himself whose ways would be prepared in the desert, not merely an appointed servant of the LORD. Thus, we must conclude that the Lord Jesus Christ is very God—God manifest in human form; truly God and yet truly Man.

Thus, as the herald of God the Son, John the Baptist held a most honoured and privileged position among the prophets and other servants of God. To this end, the Lord Jesus says in verse 11:

## MATTHEW 11:11

From the point of view of the blessings and privileges bestowed on John, no human being had received greater honours, or had occupied a more esteemed position among men. God had chosen John to prepare the way of the Lord—his very own Son, and the Messiah of Israel; and, even from his birth, John would be called 'great'.

Yet, the Lord adds that *"the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."*

This does not contradict what the Lord had said previously. Rather, he is speaking from two different perspectives. From a human perspective, and in the natural realm, no greater privileges could be bestowed on any man than those with which John the Baptist was blessed. In this, his greatness was unmatched. However, from a divine perspective, and in the spiritual realm, greatness is not achieved by favourable positions, rank or office. Rather, in God's eyes, those who are truly great are those who are the least esteemed, the least favoured, the least privileged, in the eyes of the world—provided their lack of worldly esteem, etc. is accompanied by wholehearted humility, contrition before God and love for God. These are the people who are truly great: and such could include even little children, or those who exhibit sincere child-like faith.

## MATTHEW 11:12

(Luke 16:6)

John the Baptist appeared in the desert preaching repentance and proclaiming the kingdom of heaven. Never had the people heard such powerful preaching as they did from John. Never were people so convinced and convicted of their sins by the Holy Spirit as under the Baptist's ministry.

Even while John was still preaching, however, the Lord Jesus appeared. The Lord, too, preached repentance and proclaimed the kingdom of heaven. If the Baptist's ministry was attended by the power of the Spirit, much more so was the ministry of the Lord Jesus—for in him was the fullness of the Spirit. Thus, when the Lord Jesus preached to the crowds, many in these crowds were powerfully convicted of their sins by the Spirit of God. Many were completely convinced of their lost estate and need of repentance, forgiveness and redemption that they sought by all means possible to 'force' their way into the kingdom of heaven. Those who never normally would have heeded the teaching of the rabbis or listened to the Word of God read in the synagogues, sought earnestly to hear more of God's Word at the mouth of the Lord Jesus. Indeed, so eager were they to learn and to experience the mercy of the Lord that they appeared to be 'assaulting' the kingdom of heaven or taking it by storm. Thus, the Lord expresses this phenomenon in these words:

*"From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force."*

Such was the effect of the clear and uncompromising Gospel message on the hearts or minds of the crowds. Granted, many among the crowds did not respond favourably to this message, and indeed despised and rejected it—especially among the religious leadership. Nevertheless, many others did respond to the Gospel, as the Holy Spirit convinced and convicted them of their sin and of their great need of redemption. Among these people were the tax collectors, the harlots and other 'sinners' of this kind, the unclean (morally and ceremonially) such as the demon-possessed and lepers, and other outcasts of society.

Intensely eager to enter in, all such were welcomed into the kingdom of heaven by the Lord Jesus. Also included, however, were many other common people, together with some Roman officials and a few high-ranking Jewish people. Yet, in their great haste to enter the kingdom, they so pressed forward to receive and believe the Gospel that it appeared that they were taking the kingdom of heaven violently, by force. (Cf. Luke 13:24)

True God-wrought revivals in all subsequent ages of the church illustrate this principle in action.

From this, we learn that conversions to Christ are not achieved by any human means, and certainly not by the application of modern methods at the expense of the pure and uncomplicated Gospel message. Nor are they achieved by human effort apart from earnest prayer, and apart from the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, we learn that people respond to the work of the Spirit in their lives when they hear the Gospel being preached in all its fullness, clearly and uncompromisingly. Without the presence and power of the Holy Spirit with the preacher, and without a clear or unambiguous and uncompromising proclamation of the Gospel, no one will be convinced or convicted of their sin or of their need of redemption. Thus, those who preach must pray earnestly (as did the Lord Jesus) for the Holy

Spirit to attend, bless, and prosper the preaching of the Word unto the salvation of souls and for the sole glory of God.

We must bear in mind, however, that the preaching of the Gospel must involve the proclamation of God's justice, holiness and righteousness. Also, it must involve making sinners fully aware of God's utter condemnation of sin and ungodliness. Only then must it involve the declaration to lost men and women of God's love, mercy, grace and compassion toward contrite, repentant and believing sinners—a salvation granted to all who respond to the grace of God as enabled by the Holy Spirit in regeneration and effectual calling.

## MATTHEW 11:13

The expression, '*the Prophets and the Law*' (or 'the Law and the Prophets') is often used comprehensively to include the entire Jewish Scriptures (the whole Old Testament). Here, the Lord Jesus is saying that—from first to last—the OT Scriptures prophesied until John the Baptist. This was their aim and purpose. When John appeared preaching repentance and proclaiming the coming of the Messiah, the Scriptures would then be fulfilled—in and by Christ. Thus, everything of which the OT Scriptures spoke now terminated on the One whom John the Baptist had announced and who had now appeared. (Cf. Luke 24:25-27)

## MATTHEW 11:14

(Mark 9:11-13)

Now, the Lord announces to the crowd that this very same John the Baptist whom they had heard was the prophet Elijah. However, the Lord Jesus did not mean that John was Elijah in the literal sense of the words—for Elijah would appear later with the Lord Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. (Luke 9:30) Rather, the Lord was saying that John the Baptist had appeared *in the spirit and power* of Elijah, as Malachi the prophet had foretold; and, later, as the angel of the Lord would explain to Zechariah.

Thus, through Malachi, the LORD declares,

> Malachi 4:5-6 ESV
>
> (5) "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. (6) And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

And, in Luke's Gospel, it is written concerning John the Baptist:

> Luke 1:16-17 ESV
>
> (16) "And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, (17) and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

The above are the words of the angel of the Lord to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. (Luke 1:13) Note that the angel says concerning John the Baptist that he will go before [the Lord] *in the spirit and power* of Elijah, thus interpreting Malachi's prophecy. (Mal. 4:5, quoted above)

And again, in chapter 17 of Matthew's Gospel, it is written:

> Matthew 17:10-13 ESV
>
> (10) And the disciples asked him, “Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?”
>
> (11) He answered, “Elijah does come, and he will restore all things. (12) But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man will certainly suffer at their hands.”
>
> (13) Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist was much like Elijah in that he was filled with the Spirit of God; that he preached repentance uncompromisingly to the people, and that he remained faithful to God throughout his ministry. Like Elijah, too, John was clothed only in a garment of camel or goat's hair with a leather belt around his waist. Again, like Elijah, John spent much of his time in the wilderness.

Most significantly, however, John the Baptist resembled Elijah for his tenacity in holding fast to the truth of God's Word; for proclaiming it forcefully and fearlessly, and for challenging the people without fear or favour  to repent and turn to God. Thus, John the Baptist introduced the time of restoration, or the reformation of all things, that would be accomplished by the Lord Jesus.

## MATTHEW 11:15

This, or a variation of this expression, was used by the Lord frequently during his ministry on earth. It means simply that those who are spiritually responsive to the truth of these words will be able to comprehend their significance: Not just the last mentioned remarks, however, but everything that the Lord has said while teaching the crowds on this occasion.

By the same token, those who remain in spiritual darkness (or who are spiritually dead) will be unable to make any real sense of the Lord's teaching. To them, it will be a conundrum at best or irrational and irrelevant at worst. This, however, is only to be expected of those who are yet dead in trespasses and sins; for the blind cannot see unless their sight be restored and the dead cannot live (or think spiritually) unless regenerated by the Holy Spirit to newness of life.

Nevertheless, all of us once were found in this state or condition; and, but for the grace of God, there we would have remained—and that justly, on account of our sins. Therefore, we must pray for those who are dead spiritually, that God may have mercy on them.

## MATTHEW 11:16-19

Before moving on to the next few verses, we will quote a preceding section related in Luke's Gospel, but not recorded by Matthew. This will set the background to the passage in Matthew's Gospel.

Luke records the following passage in his Gospel:

Luke 7:29-30 ESV

(29) (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptised with the baptism of John, (30) but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptised by him.)

This reaction on the part of the Pharisees and scribes (or lawyers) against the purposes of God resulted in the following rejoinder from the Lord Jesus:

Luke 7:31-35 ESV

(31) “To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like?

(32) “They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, “'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.'

(33) “For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.'

(34) “The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'

(35) “Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.”

Or, as Matthew records these words:

Matthew 11:16-19 ESV

(16) “But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, (17) “'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'

(18) “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.'

(19) “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'

“Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”

Some of the Lord's severest critics arose from among the religious leaders of the day. They criticised practically everything that he said and did. They criticised him for not conforming to the religious establishment. They criticised him for teaching doctrine that did not agree with the traditions of the elders. Above all, perhaps, the religious leadership criticised the Lord Jesus for associating with the outcasts of society, including the most notorious of 'sinners'.

Thus, the Lord asks rhetorically:

> (16) "But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, (17) "'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'

What parallel could be drawn with people like the scribes and Pharisees? They were like children: children who played their games in the marketplace, and who expected others to play the same children's games. Then, when others did not join them, they complained childishly that these others were not willing to participate with them or play by their rules.

Effectively, what the Lord meant was that the scribes and Pharisees expected other religious teachers to heed their teaching and to join them in teaching their doctrine; as interpreted by the scribes and elders, and according to the traditions of the Pharisees. However, when others (in this case, the Lord Jesus) would not associate with them, conform to their teaching or traditions, or follow their directives, they considered him as a false teacher. Indeed, it was the scribes and Pharisees who were teaching false doctrine, insofar as they had misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misapplied the Scriptures.

However, the scribes and Pharisees did not criticise the Lord Jesus only because he differed from them and their teaching, but also because of his association with 'common' and ceremonially unclean people. Thus, the Lord declares of them:

> (18) "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.'
>
> (19) "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'

John the Baptist refused to conform to the standards of his age. He refused to seek the comforts of this world, preferring rather to serve the Lord who had commissioned him and to prove faithful to his cause. However, because John differed in his conduct and dress from society around him, that society—and especially the scribes and Pharisees—suggested maliciously that John the Baptist was demon-possessed. As a necessary consequence of this wicked suggesting, some of the people were beginning to believe that the Baptist must have taken leave of his senses. To avoid acknowledging their sin and responding to God's call to repentance, some people would have claimed maliciously that the Baptist's preaching was no more than the ranting of a mentally unstable person or the ravings of a madman, and unworthy of the least credence.

Concerning the Son of Man, the same religious leaders noted the Lord Jesus as one who associated with the common people, and who ate and drank with them. However, as if it were not demeaning enough to fellowship with the common people, the Lord was being accused of eating and drinking to excess—even to the point of gluttony and drunkenness. Of course, this was vile slander on the part of these religious leaders. However, they wished to emphasise to their flock that the Lord Jesus was an associate of despised tax collectors and of the most degenerate kind of sinners imaginable. Therefore, (the religious leaders implied), Jesus could not be a Teacher sent from God—for God does not tolerate sin or sinful people.

Yet, their criticisms were without foundation. The scribes and Pharisees judged by appearances; but they were not in possession of the full facts, nor were they capable of discerning the true facts due to their spiritual insensitivity. Thus, the Lord adds these words:

"Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds." (Matthew 11:19b) Or, as Luke expresses them, "Yet wisdom is justified by all her children." (Luke 7:35)

That which may appear as foolishness in the eyes of men will yet prove to be the greatest expression of true wisdom. However, true wisdom is not revealed through isolated incidents or occurrences, but through all events taken together in fulfilment of a specific plan and purpose. Thus, the Lord says, "*…Wisdom is justified* [or shown to be right and righteous] *by her deeds*" (or, "*by all her children*"): i.e., by the fruit that it bears in due course.

Such is the wisdom of God. Over the course of time, the present actions of the Lord Jesus—for which he received so much hostility and criticism—will yet prove themselves the expressions of God's infinite wisdom. For, it is the message of the cross to sinners: the same message of forgiveness of sins and of eternal salvation that appears as folly to the world, and causes many to stumble through unbelief. (1 Cor. 1:18-31)

## JESUS DENOUNCES UNBELIEF

***Matthew 11:20-24***

### MATTHEW 11:20

It is often supposed that—in his love and mercy—the Lord Jesus does not condemn sinners or speak harshly of them in the Gospels. This, however, is not true. Indeed, the Lord of love, grace and mercy speaks more about the terrors of hell than he does of any other single subject. Thus, it is a great mistake to believe that the Lord Jesus did not and will not condemn people who refuse to repent and seek his mercy.

Therefore, Matthew tells us that the meek and lowly Lord Jesus began to denounce or condemn certain cities, towns and villages in which he had ministered. Had they not heard his words and seen his miraculous powers, then their guilt would not have been so considerable—although it would still have been inexcusable, since God had revealed his existence, power and glory to them through the Scriptures and also through his natural creation. (Rom 1:18-21)

However, the cities that the Lord is about to mention—and others like them—had heard his words and seen his works at first hand. Yet, they had refused to repent: meaning, they had refused wilfully and wickedly to believe the Lord's message concerning the need of repentance and forgiveness, preferring rather to continue in their sinful way of life. (John 3:19-20) Furthermore, by repudiating the Gospel, they were repudiating Christ; and, in repudiating Christ, they were repudiating the One who sent him; viz., the Father himself. (Luke 10:15-16) Rank, wilful, and persistent unbelief, together with the outright and final repudiation of the Gospel, is a sin that will not be forgiven. (Luke 12:8-9  However, we will deal with this in its proper place.

In the meantime, the Lord tells us in no uncertain terms what will become of those who reject the Gospel, refusing wilfully, wickedly and persistently to seek the Lord's mercy while it may be found. (Is. 55:6-7) Had they not been blinded to the truth by their own sins, they would have been able to seek the mercy of the Lord and to call upon his name. However, in righteousness, truth and justice, God has prevented them from beholding the Light. Such is the way of all those who despise the truth previously revealed, who consider it of no account, or who treat it with contempt.

From this, we learn that—although God works in election to call his people to himself—yet, this does not remove the moral responsibility from any individual from seeking the Lord's mercy. The fact that these individuals do not seek the salvation of the Lord is not because they are not of God's elect merely, but because their own sins have made them insensitive and unresponsiveness to the truths of the Gospel.

Now, in the following verses, the Son of God utters some dreadful words concerning those who refuse to believe.

## MATTHEW 11:21

(Luke 10:13)

The Lord Jesus names two small towns in Galilee: Chorazin and Bethsaida. Jesus had preached in both of these towns. He had performed many miraculous signs by healing the sick, casting out demons and raising the dead. Yet, the vast majority of the people who heard the Lord speak and who witnessed his healing and life-giving power over nature, still refused to believe on him. This was in spite of the clearest and most convincing evidence in support of the Lord Jesus as the promised Messiah or as the Anointed of God.

Unbelief in the face of such compelling evidence leaves individuals without excuse or remedy. These towns had shown utter contempt for the Son of Man and for the gracious and life-imparting words that he spoke from the Father. Therefore, these people and these towns were guilty of despising and contemning not only God the Son but also God the Father.

It is with this in view that the Lord utters this terrible pronouncement upon these towns and their citizens. The Lord compares Chorazin and Bethsaida to Tyre and Sidon. However, he states that if these heathen towns had been so favoured with the Word of God, they would have repented long ago. Furthermore, the people of these towns would have shown the genuineness of their repentance by donning sackcloth and sprinkling ashes over their heads (the outward symbols of contrition and humility) and by bringing forth the fruits of genuine godly repentance in their lives (the heartfelt expression of contrition and humility).

## MATTHEW 11:22

Tyre and Sidon, however, were not so favoured with the Gospel. They continued in their sinful way of life; and, for their iniquities, they will stand before God one day in judgment. Yet, the righteous judgment pronounced by God against Tyre and Sidon will be less severe than that pronounced against Chorazin and Bethsaida. The latter two towns rebelled against much greater light; a much greater awareness of the truth, and much greater privileges. However, greater privileges and light brings with it greater responsibilities. The towns of Chorazin and Bethsaida had heard the Gospel personally and repeatedly from the lips of the Saviour, and they had refused repeatedly to believe that Gospel or to seek his mercy. They had seen his miraculous power at work on many different occasions, but they had refused repeatedly to accept that these miracles testified to the divine power, authority, glory and commission of the Son of Man. Thus, at the Judgment on the Last Day, these two towns of Galilee in Israel will suffer significantly greater punishment than the Gentile towns of Tyre and Sidon, who were not so favoured with the presence of the Lord Jesus or the message of the Gospel.

So, too, will be the fate of those who hear the Gospel repeatedly, and yet who just as repeatedly scorn its message, holding in contempt the Gospel and its ministers, and especially the One of whom it speaks.

## MATTHEW 11:23-24

Turning his attention to another town in Galilee, the Lord Jesus now singles out Capernaum. Capernaum was especially favoured; because it was in that town that the Lord Jesus lived while in Galilee, and it was in or near that town that he performed many of his mighty works.

However, in spite of hearing the words of the Lord Jesus on a regular basis, and of seeing his miraculous powers, the citizens of Capernaum refused to repent of their sins or to believe the Gospel. They were not convinced that the kingdom of heaven (or the kingdom of God) had come. They were even less convinced that the King had come; or that Jesus was the promised offspring from the root of King David.

Granted, not everyone rejected the truth. A number did believe and became followers of the Lord Jesus. However, by far the greater part of Capernaum's citizens refused to repent and believe. For a while, many of them attached themselves to the followers of the Lord. However, they were not true disciples. Eventually, they were to dissociate themselves from the Lord's true followers and return to their worldly companions. Ultimately, fickle 'followers' of this kind would cry out one day for the Lord Jesus to be crucified.

However, Capernaum considered itself a specially favoured town. It boasted of its great privileges in comparison with other towns in Israel. It was a prosperous town with a thriving business community, based largely on fishing. Furthermore, it had provided hospitality for the Great Teacher or Rabbi—the Lord Jesus—during his stay in that area.

Thus, we see that it is perfectly possible to enjoy privileges and prosperity, to invite the Lord or his people into our homes and to provide them with hospitality, and yet to reject the Lord's Person, message and work. However, to have come so close to accepting Christ and his Gospel, without having experienced repentance for sins, is to be lost.

Thus, the Lord Jesus declares that this same highly privileged town of Capernaum will be brought down from its exalted position. However, on the Day of Judgment, the people of that town will not lose their exalted status merely, but will be brought to the very depths of Hades—the place of torments. Such will be their punishment for their treatment of the Saviour and for refusing to repent and believe the Gospel.

Yet, the Lord has not finished denouncing Capernaum or alluding to the just punishment awaiting its citizens. Now, the Lord asserts that if the same mighty works that had been performed in Capernaum had been performed in Sodom, God would not have needed to destroy that wicked city. By implication, the sinners of Sodom would have been convinced of God's power and glory as manifested in and through his Son. Consequently, they would have repented of their sins; they would have renounced completely their grossly immoral and homosexual practises, and they would have experienced the love, mercy and forgiveness of God.

The clear lesson here is that ‘morally upright sinners’ (like those of Capernaum) who refuse to repent come under God’s unending judgment and condemnation, while sexually immoral people and practising homosexuals who do repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and who utterly renounce their sin ex-

perience the unending love, mercy and grace of God in redemption, together with a place in his eternal kingdom. (1 Cor. 6:9-11)

Capernaum sinned against much greater light and awareness of the truth than did Sodom and Gomorrah. Therefore, Capernaum's sins will be considered worthy of significantly greater punishment than that of Sodom—even although they were not of the same kind. This is because there is one sin even greater than the practise of gross immorality or homosexuality—heinous to God as these are. This is the sin of unbelief—the wilful and sustained refusal to repent and believe the truth of God as declared and revealed in the Gospel. Had Sodom and Gomorrah repented and believed, they would have been spared from God's judgment—then, and at the Last Day.

In spite of their much greater privileges, Capernaum had refused consistently to repent and believe, even when presented with clearer evidence to the truth. Of necessity, therefore, and in the justice of God—Capernaum must endure more severe punishment than the immoral Sodomites.

## TRUTH REVEALED TO LITTLE CHILDREN

***Matthew 11:25-27***

(See also Luke 10:21-24)

### MATTHEW 11:25

At this point, the holy Son of God offers a prayer of thanksgiving to his Father in heaven. The vast majority of the people who had heard his words had rejected these words of life from the Father. Nevertheless, some had accepted the teaching of the Lord Jesus. By the grace of God, they had repented of their sins and had believed the Gospel—unto eternal life.

However, from this verse (among many others), we observe that the ability to receive or believe the Gospel does not lie with the person himself. This is because sinners are dead spiritually—dead in trespasses and sins; and therefore are incapable of responding to spirituals truths of their own accord or of their own wills. (Eph. 2:1,5; Col. 2:13) In all respects, they live and behave as fully responsible and capable human beings—except in respect of spiritual truths. They cannot respond to these truths unless and until enabled by the Holy Spirit—in effectual calling and regeneration. Thus, repentance and faith is all of God and none of self—although, this does not prevent any individual from seeking the mercy of the Lord, nor does it provide him with an excuse of he fails to do so.

The Lord Jesus makes plain the sovereign interposition of God in relation to salvation when he thanks the Father for hiding these things from the wise and highly-intelligent, but revealing them to little children. This is not to say that a person who is wise or intelligent cannot be saved, for manifestly this would not be true. However, the Lord is speaking of those who are wise in their own esteem (worldly wise) or in the esteem of others, but not so in God's esteem. He is speaking of those who rely on their natural faculties—such as intellectual abilities—*without acknowledging God as the Giver of this intelligence*, or using their God-given faculties to his honour and glory.

Furthermore, when the Lord speaks of little children, he is not speaking of those alone who are young in years. He is speaking of those who—*like* children—accept and believe the truth with simple, unvarnished

and implicit faith. However, this is very far from being blind faith: For blind faith—or faith not based on incontrovertible evidence—is not faith at all. 'Blind' faith is irrational, futile and foolish.

However, to such 'little children', God the Father is pleased to reveal his will—insofar as these truths relate to their lives and salvation. Those to whom God so reveals these truths—i.e., those whom his Holy Spirit enables to understand and accept the Gospel message—then repent of their sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Furthermore, since the Holy Spirit has effectually called them and regenerated them, they now are able to repent and believe *freely and willingly.*

The principle of this truth is enunciated by the Lord Jesus again in the Gospel of John. In chapter 6 of that Gospel, John writes:

> John 6:35-37 ESV
>
> (35) Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. (36) But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe.
>
> (37) "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out."

On this occasion, also, the Lord was responding to the unbelief of the people. Thus, in verse 37, he asserts: "*All that the Father gives me will come to me..."* In other words, notwithstanding the general unbelief of the people, not a single individual whom the Father has given to the Son will fail to come to the Son. From eternity, every single one of these individuals has been decreed as his elect people.

Furthermore, no one coming in repentance and faith to the Lord Jesus will ever be cast out. Thus, the Lord continues: "...*and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.*" They will come—because called and regenerated by the Holy Spirit. They will repent—because granted new spiritual life by the Holy Spirit. They will believe—because this will be their earnest or heart's desire following the gracious working of the Holy Spirit. And they will respond to all of this *freely and willingly*—because they have received a new 'heart' from the Holy Spirit: i.e., the Holy Spirit has regenerated their souls or renewed their innermost being, raising them from spiritual death to spiritual life.

## MATTHEW 11:26

Someone may object that God reveals only these truths to certain individuals and hides them from others. To this, the Lord gives this answer: "*Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will."*

It is not for any member of fallen and sinful mankind to take issue with the Most Holy and Righteous God over this issue. God is Sovereign and acts according to his own good pleasure, quite independently of the whims and fancies of sinful mankind. God is infinitely wise and never acts contrary to his perfect nature or contrary to truth, righteousness and justice— or without regard to his infinite love, mercy and grace.

Nevertheless, in his holiness and justice, God cannot and will not overlook sin or acquit the guilty. (Nahum 1:3) All mankind stands sinful and guilty before him. All mankind deserves the just penalty for their sin, which is death: spiritual death, physical death and eternal death. (Ezek. 18:4,20-23; Rom. 6:23a) Yet, according to his own sovereign will and pleasure, God has determined to have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and to show compassion toward those to whom he wills to show compassion. (Rom. 9:14-24) Thus, from among fallen and rebellious mankind, God has predestined a vast number—whom no one can count—to inherit eternal life. Yet, they are saved by his sovereign grace and mercy alone; not

because of any superior worth or merit in them, nor because they earned God's favour in some way. (Rom. 9:11; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:9; 2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 3:5) Among them are the worst of sinners—saved by the grace of God. And God will save many such from among all nations to make up the full number of his elect—his true church. But, like all who come to his Son in repentance and faith, they will do so with a child-like heart, and with gratitude to God for having mercy on them who deserved only his righteous judgment. They will rest in Christ their Redeemer, knowing that he paid the full cost of their salvation.

In the next few verses, the Lord Jesus will enlarge upon this theme; concluding with a tender invitation to the weary and heavy laden to find their rest in him.

## MATTHEW 11:27

Now, the Son discloses something of the extent of the power and authority that the Father has delegated to him while on earth. Everything has been placed into the Son's hands: That is, everything is under his supreme power and authority, and nothing is excluded from this remit. (Matt. 28:18; cf. John 13:3)

Since the Father has committed everything into the hands of his Son, then it follows that the Father alone knows—or is fully aware—of the Son's power and authority. Furthermore, the power and authority of the Son is the same power and authority of the Father. Again, the Father knows the Son intimately because the Son has come from the Father and is intent on fulfilling the Father's will and purposes. However, no human being can attain to the knowledge that the Father has of the Son, nor can any man or woman ever experience the union and communion that exists between the Father and the Son. These relationships are exclusive to the members of the divine Trinity. (John 10:30; 17:11,21)

In the same way, no person can know the Father, or experience the degree of fellowship with him, as does the Son. This, too, is an exclusive relationship, reserved for the Son and the Father alone.

How, then, do fallen sinful members of the human race come to know God or to enter into fellowship with him? They do so through his one and only Son. To this end, the Lord Jesus declares:

*"...and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."* (v.27b)

Notice the words of the Lord Jesus here: *"...anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."*

A saving knowledge of God the Father comes to anyone—and to everyone—to whom the Son chooses to disclose the truths necessary for faith unto salvation: That is, through the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the Son of God grants an understanding, repentant, and believing heart to all those whom the Father has determined should be brought to know him and whom he has given to his Son from eternity.

Thus, in his prayer to his Father, the Lord Jesus declares:

> John 17:2 ESV
>
> (2) "since you have given him authority over all flesh, *to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.*" (emphasis added)

And again:

John 17:9 ESV

(9) I am praying for them. *I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me*, for they are yours. (emphasis added)

It is evident from these verses, and from other related passages of God's Word, that the Father has given to his Son a specific number of people for himself, and that these people have been predestined from eternity. These are otherwise referred to as the 'elect', and it is they to whom the Son chooses to reveal the knowledge of the Father. Thus, those elected from eternity by the sovereign grace of God find salvation and eternal life by the mercy of God and by the substitutionary and atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The carnal (unspiritual and unregenerate) mind cannot comprehend the things of God. They are foolishness unto him. Thus—if he is relying on his own will, reason or any other faculties—fallen and sinful mankind is incapable of understanding the truths of salvation. This because his soul is dead spiritually, and cannot respond to anything spiritual. (Rom. 8:5-8) Therefore, if anyone is to experience the salvation of the Lord, God must first renew or regenerate his soul, so that he is rendered capable of understanding spiritual truths. This is what the Lord Jesus does—by the Holy Spirit—when he reveals the Father to all those individuals whom he chooses. These are then enabled to repent of theirs sins and to believe the Gospel. These are then added to God's kingdom and to the church of which Christ is Head.

But how are such people to know that the Lord has chosen them and is calling them to himself?

They experience within their lives the gracious working of the Holy Spirit in effectual (or effective) calling. As the Holy Spirit works within their souls, they begin to realise that they are sinners, separated from God, and under the wrath and judgment of God. Under conviction of the Holy Spirit, they are driven to seek answers to their spiritual needs and forgiveness for their sins. Previously—while unregenerate—their sins may have been of little concern to them. Now, however, the Holy Spirit convinces them that they must seek the mercy of the Lord—because all who seek will find.

Now, these individuals are longing for peace and rest with God. Now, they are hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Now, they are wearying of their old sinful lifestyles and are seeking forgiveness and deliverance. (Cf. Acts 2:37-39)

These are those to whom the Son has chosen to reveal the Father. These are those to whom he now says:

## COME TO ME...AND I WILL GIVE YOU REST

### MATTHEW 11:28-30

Hear the tender words of the Lord Jesus to those who are seeking genuinely for his mercy, and are doing so from a contrite and humble heart:

Matthew 11:28 ESV

(28) “Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

Does the Lord Jesus say that a certain type or class of sinner may not come to him for rest? No, indeed, he does not. The Lord Jesus tenderly invites all those who labour under the burden of their sin to come unto him. He makes no reservations or exclusions. No matter what sins that person may have committed, the Lord invites him to come unto him; for the Lord will receive him and will give him eternal rest.

Therefore, we see that no class of sinner is excluded from this invitation. And none who come will ever be turned away. Thus, all who labour and are heavy laden may come to Jesus, in the certain assurance that he will receive them and grant rest to their souls.

Of course, we must never take this verse in isolation or detach it from the preceding verses. This would make it teach something that the Lord never intended and which would be contrary to the teaching of Scripture elsewhere. In this connection, we must be very careful to observe these points:

- Those who are invited to come to the Lord Jesus are those who feel weary and heavy laden because the Holy Spirit has convicted them of their sin and of their need of forgiveness before a just and holy God.
- The Holy Spirit has convicted those people of their sin and need because the Lord Jesus has chosen to reveal to them the knowledge of the Father (and of the Father's will for them), granting to them an understanding, repentant, and believing heart (or mind) in the process.

The Lord continues with these words:

> Matthew 11:29-30 ESV
>
> (29) “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. (30) For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Here, again, the gentleness and tenderness of the Lord Jesus toward sinners becomes very evident. The Lord does not condemn those who are broken-hearted and grieving over their sins and iniquities. He condemns only the self-righteous and hypocrites who conceal or deny their sins. To all those who come to him with a contrite and broken heart, however, the Lord welcomes and receives. Thus, to all such people, the Lord declares: *“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me...* In other words, lay down your burden (the guilt of your sin) and I will pick it up. Take upon your shoulders my much lighter yoke. Then, learn at my feet and from my Word those things necessary for life and godliness. This will bring true rest to your souls and peace in your heart with God.

What more gracious invitation could the Lord Jesus issue to fallen and sinful men and women? Without qualification or reservation, the holy Son of God is calling on sinners of every kind to come unto him for rest—all those, without exception, whom the Holy Spirit effectually calls or draws to the Saviour. And all those who come will find that rest, and will experience forgiveness of sins, peace with God, and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in the Lord Jesus.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 12

## JESUS QUESTIONED ABOUT THE SABBATH

***Matthew 12:1-8***

*(Cf. Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5)*

### MATTHEW 12:1-2

It was the Sabbath, and as Jesus and his disciples walked through a grainfield, the disciples began to pick and eat the standing grain to satisfy their hunger. (Cf. Deut. 23:25) However, some Pharisees had seen them and complained immediately to the Lord Jesus about this flagrant breach of the Sabbath. (Exod. 20:9-11; 23:12)

In the eyes of the Pharisees, the Lord's disciples had broken the law of the Sabbath on a least two counts:

1. They had picked the heads from the stalks, which—to the Pharisees—was tantamount to reaping the crop. However, reaping was a form of labour that God's Law forbade on the Sabbath.

2. They had separated the corn from the ears, which was tantamount to threshing the grain. However, threshing too was a form of labour prohibited on the Sabbath by God's Law.

Clearly, however, the Pharisees had misunderstood completely the Law of God as it related to labour on the Sabbath day, and they had misapplied that Law in a manner completely unintended by the LORD. The Law forbade any form of work on the Sabbath day, except those works that were essential to a person or animal's life, health or welfare. Thus, originally, the Law forbade the gathering of food unnecessarily on the Sabbath, but not the preparation or serving of that food for household consumption. Again, the Law forbade any form of work normally performed on weekdays (work for gain, etc.), but not works essential to preparation, limited travel from place to place, or works associated with sacrifice, offering or worship in the synagogues or temple, etc.

The over-scrupulous Pharisees, however, had forbidden any and every form of work whatsoever on the Sabbath day—even although the Lord God did not require such stringent prohibitions. Thus, in response to their carping complaint, the Lord Jesus declares to the Pharisees:

### MATTHEW 12:3-4

(Mark 2:25-26)

The Pharisees professed to know the Scriptures. Together with the scribes among them, they were reputed to be 'experts' in the law: i.e., in religious law in general and in the Law of God in particular. Yet, apparently, they were unaware of certain of their own Scriptures, or of the significance of these Scriptures. Thus, the Lord Jesus reminds them of a parallel situation. When David and his companions were hungry, he entered the house of God and ate the showbread or 'bread of the Presence'. However, this

bread was sanctified to the LORD God. No one but the priests of God was permitted to eat any part of it. (1 Sam. 21:1-6)

The point the Lord was making is that—in cases of dire need or necessity (in this case, for food)—the Law of God must not be so understood or interpreted as to prevent a person from meeting his basic needs. This applies wherever the necessary supply (in this case, of bread) can be found. The fact that that bread may have been reserved and hallowed for use in the temple does not—in and of itself—prevent it being used to meet a person's need in an emergency—even although that person is not necessarily a member of the priesthood.

However, if this example from the Scriptures were not enough, the Lord Jesus provides the Pharisees with another:

## MATTHEW 12:5

The Pharisees had complained bitterly to the Lord Jesus because they had seen his disciples 'working' on the Sabbath. However, had they not considered what the temple priests were doing on the Sabbath?

Every Sabbath day, the priests ministered in the temple—as required by God's Law. Every Sabbath day, they attended to the services of the sanctuary—as required by God's Law. Every Sabbath day, they provided offerings and sacrifices to God—as required in his Law. (Num. 28:9-10; John 7:23)

The priests of the sanctuary served according to the Law of God; but, by the very nature of their service, these same priests of God were working on the Sabbath. Thus, not all works were forbidden by the Law of God. Those works that honoured and glorified God by serving him in his sanctuary or that attended to people or animals in need were not breaking the Sabbath by performing essential services on that day. The temple priesthood did not profane or desecrate the Sabbath by working in the sanctuary. No more does a person profane or desecrate the Sabbath by working to preserve a person's life, health or welfare.

Then, the Lord declares to the Pharisees:

## MATTHEW 12:6

*"I tell you, something greater than the temple is here."*

"I tell you..." is an expression indicating that what follows is of the utmost importance, and requires the rapt attention of the hearer.

..."something" or "Someone" (the word is not supplied in the original) "greater than the temple..."

The Lord Jesus had just been speaking about the priests who served God in his holy temple at Jerusalem. Now, he expands on the concept of the temple and its worship by announcing to the Pharisees that "something (or "Someone") greater than the temple is here."

But what could be greater in the sight of God or man than the temple? This was the one place—and the only place—where the LORD had caused his name to be remembered. No other place or mode of worship was acceptable in the eyes of God Most High. It was the place where he revealed his glory within the holy of holies, and which no one could see. It was the place where atonement was made for the sins of

the people. What then, or who, could be greater than the temple? Surely, only God himself could be greater than the sanctuary that bore his name and in which his presence was revealed to the High Priest once every year! (Heb. 9:1-7)

*"I tell you, something greater than the temple is here."*

If the Pharisees had realised the implication of these words, they would have raged vehemently against the Lord Jesus accusing him of blasphemy. Jesus was implying that *he* was greater than the temple, and everything that this holy sanctuary represented. The temple spoke of the utmost holiness, righteousness and purity of God. It spoke of the need of atonement before sin could be forgiven and people could be reconciled to God. (Lev. 16:2,13-15) It spoke, too, of the one place and mode of worship that the LORD had instituted for Israel. There was no other.

However, if the Lord Jesus was greater than the temple, then everything which the temple represented and of which it spoke concerning worship, sacrifices and offerings must be inferior to him. The temple had been instituted until the time of reformation (Heb. 9:8-10), when the Messiah would appear to take away sin once-for-all by the sacrifice of himself. (Heb. 9:11-15, 25-28) The temple had been instituted until the time that people would no longer worship God according to the laws of sacrifices and offerings performed in a specific sanctuary in Jerusalem, but they would do so in spirit and in truth and in all parts of the world. (John 4:22-24)

Thus, the Lord's clear implication that he was the One greater than the temple can only be understood as an assertion that he is the promised Anointed of God who would render obsolete the services and offerings of the temple *by fulfilling finally and completely everything of which the temple spoke*. In other words, the Lord Jesus would set aside the terms of the Old Covenant in order to establish the New Covenant in his blood. (Heb. 8:1-13)

## MATTHEW 12:7

(Cf. Matt. 9:13)

Now, the Lord cites another passage of Scripture that should have been well known to the Pharisees: "*...I desire mercy and not sacrifice..."* Or, as rendered by the prophet Hosea:

> Hosea 6:6 ESV
>
> (6) "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."
> (Cf. Matt. 9:13; see also Isa. 1:1-17; Mic. 6:6-8)

The Lord Jesus is not saying that sacrifice is unimportant. On the contrary, the sacrifices and offerings ordained by God were essential for the covering over of sin and for the worship of the LORD. They could not be neglected or negated without incurring God's greatest displeasure.

However, the Lord is asserting that—although sacrifice is an essential element of worship—sacrifices should never be made to God at the expense of love and mercy toward other people. A person who engaged only in the form of religion would be guilty of practising only a formal religion—a sham religion or outward show of piety devoid of heartfelt love for God and for others.

Thus, heartfelt and genuine worship of God—together with the sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise—must be accompanied by a heart of love for others and a desire to help them in their need. This has very wide ranging implications. However, in the present context, it makes abundantly clear that—had the Pharisees been worshipping God from pure, humble and contrite heart—they would have desired to do good to their neighbours.

From this, it follows that the Pharisees—and all other religious leaders—would have sought the welfare of other people, and would not have criticised them for doing whatever was necessary to fulfil their basic needs. This would not have involved any conflict with the Law regarding the Sabbath; for the Law of God never prevented deeds of kindness, love and mercy from being undertaken or performed on the Sabbath day. This was what the Lord meant when he declared: "*…I desire mercy and not sacrifice…"*

Again, had the Pharisees understood this principle, they would not have criticised and condemned people who were not guilty of any offence. The disciples had not violated the Sabbath or broken any other law of God. It would have been impossible for them to have done so in the presence of the Lord Jesus without the Lord correcting their offence. Since the Lord Jesus allowed his disciples to pluck and eat the grain, then clearly no breach of the Sabbath law was involved.

Therefore, we observe that we cannot require any person to comply with an instruction or command that does not have its clear origin in Scriptures, or that cannot be deduced from the Scriptures by a clear and necessary principle. The Pharisees had no excuse for adding their traditions or personal interpretations to the express command of God. Neither does any other religious leadership or church authority. The Word of God alone is the rule of faith and godliness. To this Word (the Bible), nothing must be added and from it nothing must be subtracted. (Cf. Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18-19)

Then, in verse 8, the Lord adds these words:

## MATTHEW 12:8

Matthew 12:8 ESV

(8) "For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

Mark's Gospel includes these words:

Mark 2:27-28 ESV

(27) And he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

(28) "So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

From an ordinary man—as the Pharisees believed Jesus to be—this would have been an astonishing assertion. Had they realised the full significance of this claim, the Pharisees would have accused the Lord Jesus of the most flagrant blasphemy against God. (Cf. John 10:30-33)

However, the Lord Jesus was not asserting merely that he was the lord or ruler over the Sabbath. Granted, this is included; but included also is the thought that the Lord Jesus is Sovereign Lord over the Sabbath and therefore over the Law concerning the Sabbath. This, however, is an explicit claim to deity.

Indeed, it is more. It is an assertion that the Lord Jesus is in fact God—for it was the Lord God who instituted the Sabbath.

Thus, as the Lord Jesus points out, the Sabbath was created by God as a day of rest and restoration for the benefit of mankind. Mankind was not created to be bound by man-made rules and regulations concerning the Sabbath, which God had not commanded.

## JESUS HEALS ON THE SABBATH

***Matthew 12:9-13***

*(Cf. Luke 14:3-6)*

### MATTHEW 12:9

It is still the Sabbath day; and now, the Lord Jesus leaves the Pharisees to enter into a local synagogue. This is in keeping with the Lord's mission to reach out first to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. (Matt. 10:6; 15:24) Furthermore, by reading and expounding the Word of God to the people, the Lord was able to show from their own cherished Scriptures that he was fulfilling the Law and the Prophets, rather than contradicting or nullifying them as the religious leaders claimed.

The fact that the Lord Jesus was able at this time to enter freely into the local synagogues to read the Scriptures indicates that at least some of the Jewish rabbis or synagogues rulers must have been favourably disposed toward the Lord's teaching. Perhaps, Jairus was such a ruler; and others like him. Ultimately, however, the Sanhedrin would exert its undoubtedly powerful influence over the synagogues in their attempt to silence the teaching of the Lord Jesus, thus making it increasingly difficult for the Lord to teach inside the synagogues or within the temple courts.

We learn from this that we must not neglect our duties and responsibilities toward our own local church, while we are involved in an outdoor or external mission that reaches out to the lost.

### MATTHEW 12:10

When Jesus entered the synagogue, the Pharisees followed him. However, they had not come to hear the Word of the Lord, but to criticise the Lord's words and deeds. And, no sooner had they entered, than they thought they had found a perfect opportunity to ensnare the Lord Jesus in his words.

In the synagogue at that moment was a man suffering from an atrophied or withered hand, caused by chronic neurological degeneration. The man's hand was completely useless, having lost all muscular power and probably resolving itself into a 'claw-hand' or 'ape-hand'.

As soon as they caught sight of this man's affliction, the Pharisees turned to the Lord Jesus and asked him: *"Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"* The man's health and welfare were of no concern to the Pharisees. They had asked this question merely to trap the Lord Jesus in his words. If he said, 'Yes, it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath' then they would have accused him of breaking God's law (or rather, their misinterpretation of God's law). However, if the Lord Jesus said 'No, it is not lawful to heal on the Sabbath', then the Pharisees would have accused him vehemently of violating that very law earlier, when he

had healed on the Sabbath. Either way, the Pharisees believed that they could entrap the Lord Jesus when he answered, and thereby discredit him in the eyes of the people.

How little concerned were the Pharisees to extend compassion to those in need, and how determined to uphold their own cherished doctrines and traditions! Such 'religion' (so-called) is obnoxious to God.

The Lord Jesus, however, answers with a question of his own:

## MATTHEW 12:11

*"...Which of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out?"*

Even although most of the Pharisees personally may not have been shepherds or sheep-owners, they understood very well the point of this question. However, the Pharisees who showed little concern for the welfare of men and women were not likely to show any more concern for the welfare of animals.

Nevertheless, while they might not have been concerned particularly for the animal, these avaricious religious leaders would most certainly have been concerned for the animal's market value. In those days especially, the loss of a sheep could amount to a very substantial loss of revenue—not only from that animal itself, but from the lambs it might have produced. Therefore—had it been their sheep—the Pharisees would not have hesitated to rescue it from the ditch or pit, even on a Sabbath day.

Thus, in the eyes of the Pharisees, the Sabbath must not be broken; although, if financial interests were at stake, then an exception could be made! What a contrast between a marked concern for financial interests and a distinct lack of concern for suffering mankind!

## MATTHEW 12:12

The Lord Jesus knew the hearts of the Pharisees. He knew that they would not have hesitated to rescue a valuable animal—even on the Sabbath. Thus, the Lord draws the conclusion: *"Of how much more value is a man than a sheep!"*

The Lord had silenced the Pharisees for now. Jesus' query had been unanswerable. They knew that if it was permissible to pursue the welfare of a valuable animal on the Sabbath, then it must be much more permissible—indeed essential—to pursue the welfare of an even more valuable human being on the Sabbath. Furthermore unlike the animals, man had been created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, on this account, mankind stood on a much higher level of priority than God's animal creation.

However, in case the Pharisees should be entertaining any lingering doubts, the Lord continues: *"So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."*

This expresses once-for-all God's intended use of the Sabbath. *"...it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."*

This always had been God's intention for his people when he had given the law concerning the Sabbath. The Sabbath rest was never intended to preclude good works generally, or—more specifically—those deeds that were necessary to life, health and welfare. However, the Pharisees and others had re-interpreted parts of God's law, or augmented it with their own traditions. Thus, it was not God's law that forbade works of healing or the performance of good and necessary works on the Sabbath. Rather, it was

the rules and regulations ordained by men such as the Pharisees. Therefore, when Jesus healed people or performed other good works on the Sabbath, he was fulfilling the law of God concerning the Sabbath. However, at the same time, this had the effect of nullifying and overturning the Pharisees' man-made rules and regulations concerning the Sabbath. (Mark 7:1-13)

Thus, the Pharisees found themselves unable to raise any further objections—at least, on this occasion.

### MATTHEW 12:13

Turning, now, to the afflicted man, the Lord Jesus commanded him to stretch out his withered hand: i.e., to open it out fully from its previously deformed and 'claw-like' or 'ape-like' shape. We must remember, of course, that the muscles in this hand had atrophied completely, and that the nerves to these muscles had long since ceased to function correctly. Thus, when the Lord commanded him to open his hand fully, Jesus was imparting to him the necessary healing of his neurological functions and muscle tissue. Consequently, when the man responded in faith to Jesus' command, he found his hand fully restored like the other.

From this, we note that the healing of the Lord Jesus was both instantaneous and complete. Furthermore, the Lord's miracles of healing never suffered from remission or a return to the diseased or afflicted condition. Thus, anyone claiming to have the gift of healing must be able to heal in this manner—instantaneously, completely and without subsequent remission. Anything less than this is not the kind of healing described in the Bible, and as was imparted to certain on the Lord's people as a gift of the Holy Spirit.

## JESUS' MINISTRY FULFILS THE SCRIPTURES

***Matthew 12:14-21***

### MATTHEW 12:14

How, then, did the Pharisees respond to this remarkable demonstration of Jesus' power and authority? The fact that this man had been healed filled them with rage. The Pharisees were enraged for a number of reasons. A few of these may be given here:

- They were furious because they believed that the Sabbath had been violated (i.e., the Sabbath law as misapplied by the scribes and Pharisees had been violated).
- They were enraged because they would have expected this man to refuse healing on the Sabbath day and to seek it on a weekday.
- Perhaps most of all, the Pharisees were filled with fury because—by healing this man on the Sabbath—the Lord Jesus was showing a complete disregard, if not outright contempt, for the traditions of the scribes and Pharisees concerning the Sabbath. It did not matter to them in the least that the Lord Jesus was obeying the will of his Father in respect of the Sabbath. The fact was that the Lord had violated *their* rules and regulations regarding the Sabbath, and this was what infuriated them.

We note, therefore, that the pious Pharisees showed absolutely no concern for the man who had just been healed—except to accuse him implicitly of conniving with Jesus insofar as he obeyed the Lord's command to stretch out his hand. Even worse, however, the Pharisees began to plot among themselves how they might put a stop to the Lord Jesus and his mighty works—by destroying him.

Thus, we see the true character of these highly esteemed religious leaders. Although not all Pharisees were of this class, those conspiring here against the Lord Jesus were no better than common murderers—for it was their intention to destroy the Lord Jesus by having him put to death.

From this, we learn that not all who are adorned in religious robes or vestments, or who serve as leaders in the church, are actually true servants of God. Many evil or vile imposters have infiltrated the church. These individuals are like ravening wolves seeking to destroy the flock by their false teaching and godless lifestyles. (Matt. 7:15; Acts 20:29-30)

## MATTHEW 12:15

The Lord Jesus, of course, knew very well what was in the minds of these hypocritical Pharisees. Therefore, he withdrew from that area, since his time had not yet come for him to be delivered up into the hands of sinful men. However, people followed the Lord wherever he went, and he healed all those who were afflicted in body or soul. Thus, in spite of the criticisms and condemnation of the Pharisees, the people still listened to the Lord Jesus and sought his help—for his words and his teaching were greater than any given to them by their religious leaders. His power far excelled anything that they had witnessed previously, and his ability to heal the afflicted far outstripped that of the Jewish healers or physicians.

Yet, it was for these reasons and others like them that the majority of the people attached themselves to the Lord Jesus. Although the Lord spoke frequently of spiritual and eternal matters, many in the crowd were not willing to accept such teaching. Ultimately, such people would cease to follow him.

## MATTHEW 12:16

The Lord commanded those he healed not to make known his whereabouts. Those healed could hardly deny the reality of their healing, for it was patently obvious for all to see. However, the Lord forbids them from revealing to others outside the immediate area where the Lord was now working, or even how they had been healed. This was to make it more difficult for people like the Pharisees to interfere with the Lord's ministry, or to attempt to discourage the crowds from listening to him. The Pharisees, of course, were to be found mainly in the larger towns and cities, rather than in the more remote rural areas that the Lord often frequented.

## MATTHEW 12:17-21

Furthermore, the Lord's command fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah; which, in that book, is written as follows:

> Isaiah 42:1-4 ESV
>
> (1) "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. (2) He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; (3) a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.
>
> (4) "He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law."

Or, as recorded by Matthew:

> Matthew 12:17-21 ESV
>
> (17) This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah:
>
> (18) "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. (19) He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; (20) a bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; (21) and in his name the Gentiles will hope."

Although the words in Matthew differ slightly from those in Isaiah, the meaning is the same. In Matthew 12:18, 'Gentiles' is synonymous with 'nations' in Isaiah 42:1. And in Matthew 12:21, 'Gentiles' is used in place of Isaiah's expression, 'coastlands'—meaning those who inhabit the coastlands, or the Gentiles.

This prophecy speaks of much more than the Lord preventing those healed from making him known. To begin with, it speaks most eloquently of the Servant of the LORD—the One whom God has chosen. This is the LORD's Anointed or Messiah. This is he in whom God's soul delights; he of whom he could say, *"This is my beloved Son, with him I am well pleased."* This was the One on whom the Spirit descended as a dove at his baptism. This is he who—through the preaching of his Gospel—brings forth justice, righteousness and truth to every nation in the world who hears that Word and responds to that message.

Verse 19 of Matthew chapter 12 declares that the Lord *"...will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice on the streets."*

This does not contradict the Lord's public preaching or teaching ministry. However, we must bear in mind the circumstances prevailing in Israel prior to and including the time of our Lord's appearing on earth. Many false prophets or false messiahs had come in the name of the Lord, proclaiming loudly and publicly that they were the servants of Yahweh. Some of them amassed sizeable followings, much to the annoyance of the Roman authorities. Others also arose at these times who were more of a politico-religious persuasion, such as the 'Zealots'. These were extreme religious purists, who called for the death penalty to be imposed on anyone who defiled the sacred things of God. These, too, however, made their pres-

ence known among the people, by proclaiming their views forthrightly and publicly, and again to the consternation of the Roman authorities.

Thus, by comparison, the Lord's teaching and ministry was of much lower profile. Although the Lord attracted crowds, his teaching and preaching was not such as could be construed as mischievous to the Roman government or to law and order (although, the religious leaders misconstrued it as such). Furthermore, the Lord's teaching was intended to heal and to bind up the broken hearted. When compared therefore with the false teachers and political agitators of the period, the Lord's teaching was challenging but posed no threat to the peace or security of the region. The Lord gathered crowds around him, but these were like sheep without a shepherd rather than the discontents and rabble-rousers associated with political agitators or false teachers. (Matt. 9:36)

The same thought is continued in verse 20 of Matthew chapter 12. This speaks of the gentleness and lowliness of the Lord Jesus, and of his loving concern for the people. Though a person be like a bruised or broken reed, sorely afflicted and suffering much inward pain, yet the Lord had come to heal the broken hearted. Although they might be like smouldering wicks, at the very end of their tether, or with virtually no life or strength left in them, the Lord had come to restore life, health and strength to all those who sought his help. Furthermore, by the proclamation of the Gospel, justice would be brought to the nations: i.e., to all those who responded to the truth of the Gospel and who placed themselves under the teaching of the Word of God. The reference here, of course, is to the spiritual kingdom (or the kingdom of heaven) of which the Lord had spoken earlier in this Gospel—not to any physical kingdom on earth at the present time or at the time the Lord was speaking.

Once again, the Lord Jesus makes it plain that the Gospel would not be reserved for the people of Israel alone. Ultimately—as the prophets had declared—the Word of the Lord would be sounded forth among the Gentiles. Nor would it be confined to the Gentiles living within the borders of Israel. On the contrary, the message of the Gospel would go forth into every nation of the world. This alone fulfils the prophecy that in his name will the Gentiles hope: for, only by hearing and responding to the message of life and salvation could the non-Jewish nations hope to find forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Rom. 15:12)

## JESUS ACCUSED OF COLLUDING WITH SATAN

***Matthew 12:22-24***

*(Cf. Mark 3:22-27; Luke 11:14-26)*

### MATTHEW 12:22

While Jesus was teaching and healing the people, a man was brought to him who was both blind and mute. However, on this occasion, the man was not suffering merely from a combination of physical disabilities, but from physical disabilities resulting from demon possession (ESV, ‘oppression’). Thus, this poor sufferer was not only blind and mute, but was being tormented by the presence of evil spirits controlling the faculties of his mind and the functions of his body.

The man would be considered an outcast from society, since the demon-possessed were ceremonially unclean. He almost certainly found himself friendless, except perhaps for a few other people with similar

conditions to his own. Even so, someone cared enough about him to bring this poor sufferer to the Lord Jesus.

Unable to see or speak to the Great Physician, the demon possessed man stood before him in silence—at least insofar as the demons would allow him. Yet, with a word of command—or by the exercise of his divine power—the Lord Jesus healed this afflicted man. Immediately the Lord expelled the demons, the man was able both to see and to speak intelligible words. No longer was Satan able to keep this man from beholding the Light of the world, or from praising the name of his Healer and Deliverer.

In passing, we should observe that an outcast of society, possessed by foul demons, was brought by someone to Jesus. Without hesitation, the Lord received this man and healed him. Thus, we too must bring to Jesus those who are outcasts of society and perhaps considered too foul to be accepted by him; because, prior to our conversion, such too was our condition in the sight of a most holy God. (Isaiah 64:6; 1:18) Again, we must remember that the Lord Jesus receives even the worst of sinners and eats with them. (Luke 15:2)

## MATTHEW 12:23

When the crowd witnessed the effect of the Lord's power over Satan, and his ability to heal a man who had been demon possessed and physically afflicted, they expressed bewildered amazement. They knew that no ordinary man could accomplish this. They realised that any man with such power must have received that power from God. No doubt, many would remain sceptical. Nevertheless, a number among them began to ask, *"Can this be the Son of David?"*

These people remembered that their Scriptures had said that the coming Messiah—the Son of David—would perform many mighty works. They would have remembered that the Scriptures said he would heal the sick, cast out evil spirits and raise the dead. Therefore, when they saw the Lord Jesus performing these very works, they began to believe that he was indeed the Messiah of God, and that these miraculous signs proved it.

However, as soon as the Pharisees learned that the people were asking this question, they intervened immediately. No, these miracles did not prove that Jesus was the Messiah or that he had received power from God to cast out demons. Indeed, they asserted, *"It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons."*

Before we deal with this scurrilous blasphemy, let us note how the Pharisees spoke of the Lord Jesus. They referred to him, as *"...this man"....* This is a clear denial of Jesus' claims about himself, and of the people's rising belief that Jesus might be God's promised Messiah. Furthermore, by using the expression *'this man'* in such a derogatory manner, they are implying in the strongest possible terms that the Lord Jesus is nothing other than a common man; that he has no connections with God except in his own mind, and that he most certainly has not received divine power from God to cast out demons. On the contrary, this is a common man who is in league with the devil, and is casting out demons by using supernatural powers imparted to him by Satan.

What greater blasphemy could these religious leaders have uttered! Not content with denying that Jesus is the Christ, they attribute the powers of the Prince of Light to that of the prince of darkness! Apart from the gross absurdity of this assertion, it is also unimaginable folly. It is wickedness of the utmost

magnitude and comes perilously close to committing that sin which will never be forgiven—as we shall see in due course.

By attributing Jesus' power to cast out demons not just to the evil one, but to 'Beelzebul' the Pharisees were demonstrating their utmost contempt for the holy Son of God. 'Beelzebul' was a name meaning *'god of dung'* or *'god of filth'*, and was possibly a corruption of the name 'Beelzebub' ('*lord of heaven*' or *'god of flies'*)—the god of the Ekronites, whom—historically—the Jewish people despised.

In case there should be any doubt about whom the Pharisees meant when they spoke of 'Beelzebul', they qualified their blasphemous assertion by equating Beelzebul with 'the prince of demons'. This is an unambiguous reference to Satan—the 'god (or 'ruler') of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 2 Cor. 4:4), 'the prince (or 'ruler') of darkness' (Eph. 6:12), and 'the prince of the power of the air' (Eph. 2:2).

It is hard to imagine what greater sin could have been committed on this occasion, and others like it, by the Pharisees. It reached to the very threshold of committing the unforgivable sin, and those who had reached that stage were very close indeed to the point of final impenitence, where—by their own rebellious and blasphemous attitude—they had hardened their hearts (or minds) irreversibly against the truths of salvation. Unlike Saul of Tarsus, they are guilty of blasphemy against the Name wilfully and maliciously. Saul (or Paul) did so in relative ignorance, and without the same light as had been revealed to these other Pharisees.

## JESUS REFUTES THE PHARISEES' VILE CLAIM

***Matthew 12:25-30***

### MATTHEW 12:25

Knowing the evil thoughts that had been passing through the minds of the Pharisees, Jesus turns to address them. The Lord makes the point that should have been obvious even to the Pharisees that a divided kingdom is a kingdom doomed to disintegration and ruin. Similarly, a divided city or house must fall. Therefore, apart from any other considerations, the Pharisees' assertions were illogical—as the Lord demonstrates in verse 26, by asking:

### MATTHEW 12:26

*"And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?"*

If the Lord Jesus had received his power to cast out demons from the prince of demons then Satan was acting against his own interests. And, if so, his evil kingdom could not survive. It must fall—and fall at his own hands.

It seems that the Pharisees had failed to see the absurdity and illogicality of their assertion. In their blind rage, they had uttered the first vilest accusations that had come into their minds—without considering the logic of their statements. Now, however, the Lord Jesus demonstrates to them just how powerless their arguments were, since founded not only on illogical but also on grossly untrue statements.

However, to demonstrate further the foolishness of their scurrilous assertions, the Lord asks in verse 27:

## MATTHEW 12:27

*"And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out?"*

If it was true that the power to cast out demons did not come from God but from Satan, then where did this place the recognised Jewish exorcists? The Pharisees knew that certain of their own Jewish people had been casting out demons for some time. Many of these were unsuccessful because they had not been called or appointed by God to this ministry. However, the religious leaders were aware that other exorcists did cast out demons successfully—and the Pharisees recognised these men as servants of God. Were they now saying that their own exorcists were not God's servants, but that they had received their ability from Satan? This is certainly the only conclusion one could come to, if, in fact, the casting out of demons is done by the power of Satan and not by God.

Once again, the Lord exposes the absurdity of the Pharisees' claim. Furthermore, the Lord demonstrates to them that they are attempting to prove that the same phenomena occur from sources that are diametrically opposed—God and Satan. Yet, it was bitter hatred and jealous rage on the part of these religious leaders that made them attribute the Lord's power to Satan—when they were fully aware that God gave such power to certain selected men to accomplish his own purposes over the evil one. The Jewish exorcists were proof of this; and, as the Lord declares: *"...Therefore they will be your judges."*

Then, in verse 28, the Lord Jesus turns the tables on the Pharisees by announcing to them:

## MATTHEW 12:28

*"But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."*

This must have been the last thing that the Pharisees wanted to hear. They had tried desperately to avoid this very conclusion by attributing the Lord's power over the evil unclean spirits to the evil one himself. Now, they must have seen their dilemma. If, indeed, Jesus was casting out demons by the Spirit of God, then all their claims about Jesus must have been wrong. For, if Jesus was acting by the Spirit of God, then he must be the Sent One of God. He must be God's Anointed, or Messiah. In this case, the signs that he was performing were indeed the proof of his Messiahship and commission from the Father. And, if this were so, then the kingdom that God had promised must now have come—as the Lord Jesus states expressly in this verse.

This placed the Pharisees in an impossible situation. Regardless of the evidence and of the logic of the Lord's arguments, however, they remained resolutely opposed to the Lord Jesus. Even although their own Scriptures pointed to Jesus as the promised Messiah, they were not willing to accept this conclusion. Rather than accept that Jesus was the King sent by God, and that the kingdom of God had now come, they were determined to maintain their opposition to the holy One of God. Ultimately, this could lead only to final condemnation for the recalcitrant Pharisees and others like them. Such is the desperate plight of all those who will not accept the evidence that God himself provides.

Yet, the Lord has not finished responding to the Pharisees' vile accusation against him. He has more to say to them in verse 29.

## MATTHEW 12:29

The Lord uses another illustration. It is impossible for anyone to enter and ransack the house of a well defended owner unless the would-be assailant first overcomes the owner's defences and renders him powerless. Only then is it safe for him to strip and destroy the owner's property.

Thus, the Lord is declaring that far from working in collusion with Satan, he considers Satan as the arch-enemy of God and man. Instead of co-operating with the evil one, the Lord's intention was to overcome and defeat Satan, bringing his house or kingdom to ruin in the process. This, however, is the opposite of what the Pharisees had been saying.

Now, in verse 30, the Lord adds these solemn words:

## MATTHEW 12:30

*"Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters."*

The Pharisees had complained bitterly because the Lord Jesus would not accept their interpretation of God's law or bind himself to their traditions, rules and regulations. They considered the Lord as one who was unwilling to conform to the accepted (but mistaken) religious beliefs and practises of their day. Now, however, the Lord Jesus asserts that it is not he who is failing to conform to God's standards, but they. The Lord has been preaching and teaching nothing but the truth as it has come from the Father. However, the Pharisees and many others have rejected that truth in favour of maintaining their own beliefs and traditions. Therefore—since they have insisted on holding fast to erroneous or false teaching, then they have cut themselves off from fellowship with God and recognition by God. Thus, since the Pharisees are not furthering the kingdom of God or seeking God's glory, they are working against God and against his Son. In addition, instead of gathering souls into the kingdom, they are doing their utmost to exclude souls from the kingdom. They themselves are not entering in, and they are endeavouring to prevent those who would enter from doing so. Thus, they are scattering.

Fortunately, the will and purposes of God cannot be hindered or thwarted by the will of sinful men—not even sinful 'religious' men. The Pharisees and others of their kind may attempt to keep people out of God's kingdom, telling them that they should be satisfied with observing their traditions, rules and regulations. Nevertheless, though they attempt to obscure or block the way to life, or to scatter those whom the Lord would gather to himself, they cannot succeed. God's will is both invincible and inviolable. From eternity, he has determined that a vast multitude will be saved—and, at the last day, not one person out of that vast multitude will be accounted missing from the Father's presence in glory.

## BLASPHEMY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

## (THE UNPARDONABLE SIN)

***Matthew 12:31-32***

*(Cf. Mark 3:28-30)*

## MATTHEW 12:31

We come now to consider the one sin that will not be forgiven: blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.

As we noted earlier, the Pharisees had come perilously close to committing this unpardonable sin by their vile accusations against the holy, sinless, Son of God. However, it was not their calumnies against the Son of Man that almost caused them to commit this sin, but because the implications of their scurrilous remarks impacted on the work of God the Holy Spirit.

Before we consider this, let us observe what the Lord Jesus says before speaking of this specifically. The Lord introduces his words with the expression, *"Therefore I tell you...."* meaning that what follows is of the utmost importance and requires the most diligent attention on the part of the hearers. Furthermore, by using this expression, the Lord is asserting his divine and sovereign authority in these matters, and implying that his words or teachings must be received over and above any words or teachings of the Jewish scribes or rabbis.

Firstly, then, the Lord declares categorically what kind of sins *can* be forgiven. His words are, *"...every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people..."* This expression leaves no room for doubt. With the exception of the one sin that he will mention shortly, every sin committed by mankind is pardonable. This includes sins of the most heinous or wicked nature; sins of the most vile, immoral or perverted nature; sins of the most violent, abusive or otherwise reprehensible nature, as well as all other classes and categories of sins common to mankind. Furthermore, the promise of forgiveness extends not only to sins of the utmost magnitude but also to those often considered minor or of less significance. In they eyes of God, all sin is worthy of and punishable by death—regardless of type or degree. Therefore, all sin requires atonement and forgiveness—regardless of type or degree. Yet, the Lord Jesus has just asserted categorically that every one of these sins can be forgiven (and will be forgiven upon true godly repentance and genuine faith in Christ).

Yet, the Lord did not say merely that *"every sin"* will be forgiven. On the contrary, he said that *"every sin and blasphemy"* will be forgiven. This does not contradict what he is about to add. However, in saying that every blasphemy will be forgiven people, the Lord also qualifies the form of blasphemy intended in verse 32—which we will consider shortly. Thus, within the range of this qualification, every form of blasphemy of which men or women may be guilty is nevertheless forgivable sin. The word 'blasphemy' means 'to vilify', 'to speak evil of', or 'to rail against'... It is related to the word 'slander', and involves using abusive, scurrilous, vile, profane or otherwise slanderous expressions or accusations against God. This was the sin of which the Pharisees were particularly guilty. However, this form of blasphemy is pardonable or forgivable. Undoubtedly grave as this sin is, this is not the unpardonable sin. Indeed, the former Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus (later to become the apostle Paul) had been guilty of this form of blasphemy on many occasions prior to his conversion on the Damascus road. (1 Tim. 1:13) However, the fact that Paul ex-

perienced the Lord's mercy and forgiveness, demonstrates that this kind of blasphemy can be forgiven—as the Lord Jesus states expressly in this verse.

However, also in this verse, the Lord asserts categorically: *"...but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven."*

What, then, is the significance of this form of blasphemy that renders this sin unpardonable?

Primarily, it is one of degree and of spiritual knowledge. To commit sin against, or to blaspheme God the Father, is a heinous sin: but, nevertheless, this sin is not of such a degree that it cannot be forgiven. Similarly, to commit sin against, or to blaspheme God the Son, is also a heinous sin: but, once again, this sin is not of such a degree that it cannot be forgiven. However, to commit sin against, or to blaspheme God the Holy Spirit, is not only a most heinous sin, but also it is a sin of such degree that it cannot and will not be forgiven.

But why has the Lord Jesus made this distinction between blasphemy of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit?–especially since all three Persons are equal members of the Godhead.

On the one hand, blasphemy of both God the Father and God the Son can be committed by anyone so inclined to slander the holy Name. This means that any member of the human race is capable of this sin. Yet, those who commit this form of blasphemy are doing so with a lesser degree of knowledge of spiritual truths than those who commit the unpardonable sin.

On the other hand, however, those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit can do so only because they possess a very clear knowledge of spiritual truths and of the Gospel and yet repudiate that Gospel and despise the Spirit of grace–wilfully, wickedly and maliciously. The unregenerate Pharisees possessed such (intellectual) knowledge of the truth. However, by repudiating that truth and by ascribing the works of God the Holy Spirit to the power of Satan they had come to the very brink of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Had they crossed this threshold, they would have committed the unforgivable sin. Similarly, if any other person *who possesses similar spiritual light and understanding to that of the Pharisees* blasphemes the Holy Spirit by attributing God the Holy Spirit's work of power and grace to Satan, they too become guilty of the unforgivable sin.

However, since this passage is frequently misunderstood and sometimes the cause of deep concern to genuine believers, we should note carefully the following points:

- The unpardonable sin, or blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, can be committed only by so-called 'religious'—*but unregenerate*—men or women (like the Pharisees).
- It can be committed only by those unregenerate men and women who are versed thoroughly in spiritual truths, without actually having accepted or believed these truths.
- Again, the unforgivable sin can be committed only by those unregenerate people who wilfully and wickedly repudiate the Gospel message and / or who attribute the power and work of the Holy Spirit to the power and work of Satan.
- Furthermore, this sin is magnified because it involves rank, wilful and flagrant unbelief in spite of the clearest possible evidence to the truth of the Gospel as manifested by the power and work of

God the Holy Spirit; which power and work the despiser of the Gospel attributes to Satan or to demonic agency.

Many, if not all, of these elements must combine before one can commit this sin. However, those who become guilty of this sin are the same kind of people who despise the Spirit of grace and who tread underfoot the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified.

From this, we learn that people who possess an intellectual knowledge of God, of his Son and of his Holy Spirit (without actually being regenerated by the Spirit) are most likely to commit this sin—if they despise the grace of God in the Gospel and attribute the work of the Holy Spirit to that of the devil. This, however, will include certain people within the church (false professors) who later may repudiate their profession and return to the world to which they have always belonged. These are the people the Hebrew writes speaks of when he refers to those who despise the blood of the covenant, etc. (Heb. 10:26-29; cf. Heb. 6:4-6)

In verse 32, the Lord Jesus expands on this theme:

## MATTHEW 12:32

(Mark 3:29)

Here, the Lord rephrases his earlier remarks—and adds a further solemn warning. Any word spoken against the Son of Man will be forgiven. Any slander or blasphemy uttered against the Lord Jesus Christ will be forgiven. Any other form of evil speech, scurrilous accusations, or profane language against the Saviour will be forgiven. However, those who utter such blasphemous or scurrilous remarks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

Why is this—especially when God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are equal in eternity, power and glory?

The answer is that only certain people among mankind are capable of committing this sin because only they possess sufficient knowledge of spiritual matters. An ordinary spiritually uninformed person cannot commit this sin. It can be committed only by those who possess a substantial knowledge of God's will and ways and of spiritual truths generally, without their lives actually having been transformed by these truths. However, the extent of the knowledge renders them inexcusable, if—in spite of that knowledge—they repudiate the truth and attribute the work of God to the devil. This is because the work of God and the work of God's Son is carried out through the Person of the Holy Spirit.

Although other unregenerate people were in relative ignorance of this fact, people such as the Pharisees were fully aware that God works through his Holy Spirit. They were aware that their Old Testament prophets had been filled with God's Holy Spirit. Therefore, when they attributed the power of God's Son to that of Satan, they were on the very verge of blaspheming the Holy Spirit—knowingly and wilfully. Of course, they denied that Jesus was the Son of God. Nevertheless, their unbelief and denials did not excuse them in the least. The Lord Jesus had proved demonstrably and repeatedly that he was the Anointed of God. Therefore, when they maligned the Lord's office and power, the Pharisees were left without excuse or remedy.

Thus, once again, we see that those only can commit this sin who have a significant intellectual understanding of God (but without a saving knowledge of God). Furthermore, they must also possess a clear realisation of how God operates in the hearts and lives of people through his Holy Spirit—although they themselves have not actually been saved or sanctified by the Spirit. The Pharisees, and other religious leaders, possessed this degree of knowledge and understanding. It did not imply that they were saved men—for they were not. However, the extent of their knowledge of how God operates through his Holy Spirit left them fully responsible to God if they maligned the Person and work of the Holy Spirit by rank unbelief and by attributing the power and work of God's Holy Spirit to Satan.

In verse 32, the Lord says, *"...but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven..."* Then, the Lord adds these solemn words, *"...either in this age or in the age to come."*

This expression does not imply that sins can still be forgiven in the age to come (except blasphemy of the Holy Spirit). The Bible makes it abundantly clear that sin must be forgiven in this life and in this age; for there is no possibility of forgiveness after death or at the coming of the Lord in his glory. The Lord is using this expression here to emphasise the finality of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. It will it not be forgiven during this age. Furthermore, there is not the remotest possibility of its being forgiven after death or in the coming age. Indeed, those guilty of this sin will join the finally impenitent in the place prepared for the devil and his angels—enduring for all eternity the punishment appropriate to their sin. (Matt. 25:41)

## JESUS DENOUNCES THE PHARISEES

***Matthew 12:33-37***

### MATTHEW 12:33

This is another way of saying that a person's conduct or lifestyle is the true indicator of his spiritual state and condition. Those in whom the Spirit of God dwells must bring forth good fruit (holiness of life), in increasing measure. Furthermore, those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells, and who are being sanctified by the Spirit of God, cannot speak evil of the Holy Spirit. They have absolutely no desire or inclination to do so. Thus, it is not possible for a true believer to blaspheme the Holy Spirit—although a false professor may do so.

This was exactly the position with the Pharisees. They professed belief in God. They demonstrated their 'piety' ostentatiously before men. They evidenced their 'faith' in God by their long prayers, and they drew attention to their fasting and almsgiving by publicly proclaiming their good works. Yet, all this was a sham. The Pharisees and others like them professed to belong to God, but the Spirit of God did not dwell within them. They professed to be righteous in the sight of God and men but they never had experienced that righteousness that comes from God through faith, and which was possessed by their forefather Abraham. They made an issue of all their good works, but in God's sight their works of self-righteousness were as filthy rags—for they proceeded from a heart and life that was alienated from God and at enmity with God. Thus, the fruit produced by the Pharisees and their like was not the good and beneficial fruit of the Spirit, but the bad and corrupt fruit emanating from the fallen sinful nature.

Thus, the Pharisees' character and conduct proved demonstrably that they were not the children of God, nor the spiritual children of their forefather Abraham. The poisonous and corrupt fruit that their lives pro-

duced served only to show that they were hypocrites; that their profession of faith in God was false, and that they had no part or lot in the kingdom of God.

Of course, not all Pharisees were of this kind. Some were genuinely seeking the kingdom of God—notably, the Pharisee Nicodemus. Others, such as the Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, would experience God's salvation in the midst of persecuting those who belonged to his church and kingdom. Therefore, from even among the most violent persecutors of the church or the most hypocritical of individuals, the Lord will call forth and save his own.

The Lord Jesus has exposed the Pharisees for what they really are. However, in verse 34, the Lord utters even more severe words against them:

## MATTHEW 12:34

*"You brood of vipers!..."*

On an earlier occasion, John the Baptist had used this expression to designate the true nature and character of religious hypocrites. (Matt. 3:7)

The Pharisees and other religious leaders claimed vehemently that they were the children of Abraham and therefore the children of God. However, they failed to acknowledge that Abraham's children (and God's children) were those who demonstrated the same kind of faith and obedience as Abraham.

However, if the Pharisees were not the children of God—which they were not—to whom did they belong? The Lord answers this elsewhere in connection with Jewish hypocrites more generally: *"You belong to your father the devil."* (John 8:39-44)

Here, in this verse, the Lord is drawing the same parallel. The Pharisees and other religious hypocrites did not belong to God but to their true father the devil: That is, the works that they produced in their lives were the works of the sinful nature, and of the devil—the author, father or originator of lies and deceit. (John 8:44)

The devil or Satan is known also as the Serpent—the same Serpent that tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden. Thus, by referring to the Pharisees as a *"brood of vipers",* the Lord was associating the works or deeds of the Pharisees directly with the Serpent or evil one himself. This places these religious leaders in the same category that they had assigned to the Lord Jesus and to the Holy Spirit; except, in the case of the Pharisees, the assignment to Satan as their lord and master was accurate and wholly justified.

The Lord then states expressly the true condition of the Pharisees' heart. It was a corrupt and evil heart. Therefore, it was incapable of bringing forth anything spiritually good, or of producing sound and wholesome speech. Rather, from this corrupt well, sprang all manner of vile and inappropriate communications. From their corrupt heart, there issued all kinds of evil thoughts, imaginations and dispositions. From their corrupt inner self, there flowed a torrent of violent, abusive, deceitful and hypocritical language and actions. (Remember, they had been plotting to put the Lord Jesus to death.)

Here, then, is a picture of a heart and life that is far from God and from his saving grace and power. The Pharisees may have been arrayed in the robes of religion, but they were not arrayed with the robe of Christ's righteousness. They may have assumed the highest places in the religious hierarchy, but—in the sight of God—their robes and their highly exalted position meant nothing. These men were religious im-

posters. And, like all religious imposters throughout the ages, the Lord will say of them, *"Depart from me. I never knew you."*

The Lord Jesus reinforces his argument by adding in verse 35:

## MATTHEW 12:35

It is impossible for a person who is good in the eyes of God to bring forth anything but good. In his heart, he treasures up that which is good, pure, holy and honourable. From that treasure house, he draws forth that which is righteous and praiseworthy in the eyes of God and beneficial to his neighbour. This is the same as producing the fruit of the Spirit in one's life. It does not imply sinless perfection, but it certainly implies a regenerated and justified life; one in which the Holy Spirit is indwelling and which he is sanctifying.

However, an unregenerate and unsanctified heart is incapable of storing up or bringing forth good treasure. On the contrary, an evil (unregenerate) person stores up those things that appeal to his sinful nature, and in which his sinful nature delights. And, from that corrupt storehouse—his innermost being or 'heart'—he brings forth all kinds of bad or evil fruit. This is not to imply that he can produce absolutely nothing except evil at all times, because manifestly this would not be true. However, it implies most clearly that such a person's heart is corrupted by sin. On account of this unforgiven sin, that person cannot produce anything good in the sight of God (although he may do much good in the sight of men). Furthermore, while he remains in this condition, that person remains at enmity with God and is abiding under God's wrath and judgment. (John 3:18) This is the state and condition of all those whose sins have not been forgiven—not just of people like the Pharisees.

In verse 36, and bringing his argument full circle, the Lord Jesus addresses the Pharisees' original blasphemous assertions:

## MATTHEW 12:36-37

In context, the Lord is speaking of the vile and scurrilous blasphemy uttered by the Pharisees when they attributed the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan. It is certain that these men will be held to account for these wicked words on the Day of Judgment, and they will be sentenced accordingly. However, the Lord is making the point that this judgment will not be confined to such blasphemies as the Pharisees uttered, but will be extended to include every careless or idle word spoken.

This has far reaching consequences, especially for unregenerate men and women. It implies most clearly that God is keeping a record of every word spoken (as well as every deed performed), and that on the Judgment Day, he will hold everyone accountable for everything that they have said. Again, in context, this is referring particularly (although not exclusively) to everything spoken about or against God or about or against things of a spiritual nature. However, it comprehends even the (apparently) least significant of such remarks, for the Lord says it will include every careless (i.e., empty, idle, or thoughtless) word spoken. Thus, the Lord concludes by saying, *"...for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."* (v.37)

Often, great emphasis is placed on a person's *works*. However, according to this passage of God's Word, it is by our *words* that we will be justified or condemned. This is because our words are the outflow of our heart (or innermost being), and show more immediately than our works the true state of our soul.

## SCRIBES AND PHARISEES ASK FOR A SIGN

***Matthew 12:38-42***

### MATTHEW 12:38

If it were not for the fact that Matthew has arranged much of his material topically rather than chronologically, we might be inclined to consider this request as one of the most audacious ever made by the scribes and Pharisees. However, we will give them the benefit of the doubt and assume that this verse does not follow on immediately (in time) from the events of the previous verses where Jesus had demonstrated his power and glory by casting out evil spirits.

Yet, even if we suppose that the casting out of evil spirits did not occur at the same time as the scribes and Pharisees asked for a sign, they were nevertheless without excuse for making this request. The Lord Jesus had performed many other miracles in their presence. These were all the signs that they should have needed to satisfy themselves of Jesus' commission from God and mission in the world. Yet, they refused to accept or believe this remarkable testimony to the Lord's power and glory.

Not content with the signs that the Lord had shown already, they demanded more. And, if they had indeed been present when the Lord cast out the demons earlier in these verses, then their request was indeed audacious. What greater sign could have been given them than the Lord's power and authority over the supernatural?

Thus, in verse 39, the Lord declares to the scribes and Pharisees:

### MATTHEW 12:39

The Lord says, *"An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign..."*

How could the Lord Jesus use such language of pious men like the scribes and Pharisees? Were not they the upholders and teachers of God's Law, including the Moral Law expressed by the Ten Commandments? But, if these Commandments forbade adultery—and if the scribes and Pharisees followed this teaching—why call them an *"evil and adulterous generation?"*

We should note, however, that the Lord was not just calling the scribes and Pharisees *"evil and adulterous"* but the entire generation of people in that day.

To understand the meaning of the Lord's language, we must consider the Old Testament use of similar language. There, the LORD God described Israel as a wayward, evil and adulterous people—meaning that they were consistently unfaithful to him and to his covenant with them: That is, they were guilty of spiritual unfaithfulness or spiritual 'adultery'. It does not mean necessarily that they were all guilty of physical adultery—although a number were. (Isa. 57:3; Hos. 7:1-4)

Thus, the Lord is saying that the scribes and Pharisees—and indeed the vast majority of that generation—had become guilty of spiritual unfaithfulness or adultery. They had broken their covenant with God. (Jer. 11:10) They had broken his Word consistently, and they had failed to trust, honour, and obey him in their lives. Like a wife who forsakes her husband, so Israel had forsaken her Husband—the LORD their God. (Cf. Isa. 54:5; Jer. 31:32 with Jer. 3:20) Consequently, the people whom God had set apart as a holy nation had become an evil people. They had rebelled against God, and against his will and his ways for their lives. This, then, was the kind of people that now were asking the Lord Jesus for a sign—a rebellious, sinful and hypocritical people.

Yet, the Lord's expression *"An evil and adulterous generation"* is not thereby exhausted by this explanation. To some extent at least, it must also be understood in its more literal sense as alluding to moral uncleanness, including sexual immorality. However, these sins were not to be found among the ordinary people alone. A number of the scribes and Pharisees were guilty of such vile sins themselves—in thought, word, or deed. Thus, concerning these religious teachers and leaders, the Lord Jesus says elsewhere in this Gospel:

> Matthew 23:27-28 ESV
>
> (27) "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones *and all uncleanness*. (28) So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." (Emphasis added)

The Lord Jesus, however, does make a partial concession to the scribes and Pharisees' request. He reminds them of that signal sign which the LORD God had given to his people already—that of the prophet Jonah:

## MATTHEW 12:40

Here was a sign that could not be disputed—except by those who refused wilfully to believe the facts in the face of incontrovertible evidence.

As was well known to Israel, the prophet Jonah had been cast overboard into the sea. To preserve his life, the LORD had caused Jonah to be swallowed alive by a great sea creature. For three days and nights, Jonah remained within that massive marine mammal; until, at last, the creature vomited out the unfaithful prophet. (Then, Jonah followed the LORD's originally instructions to preach repentance to Nineveh.) (Jonah 1:1-17)

In the same way that Jonah spent three days and nights in the heart of the great fish, so the Lord Jesus would spend three days and nights in the heart of the earth (reckoning by Jewish chronology whereby partial days counted as distinct days: e.g., Friday evening until Sunday morning counted as three days).

This singular sign would demonstrate once and for all that Jesus was all that he claimed to be: the Messiah and Son of God: For only God has power over life and death. Only God can rise again *of his own power* after having been put to death. Thus, when Jesus arose on the third day, this would be proof to everyone who was willing to believe the evidence that his claims concerning his commission from God the Father, and his life and work were true. Furthermore, his resurrection would be proof not only that he was Lord over life and death but also that he had fulfilled all the OT Scriptures concerning him; that he

had completed once-for-all the work of atonement, and that he had brought about the justification and ultimate glorification of all his redeemed people.

Thus, the Lord is declaring that those who refused to believe the evidence of the resurrection, and consequently that Christ is alive today and that he will return in glory, are not likely to be convinced by any other signs. However, all those who are true children of God believe unhesitatingly and without reservation that Christ rose from death on the third day, that he ascended to the right hand of his Father in glory, and that he will come again in great power and glory.

This belief in the resurrection of Christ may seem self-evident insofar as genuine children of God are concerned, for without the resurrection there is no justification or forgiveness of sins for anyone. However, it is essential that we believe in the *physical and bodily* resurrection and ascension of Christ—not merely in a spiritually resurrection (so-called). Many professors of faith in the resurrection deny the physical and bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus. These, however, err fatally in their belief, for they are denying a fundamental doctrine of the faith. (1 Cor. 15:1-58; 1 Thess. 4:13)

## MATTHEW 12:41

(Luke 11:32)

Yet, the Lord Jesus has more to say concerning the sceptical and unbelieving generation of his day. The people of Nineveh—a heathen city—heard Jonah preach to them about God's imminent judgment on that ungodly land. However, the Ninevites believed God's Word message of judgment against them, and they repented of their evil deeds. Consequently, the LORD showed mercy to Nineveh and spared its penitent populace. (Jonah 3:5-10)

Therefore, on the Day of Judgment, the people of Nineveh will rise up in judgment against the unbelieving and ungodly Israelites because of their wilful unbelief and stubborn impenitence—in spite of much greater light and privileges. This does not mean that the Ninevites will act as Israel's judges, but rather that by Nineveh's example of faith in God's message and of their repentance toward God, they will condemn unbelieving Israel.

At the end of verse 41, the Lord adds the words, *"...and, behold, something greater than Jonah is here:"* [lit., [a] "greater than Jonah is here."] The reference here is to the Lord Jesus himself, meaning that he was the One who was greater or more excellent than the prophet Jonah.

Then, in verse 42, the Lord draws another parallel:

## MATTHEW 12:42

The Queen of Sheba travelled from a country far beyond the borders of Israel to hear the superlative wisdom of Solomon. This magnificent queen ruled over a heathen nation; yet, she came to listen to King Solomon's words of great wisdom and to hear from his lips about Israel's God. Here was a foreign sovereign seeking the knowledge of the truth from one who knew the truth. (1 Kings 10:1-13)

Thus, on the Day of Judgment, the queen of the south will rise up to accuse Israel for their rank unbelief and impenitence. She sought the knowledge and the wisdom of the LORD God of Israel through his servant Solomon. Yet, Israel herself did not seek the LORD or call upon his name. And, now, One greater

than Solomon was here. Solomon was David's son, but Jesus was David's Greater Son. He is the fountain of all Wisdom and Knowledge, but rebellious Israel did not seek the knowledge of the Lord.

## THE RETURN OF AN UNCLEAN SPIRIT

***Matthew 12:43-45***

### MATTHEW 12:43-44

Continuing in his response to the request of the scribes and Pharisees for a sign, the Lord Jesus uses an analogy to illustrate the condition and position spiritually of the present generation. Though the Lord were to respond to their request, it would not convince either the religious leaders or the majority of the people of the truth. They had refused already to believe the earlier signs that the Lord had given, and which testified to his commission from God the Father. Even if one should rise from the dead, these wickedly and wilfully stubborn religious leaders, and the people of Israel more generally, would not believe this evidence to Christ's Person and work or to his power and glory. Thus, the scribes and Pharisees—and others like them—resemble people possessed by unclean spirits. These evil or unclean spirits bring forth all manner of impurity and corruption in the lives of those whom they control. In the case of many of the scribes and Pharisees, their immoderate and corrupt lifestyles, together with their distorted teaching, was exerting a powerful worldly or materialistic influence on the lives of many other people. (Matt. 23:24-28)

However, if the scribes and Pharisees—and the people of Israel more generally—were to respond favourably to the sign for which these leaders had asked the Lord, then this might ameliorate their evil propensities temporarily. A belief in the power and authority of the Lord Jesus—albeit, a superficial and temporary belief—might result in those affected making some limited changes to their worldview and lifestyles. This 'moral reformation' would be like expelling an unclean spirit from their minds. However, since the scribes and Pharisees had not experienced any real change of heart, then their moral improvement would be short-lived. The Lord likens this to the expelled unclean spirit being unable to find a place to rest, and consequently returning to its former home. However, on returning, the unclean spirit discovers that the person's life has been reformed (superficially), and that the spirit's former dwelling (the 'heart' or mind) is now relatively clean. Of course, the 'cleansing' has been superficial only. It has not purified the person's heart or mind internally.

This creates an ideal situation for the unclean spirit. Not only can it re-exert its polluting influence over the previously 'cleansed' mind, but now also it can invite seven[40] other even more vile spirits to join it. As a result, the person finds his life characterised by even greater uncleanness, corruption and other forms of evil than previously.

This illustrates what happens to a person or nation that has been blessed signally by hearing the truth; by seeing or hearing of the powerful life-changing work of the Gospel, and who permit the effects of the Gospel to influence their lives to some degree; perhaps making some limited improvements to their sinful lifestyles. This is like 'cleansing' one's life and expelling the unclean spirit; i.e., 'turning over a new leaf'. However, since this is not a heart-cleansing brought about by the Holy Spirit in regeneration and sanctifi-

[40] *seven*: In the Bible, the number seven often indicates total perfection, full completion, or—as in this case—an indeterminate or incalculable quantity or number, or multiplicity.

cation, then the moral improvements cannot last. Ultimately, the person reverts to his former sinful way of life—or a nation reverts to its former ungodly lifestyle. This is like the return of the unclean spirit to its former home. However, on this occasion, the person (or nation) begins to cherish or practise even greater impurity, uncleanness or other forms of evil than previously. This is an effect of coming to knowledge of the truth *without actually receiving and believing that truth*. The person (or nation) brings down upon himself God's judgment for his obstinate unbelief and wilful impenitence.

What was true of the generation of Jesus' day is true also of all subsequent generations that despise the truth, after that truth has been presented to them unmistakably and repeatedly.

## JESUS' MOTHER AND BROTHERS

***Matthew 12:46-50***

### MATTHEW 12:46-49

As Jesus continued to teach the crowds, his mother and brothers approached. They asked to speak with the Lord Jesus; but, before they do so, the Lord has an important lesson to provide to his listeners concerning relationships in the kingdom of God.

The Lord begins by asking the man who told him of his mother and brothers' presence; *"Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?"*

We should note immediately that the Lord Jesus is not disparaging family relationships, or inferring that children should not honour their father or their mother. The Scriptures make it abundantly clear that God requires children to honour their parents and to provide for them. Indeed, the Lord Jesus made provision for his mother's care and welfare even while he was hanging on the cross. (Exod. 20:12; John 19:26-27 Eph. 6:2)

The Lord asks this rhetorical question for a specific reason: viz., to demonstrate that relationships in the family and kingdom of God will not be the same as present relationships on earth. Earthly relationships are temporary and are adapted for our temporary form of life in this world. However, in the age to come, relationships will be permanent and eternal. Thus, the present form of family life will be redundant. There will be no parents and children, for their will be no further need for marriage in the heavenly kingdom. Everyone will be either a brother or a sister in Christ, and brothers and sisters of one another in the kingdom of heaven.

Thus, stretching out his hand toward his disciples, the Lord declares: *"...Here are my mother and my brothers!"* (v.49)

The Lord Jesus is not substituting his disciples for his natural or legal family. Rather, he is stating that his disciples will form part of his permanent and eternal family—the children of God; whereas, his natural and legal family is a relationship that God has established for this world alone. Of course, since the Lord's mother Mary was a believer, then she too was a child of God and she too would inherit the kingdom of heaven. So also, the Lord's brothers—when converted—would become the children of God and joint-heirs with Christ in his glory.

Thus, what the Lord Jesus is asserting is that the only permanent relationships are those who are brothers and sisters in Christ. Every other relationship—including 'mother' or 'father' is subsumed under the expressions 'brother' or 'sister', meaning, a disciple of Christ and a child of God.

Does this mean, then, that believing family members on earth will no longer recognise one another in heaven?

No, it does not. Remember the Lord Jesus spoke of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob re-united and seated together in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 8:11) Thus, everyone will remember those believing family members whom they knew and loved on earth. However, the relationship between them will be different. Instead of a loving bond between husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, and other relatives, or indeed between believing friends, everyone will be united in the bonds of Christ's inseparable love—*as brothers and sisters in him.*

But how does one know who are the brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus? The Lord answers this in verse 50:

## MATTHEW 12:50

Those who are truly the children of God, and the brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus, seek at all times to obey their heavenly Father's will for their lives. That is, as the redeemed and sanctified children of God, they endeavour to live in a way that is honouring to their Father in heaven, and that strengthens them in their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Furthermore, they seek by the words and example to glorify the name of the Lord and to attract others to the Saviour. Thus, it becomes evident that these are God's children; the redeemed of the Lord, and the brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus. They may be considered also as the 'mothers in Christ', insofar as this term is subsumed under the term 'sisters in Christ'.

As we have said, this implies no disparagement of earthly relationships. On the contrary, family relationships on earth have been instituted by God and God has commanded that they ought never to be dishonoured. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, believers are exhorted most strongly to honour their parents and also to assume full marital and parental duties and responsibilities. (Col. 3:18-21)

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 13

## PARABLES ILLUSTRATING THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

***Matthew 13:1-53***

The series of parables that the Lord Jesus uses in this chapter are intended to illustrate something of the nature, extent and power of the kingdom of heaven. The parables speak, also, of those who belong to that kingdom, and of those who do not. Thus, by the use of several different parables, the Lord demonstrates various aspects of this truth.

## THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

***Matthew 13:1-9***

(See also Mark 4:1-9; Luke 8:5-8)

### MATTHEW 13:1-2

Later that day, the Lord Jesus left the house where he had been teaching and travelled down to the shore by the Sea of Galilee, where he sat down. However, the crowds soon gathered around him again, so he entered a nearby boat, took it just offshore, and sat down in the boat facing the crowd thronging the beach. Apart from ensuring the stability of the small craft, by sitting down the Lord was assuming the normal posture among the rabbis when engaged in teaching.

### MATTHEW 13:3-4

Once seated in the boat, the Lord began to teach the crowd many things in parables. A parable is a similitude or analogy relating to real events, and is designed to portray moral and spiritual truths to those whose hearts or minds the Holy Spirit had made receptive to the truth. To others, these parables would seem more like riddles or conundrums that they found difficult to comprehend. Nevertheless, this accords with the Lord's words in his prayer to his Father:

> Luke 10:21-24 ESV
>
> (21) In that same hour he [Jesus] rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. (22) All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”
>
> (23) Then turning to the disciples he said privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! (24) For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.” (See also Matt. 11:25-27)

Parables do not correspond necessarily in every last detail with the events that they are intended to portray. The idea of a parable is to provide an overview of these events by using common analogies, even

although—on a few occasions—these analogies cannot be made to correspond precisely with the event or principle under discussion. However, these parables always contain more than sufficient elements of truth and accuracy to teach the truths intended.

A case in point concerns the parable of the sower, which now follows. This parable exemplifies very accurately the principles of Gospel preaching and its results.

According to Mark's Gospel, the Lord Jesus began this teaching by exclaiming, *"Listen!..."* (Mark 4:3) In other words, "Pay close attention or give the utmost heed to what you are about to hear." The implication being that the teaching would be of the utmost instructional importance. This did not mean merely that a person was to listen carefully to Jesus' words—although this was involved. Rather, it meant that they had to listen attentively, and also with a genuine and heartfelt desire to understand and to obey the truth taught.

Such a genuine and heartfelt desire to understand, believe, and obey the truth, however, required the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Those whom the Spirit was drawing to Christ would seek genuinely to learn and to understand; and those who so learned and understood as the Spirit enabled them would begin to grasp and believe the truth in all its fullness.

Then, the Lord continues:

> Matthew 13:3b-4 ESV
>
> (3) "A sower went out to sow. (4) And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them."

Before the days of automated mechanical sowing, farm labourers walked across the fields with bags of seed, spreading (or 'broadcasting') the seed manually over the ground. Even when the labourers attempted to keep the distribution of the seed within limited areas, they could not know with certainty into which kind of ground the seed would fall. Indeed, for one reason or another, some seed fell among the pathways around the fields or between the furrows. However, because these paths had become hardened with constant walking over them, the seed could not take root and therefore remained on the surface. There, it was exposed to the wind and rain; to the likelihood of being trodden underfoot by men, or to the birds of the air. In this instance, the Lord declares that the seed scattered along the paths was devoured by the birds. Consequently, there was no possibility of this seed taking root or bearing fruit.

This illustrates that which is superficial or shallow, and incapable of enduring. We will consider this more fully in its proper place (vv.18-19).

## MATTHEW 13:5-6

Some of the seed sown or scattered abroad by the labourer fell on rocky ground. It is unlikely that the sower would cast his seed on rocky ground intentionally. However, it is highly likely that the rocks and stones were hidden from his view, lying just beneath the surface. Thus, because of the rocky and barren nature of the ground, the seed could not put down its roots or flourish. The plant may have sprouted in due course. To begin with, it may have appeared healthy and full of vitality. Nevertheless, due to its poor root structure and very inadequate source of nourishment, it could not endure. Almost as soon as the

plant appeared from beneath the ground, the scorching wind or the searing heat destroyed it. It withered and died, because it had no substantial root or sources of nourishment on which to draw.

This represents that which—in the early stages—appears to be growing and flourishing, but which fails to mature due to its not being rooted firmly in good, deep and nourishing soil (vv.20-21).

The Lord now provides another example:

## MATTHEW 13:7

When the labourer cast forth his seed, some of it fell in among the thorns and other harmful weeds. Eventually, the seed sown by the labourer sprouted and grew up alongside the thorns. Ultimately, however, the thorns or other destructive weeds entwined themselves around the young plant, choking it and depriving it of the ability to produce useful fruit. Thus, this fruitless plant proved of no value to the farmer. At the harvest, he would cast it aside to be burned.

This illustrates that which begins to make progress, which continues to show some signs of growth over a period, but which ultimately is overcome and rendered unprofitable or useless by becoming enmeshed by harmful and life-destroying conditions (v.22).

Thus far, the Lord has given three examples of seed sown in different soil conditions. However, all three of those cited so far failed to mature or to produce lasting fruit. Only one example—the seed sown in good soil—would take root, mature, and produce an abundance of good fruit. We will consider this example now.

## MATTHEW 13:8

Some of the seed sown by the labourer fell onto good soil. As a result, it took root quickly in the favourable ground. With the right amount of nutrients, the seed began to grow, eventually flourishing into a healthy young plant. Then, nurtured by the good soil and adequate sunlight, it continued to grow into a strong healthy plant.

In due course, this plant matured and produced a bountiful crop. However, the many seeds sown on this good soil did not all produce the same *quantity* of fruit. Nevertheless, the fruit that each did produce was of the same rich *quality*. Hence, some of the seed resulted in a hundredfold increase in grain; some, a sixtyfold increase, and some, a thirtyfold increase. However, since all of this grain was of the same fertile and productive *quality*, all of it was of considerable use and value to its owner.

This situation represents that which begins well, which continues to grow to full maturity, and which demonstrates that—irrespective of the quantity yielded—the quality of the soil and of the resulting fruit was healthy, fertile and productive (v.23).

## MATTHEW 13:9

This expression means simply that those who are able to understand this parable (and any other teaching of the Lord Jesus) ought to be instructed by it. However, this assumes a degree of spiritual understanding, which—at that time—even the Lord's disciples seemed to lack. Yet, this was not due to any fault in the teaching, or in the use of parables to illustrate that teaching. Rather, this lack of comprehension indi-

cated a fault on the part of the hearers insofar as their sinful natures, worldly-mindedness, or world-centred attitudes had made it difficult for them to apprehend even the most obvious of spiritual truths. Nevertheless, the Lord would help his disciples to understand the significance of these parables later, when he provided them with an explanation.

## THE SECRETS OF THE KINGDOM

***Matthew 13:10-17***

### MATTHEW 13:10-11

After the crowd had dispersed, the Lord's disciples approached him asking why he taught the people in parables. The Lord's answer is simple, but nevertheless it reveals a profound truth: *"To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given."* (v.11)

This is an explicit assertion on the part of the Lord Jesus that the truths of the kingdom are revealed to some but not to others: That is, the ability to understand and believe the Gospel is granted to some but not to others.

As stated above, those who seek genuinely to learn and understand these truths will come to understand and believe these truths—for the Spirit of God will so enable them. However, those who have no genuine heartfelt desire to know and understand spiritual truths will fail to comprehend them and will remain in spiritual darkness. This, however, is no reflection on the Gospel or on the grace and mercy of God. Rather, it is a reflection on those people's own fallen sinful nature and their unwillingness to know the Lord or to seek the Lord that he may be found.

Thus, the vast majority of the crowd listening to the Lord Jesus were unable to comprehend the meaning of his teaching, because their sinful character and conduct had rendered them insensitive to spiritual truths. Only by the grace of God and the inward working of the Holy Spirit could this spiritual apathy or insensitivity be remedied. However, such was the case in the lives of all those who had believed on the Lord Jesus—including his immediate disciples (but excluding Judas Iscariot). By his grace, the Holy Spirit had enabled these followers of the Lord to understand spiritual truths and to believe the Gospel. Granted, however, their understanding and faith was limited at this stage. It was sufficient unto salvation, but they had yet much to learn about spiritual truths.

### MATTHEW 13:12

(Mark 4:25; Luke 8:18; 19:26)

Here, the Lord explains the same truth in different language: *"For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."*

This may sound puzzling, but the interpretation can be understood from the context. Those who seek with a genuine heart to learn and to understand the ways of the Lord will begin to comprehend further spiritual truths. Ultimately, he will possess an abundance of spiritual knowledge, wisdom and understanding—coupled with a wholehearted commitment to, and faith in, the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit in his life, that person will become spiritually enriched and mature.

However, those who do not seek the knowledge of God, or who refuse the Gospel, will find that what little knowledge and understanding they did possess of spiritual matters will diminish gradually. Ultimately, because of their insensitivity to Gospel truths and to the things of God, they will harden their hearts against all further spiritual understanding. As a consequence of this recalcitrant behaviour, God will harden their hearts (their ability to comprehend spiritual truths) so that they are incapable to responding to any further preaching or teaching of God's Word. Thus, what little understanding or comprehension they once possessed has now been taken away from them; together with any possibility of recovering that knowledge in the future. As a rule, however, this applies only to those who remain persistently and wilfully impenitent over a very prolonged period.

## MATTHEW 13:13

(Luke 8:10)

Earlier, the Lord Jesus had referred to the majority of the nation—including their civil and religious leaders—as an adulterous generation: i.e., a nation which had proved persistently unfaithful to God, and which had behaved like a spiritual prostitute by turning to idols and by desecrating that which was most sacred in the eyes of the LORD. These were hard words; but they portrayed the ungodly state of the nation at that time, and for many generations previously. However, in making these remarks, it was not the Lord's intention to comprehend everyone within the scope of his denunciation. Many in Israel had proved faithful to the Lord in the face of a general apostasy. Even at the present time, a number of Jewish people believed with all their hearts on the Lord Jesus and received him as their Messiah and Saviour.

With this in mind, we can better understand the Lord's words in this verse: *"This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand."*

Had the Lord spoken to them in plain language, the people would not have responded any better. Over the centuries, the prophets had declared the word of the LORD to the people in plain language, and yet the people had failed to respond to, believe, or obey the word of God. And, when the prophets had employed parables to illustrate the truths of God's Word, the people still could not—or would not—respond to God's call to repentance. This, of course, was due to their spiritual insensitivity which followed from their rebellion against the LORD and against his ways.

Yet, we must remember that—on most occasions—the Old Testament prophets were not calling pagan or heathen nations to repentance, but the nation of Israel. Israel had been chosen of God. This nation consisted of the professing people of God. Yet, because of their rebellion and spiritual adultery, God had set aside that people as his own—with the exception of a remnant in Israel who remained faithful to the LORD.

This was the situation that the Lord Jesus was now addressing. The people, who, formerly, had been the people of God, had been set aside by God—except for a small number of faithful believers. It is of those who had been set aside because of their unfaithfulness that the Lord Jesus now says, *"This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand."*

Although set aside, these Jewish people and their religious leaders continued to assert that they were the children of Abraham and the chosen people of God. However, had this been true, they would have been able to comprehend the significance of the Lord's teaching—including his parables; for they would have

been in possession of the necessary insight into spiritual truths. The fact that they could not comprehend these truths demonstrated unmistakeable that they were neither the true (spiritual) children of Abraham nor the children of God. Thus, although professing to see (or understand) spiritual realities, their spiritual ignorance proved otherwise. It proved that they could not see or understand. Although professing to hear and assimilate spiritual truths, their character and conduct proved otherwise. What they heard did not result in changed or godly lives. Therefore, their claims to see and hear were false. Even when spiritual truths were explained to them in the form of parables, they still could not grasp their spiritual significance.

Granted, the Lord's disciples also failed to grasp these spiritual truths initially. However, *unlike those who were dead spiritually*, the disciples asked the Lord Jesus to explain the parables to them—*so that they could understand and believe*. This marked the difference between those who belonged to the Lord and those who did not.

However, this situation was not unexpected. It had been foretold by the prophet Isaiah several centuries beforehand, and was written down in the (Old Testament) Scriptures. Thus, in verse 14, the Lord Jesus declares:

## MATTHEW 13:14-15

Matthew 13:14-15 ESV

(14) “Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: 'You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.

(15) “For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them'.” (Cf. Isa. 6:9-10)

The background to this quotation is from the time that Isaiah witnessed the LORD high and lifted up. Filled with a sense of his own uncleanness and unworthiness, Isaiah saw the glorious seraphim take the burning coals from the altar and touch his lips with them. This symbolised atonement for the prophet's sins.

Then, Isaiah declared:

Isaiah 6:8-10 ESV

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here am I! Send me.” 9 And he said, "Go, and say to this people:

> “'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.'
> 10 Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes;
> lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their
> hearts, and turn and be healed.”

The LORD was commanding the prophet Isaiah to proclaim these words to his own people. However, Isaiah was being sent to a wayward and rebellious house that the LORD knew would not respond to the

prophet's words. Thus, Isaiah was to proclaim to them that their wickedness had resulted in their being able to hear the word of the LORD, but not to understand it. It had resulted in their being able to catch a fleeting glimpse of spiritual truths from afar, but not to see or perceive them with their minds.

This, and the verses that follow in Isaiah, is a clear indication of God's temporal judgment on a people that once knew his ways but later rebelled against God and refused to obey his word and his will. Ultimately, they had reached the stage of complete spiritual insensitivity where they had no further desire for God or for his word. Thus, they had made themselves completely unwilling to seek repentance or God's mercy, and thus unwilling to seek the LORD's power to heal.

This parallels exactly the situation that the Lord Jesus was addressing. Therefore, he uses this passage from Isaiah to demonstrate that what was then occurring in the hearts of an unbelieving and rebellious Israel was in fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy centuries earlier.

## MATTHEW 13:16

By contrast, the Lord's disciples were able to understand spiritual truths, and more than willing to receive further teaching. Thus, their eyes were blessed: i.e., they were highly favoured and greatly privileged because the Father had granted sight (or insight) to their spiritually blind eyes, so that now they could comprehend spiritual truths.

Expressed differently, the Father had unstopped their deaf ears so that they could hear, believe, and obey the glorious truths of the Gospel and respond with all their heart to its teaching.

This demonstrates very plainly, however, that this is a work of God's grace, and is in no way due to the efforts or will of man. Those who are blind spiritually cannot restore their sight by exerting their own willpower. Again, those who are deaf spiritually to the truths of the Gospel cannot restore their hearing—that is, their ability to hear, understand and believe the Gospel—of their own will. All this is a work of God's sovereign grace, effected through the person and power of his Holy Spirit in effectual calling and regeneration.

In verse 17, the Lord continues to address his disciples:

## MATTHEW 13:17

Once again, the expression, *"Truly, I say to you..."* (or, "Verily, verily...") draws attention to the importance of the words about to follow.

Continuing on the same theme, the Lord declares that the ability to understand those spiritual truths that spoke of the kingdom of heaven (including the coming of the Messiah) was long sought after by the Old Testament prophets, and by many righteous people of that era. However, the full significance of these truths remained hidden from their eyes. To these earlier believers, these were mysteries or secrets of the kingdom that the LORD had not revealed to them at that time. Nevertheless, they believed that, in due course, the truths of the kingdom and of the Messiah would be revealed to others.

These 'others' included the disciples of the Lord Jesus. Through them and other followers of the Lord, the Gospel would reach all nations. The truths hidden for generations from the people of Israel were now to be revealed by the Lord Jesus Christ; and, later, his disciples. Thus, all nations were to learn that salva-

tion was being extended to them, through repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the mysteries of the kingdom would be expounded more fully in the epistles of the New Testament, especially by the apostle Paul.

## THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER EXPLAINED

***Matthew 13:18-23***

(See also Mark 4:13-20; Luke 8:11-15)

### MATTHEW 13:18

The Lord Jesus now answers his disciples' request to explain to them the parable of the sower.

The seed sown by the farmer or labourer in the field represented the eternal or imperishable Word of God. In this context, the seed related more precisely to the Gospel message or *'the word of the kingdom'*. This Gospel was being proclaimed to large numbers of people, and these people could be reduced to four distinct groups or categories. In verse 19, the Lord Jesus explains the meaning of the first group.

### MATTHEW 13:19

Many among the Lord's listeners included the curious and the casual hearers. Their hearts were not truly inclined to hear or believe the truth, or to understand its significance to their lives. Indeed, they did not want such truths to take root in their lives. Thus, when the Lord spoke of the truths pertaining to the kingdom of God and his righteousness, such truths were beyond these people's comprehension and also beyond their willingness to accept.

This was not because—being spiritual—such truths could only be discerned with a spiritually-enlightened mind. This was true up to a point. However, these people could not even understand those parts of the Lord's teaching that were applicable to everyone's rational faculties or to their common sense. To them, the Lord's teaching made no sense. However, this was due to the fact that they were not genuinely interested in spiritual matters. What little they did understand, they soon dismissed from their minds as being detrimental to their interests or contrary to their present pleasures and pursuits. This is analogous to the evil one placing a veil over their minds, preventing them from understanding and believing the truth.

This represents the seed sown along the path, where the birds come and snatch it away. This speaks of the evil one who comes and snatches away the seed (or Word of God sown in the mind): That is, Satan convinces them that the truth is of no consequence or no relevance to their lives. Thus, effectively, the evil one causes these people to reject what they had heard, but had failed to understand. For this reason, the Word of God has no effect in the lives of these people—except to increase their guilt for preferring darkness to light and the power of Satan to that of God (vv.3-4).

Now, in verses 20-21, the Lord explains the meaning of the seed sown in rocky ground.

## MATTHEW 13:20-21

Significantly, the seed sown on rocky ground speaks of those who hear the Gospel, and who embrace its message with great joy. Initially, they are enthusiastic 'followers' of Christ, declaring their new-found faith to others and inviting them to hear and believe the Gospel.

However, where the seed has been sown in rocky ground, a person's profession of faith does not last. The ground in which it has taken root is too shallow. The seed cannot put down roots or find the necessary sustenance from beneath good soil. Therefore, it begins to falter. Slowly, the once promising young plant starts to die, ultimately perishing in the ground which should have been its source of life and vitality.

So, too, with the professing believer whose faith in Christ is of a superficial and shallow nature. Such a profession cannot endure. The person making it has no solid foundation in the faith. For a time, he may appear joyful and enthusiastic. Before long, however, this person experiences suffering, sorrow or persecution related to his profession of faith. Yet, to him, these hardships are most unwelcome and difficulties for which he was wholly unprepared. In the heat of persecution—or the scorching sun (v.6)—his faith (so-called) begins to wane. Soon, he begins to lose interest in spiritual matters because his faith is not genuine. Ultimately, he falls away from his profession of faith and returns to the world to which he belongs (vv.5-6).

This demonstrates that it is possible to make a profession of faith in Christ without that profession being genuine. It shows that it is possible to follow Christ for a time without being a genuine disciple of the Lord Jesus. And it shows that those whose faith is not genuine may very well leave the church and its fellowship and return to the world. This should not be surprising, for no-one in this category has experienced the grace of God or the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration or sanctification.

In verse 22, the Lord Jesus speaks of the third group of people, represented by seed sown among thorns.

## MATTHEW 13:22

We consider now those who profess faith in Christ, who continue in the faith for some time, who appear to be making good progress in the things of God, yet who ultimately fail to continue to the end. As we shall see, this too is another form of false profession and superficial faith. It is not a case of genuine believers falling away from the faith. This is impossible, since they are the elect of God and are being upheld by his almighty hands. Thus, in all cases, the elect endure to the end, and so prove that they are the called and redeemed children of God.

Considering the seed sown among the thorns—this represents the Gospel being accepted by someone. They profess to believe the Gospel message. They appear to make progress in spiritual matters; perhaps over a period of many months or years. To all intents and purposes, these people appear to the church to be genuine believers. However, genuine believers they are not. They accept and practise all the outward forms of godliness, but without having experienced a renewed or regenerated heart. In this respect, they are much like the (apparently) pious Pharisees—although without necessarily being as pretentious as they.

Yet, their resemblance to the Pharisees is more than superficial. Like them, these professing believers have set their hearts—not on God—but on the things of this world. They are greedy for gain. They are covetous. They forever desire more. Thus, the true object of their worship is not the Father and the Son but material goods, or the idols of greed, envy, pleasure and gain.

This speaks of the seed sown among thorns. The thorns are the idolatrous pleasures or pursuits of the world that grow up and choke the good seed. Ultimately, the growing plant dies. The false professor is overcome at last by his idols, and to these idols he continues to cling. He may forsake the company of believers, since he never truly belonged to their fellowship. Sadly, however, many of these false professors remain within the visible church (although not part of the true church). Nevertheless, they may exert a contaminating influence on the hearts and souls of others with their materialistic and unspiritual way of life, and their idolatrous hearts (v.7).

These are not just 'carnal Christians' or worldly-minded believers who stand to lose part or all of their reward in heaven; although not their salvation. The people represented by the Lord in this part of the parable are not genuine believers at all; although, to many, they may appear to be so. Like many religious people, they appear to others as pious or godly, but godly they are not—for they have not been renewed inwardly.

These people are like tares (or weeds) among the wheat; and like the tares in that parable, the angels will separate them from the wheat (the genuine children of God) at the last day. Therefore, there is no possibility that those people represented by the seed sown among the thorns will ever experience God's eternal kingdom—unless they repent of their idolatry and turn to the Lord with all their hearts while time for them remains.

Finally, in verse 23, the Lord Jesus speaks of the people represented by the seed sown in good ground.

## MATTHEW 13:23

This is the only category among the four that speaks of genuine believers on the Lord Jesus Christ.

The seed sown in good soils represents the Gospel as it is sown in receptive and believing hearts or minds. Such seed is able to put down deep roots, to find all its necessary sustenance from the good soil in which it has been sown, and to grow and flourish as it is fed on the nutrients of the soil, watered by the rain from above and encouraged by the effects of the sun's radiant heat and light.

This is what happens when the Word of God is sown in the hearts of minds of those whom the Holy Spirit has made receptive to the truth. Because the Spirit of God has already prepared that person's heart or mind (through regeneration) to understand, accept and believe the truths of the kingdom, then that person does so—freely and willingly. He embraces all that the Gospel declares as true. He believes with all his heart on the Lord Jesus Christ and he receives him as his Saviour and Lord.

The fact that this believer is being indwelt by the Holy Spirit demonstrates beyond question that he is a genuine child of God. The presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's life can be seen by the fruit that this person produces subsequent to his conversion. Thus, like the seed sown in good soil which brings forth a bountiful harvest, the genuine believer on Christ produces the fruit of the Spirit in abundance. He cannot do otherwise. He has heard and understood the Gospel. He has responded to the message with all his heart. Yet, he has done so because the Spirit of God has called him effectually to repentance and faith, in

fulfilment of God's purposes in election. Thus, with the Holy Spirit within, this person must grow in the faith; he must produce abundant and godly fruit, and he must live a life that is wholly consistent with his calling and election.

This is what makes the difference between the first three groups or categories mentioned and the last. The first three never experienced the work of the Holy Spirit in effectual calling and regeneration. Therefore, they were never the children of God, even although they may have continued to meet with the people of God or professed to belong to Christ. The last group, however, did experience the work of the Holy Spirit in effectual calling and regeneration; because from eternity, God had predestined this group for himself through repentance and faith in his Son. Subsequently, this group proved the genuineness of their faith by the quality of godly fruit produced in their lives.

The Lord Jesus, however, states that the good seed brought forth different quantities of good fruit. The *quality* remained the same in all cases, but the *quantity* produced differed from one field to another or from one plant to another. Thus, we see that not all believers produce an equal amount of fruit. The fruit that they produce—whether little or much—is of the same high *quality*. However, for one reason or another, they are prevented from producing the same quantity. This may be because some are granted greater opportunities, or longer lives, etc., than others. However, the Lord counts faithfulness and fruitfulness to the utmost of one's ability as what matters (i.e., *quality*)—not the *quantity* of fruit produced. Thus, the Lord speaks of some bearing a hundredfold; others, sixtyfold, and yet others, thirtyfold.

## THE PARABLE OF THE WEEDS IN THE FIELD

***Matthew 13:24-30***

### MATTHEW 13:24-27

The Lord Jesus now employs another parable to illustrate the nature of the kingdom of heaven.[41] This is the parable of the weeds (or tares) sown among the wheat.

The kingdom of heaven speaks of those who belong to that kingdom: i.e., to God's kingdom, or those who belong to the true church or to the redeemed people of God. Essentially, this kingdom is comprised only of 'good seed', because this was the only type sown by the man in his field. This speaks of the kingdom of heaven consisting only of those who belong to the Lord—and of no others.

Nevertheless, while the man's labourers took their well-earned rest and were asleep, an enemy appeared in the field and proceeded to scatter weed-bearing seed (possibly, darnel) among the good seed. Clearly, it was the enemy's intention to contaminate or corrupt the crop of wheat when it arose by ensuring that

[41] *kingdom of heaven*: We should note, of course, that the Lord Jesus uses the expression 'the kingdom of heaven' to refer not only to the future glorious kingdom in the new creation, but also to the present period. The kingdom of heaven encompasses the entire period and extent of the Lord's sovereign rule, beginning on earth and culminating in heaven. The fact that Mark uses the expression 'the kingdom of God' in exactly the same context as Matthew uses the expression, 'kingdom of heaven' indicates clearly that these are synonymous—not distinct—expressions. However, for the benefit of his mainly Jewish readers or hearers, Matthew refrains from using the word 'God' (whose Name the Jews would not pronounce). Thus, Matthew substitutes the word 'heaven' instead of 'God'.

unhealthy weeds would be growing in very close proximity to the wholesome grain. In due course, therefore, both wheat and weeds appeared together in the field. This speaks of good and bad or pure and impure existing together in the kingdom of heaven, or the church of God, while in its present earthly state.

## MATTHEW 13:27

Later, when the labourers tending the crop discovered to their dismay that weeds had grown up among the wheat, they approached the master of the house. They could not comprehend how weeds could have grown among the good crop when only pure unmixed seed had been sown. The servants realised the potential danger that the weeds posed to the wheat, especially when growing in such close proximity. Surely, the weeds would threaten to choke or otherwise harm the wheat growing nearby! Therefore, the servants asked of their lord, *"Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?*

## MATTHEW 13:28-29

Of course, the master was not ignorant of the fact that weeds had arisen among the wheat. He knew that his enemy had been hard at work, endeavouring to devastate his crop and deprive the master of a good and healthy return for his labours.

The servants were most anxious to root out the source of potential harm to, or contamination of, the wheat. Therefore, they asked their master if they should go to the fields to strip out the weeds. However, in his wisdom, the master refused. Instead, he replied, *"No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them"* (v.29). Although well intentioned, the master knew that his servants would not be able to distinguish in all cases between the wheat and the weeds. At certain stages of the plant's growth, it could be very difficult to determine which one was genuine wheat and which one was some other plant—like darnel.

The master has an infinitely superior plan, which will not involve the possible loss of even one of the genuine wheat plants.

## MATTHEW 13:30

Both plants were to be allowed to co-exist until the time of harvest. Although, the weeds would threaten to harm or contaminate the wheat, the Lord would protect the good crop. Then, when the harvest arrived, the master would instruct his reapers: *"Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."*

Clearly, the master was not going to permit his servants to root out the weeds, in case they pulled out good plants in error. However, at the harvest, the master would bring in those who were expert reapers. They would be able to distinguish infallibly between the good plants and the bad.

We note that the weeds will be gathered to be burned—indicating very clearly that they do not belong in the kingdom of heaven. By contrast, the wheat will be gathered into the master's barn—indicating just as clearly that this is his crop, his harvest, and his possession. These alone belong properly to the kingdom of heaven. However, we will consider this in more detail when the Lord explains the meaning of this parable to his disciples.

## THE PARABLES OF THE MUSTARD SEED

### MATTHEW 13:31-32

The Lord uses another parable to illustrate the kingdom of heaven—this time, its scope or extent.

At its inception, the kingdom of heaven resembles one of the smallest of seeds—the minute mustard seed. A man took such a tiny seed and sowed it in his ground. However, when this tiny seed sprouted and grew, it became a significant-sized shrub or tree. Indeed, its size exceeded that of many garden plants. So large had it become that birds were able to nest in its branches.

This speaks of the kingdom of heaven from its inception through its continuing growth and expansion to full stature as a mature shrub or tree. It began life as a tiny seed. It grew to become a large shrub.

So it will be with the kingdom of heaven. The message of the kingdom—i.e., the Gospel—will be preached among all nations. Ultimately, the seed sown in the hearts and minds of people around the world will sprout and grow. This speaks of the expansion of the church worldwide throughout the ages. What resembled a mustard seed at its inception (the first preaching of the Gospel by the Lord and his apostles), grew ultimately to overspread the earth. That which began as the Good News of eternal salvation to Israel extended across the world to become the Good News of eternal salvation to all nations. All who called upon the name of the Lord would be saved—irrespective of their nationality, culture or colour.

## THE PARABLE OF THE LEAVEN

### MATTHEW 13:33

The Lord Jesus now likens the kingdom of heaven—i.e., the spread of the Gospel and the growth of the church—to a small amount of leaven or yeast that a woman added to her flour. This leaven would permeate the flour. Then, in the process of baking, the bread would rise significantly, filling its container.

Once again, this illustrates the expansion of the kingdom of heaven or the spread of the Gospel and the growth of the church. The kingdom of heaven begins like a small amount of yeast added to meal or flour. However, as the teaching of the Lord Jesus and his apostles permeates and expands like leaven in the hearts and minds of its believing listeners, it fills those people's innermost being with a full appreciation of the truth, and promotes their spiritual growth to maturity.

This is one of the few occasions where the permeating and expanding effects of leaven is used metaphorically or symbolically in a good sense. On most occasions in the Bible, illustrations using leaven symbolise that which is bad, corrupt or evil. On this occasion, however, the Lord uses leaven to symbolise that which is good in every conceivable way.

## JESUS' PARABLES FULFIL PROPHECY

### MATTHEW 13:34-35

Matthew now explains that Jesus' use of parabolic language fulfilled the words of Asaph in the Old Testament. In Psalm 78, Asaph speaks prophetically, declaring:

> Psalms 78:2-4 ESV
>
> (2) I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, (3) things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. (4) We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.

Here, the LORD speaks of teaching his people by analogy or comparison about things eternal beginning from the foundation of the world and continuing through the period of Israel's history as a nation. The great works and wonders of the LORD were to be taught to the children of Israel. This was to be done not only by heads of families, but also by the anointed prophets and teachers of Israel. During their instruction, these teachers would often expound the ways of the LORD using analogies or comparisons with familiar objects or events from everyday life.

When he came into the world, the Lord Jesus used a very similar method of teaching. By employing parables when teaching the people, the Lord was using examples of familiar objects or everyday events that should have made it easier for the people to understand. However, because of their moral turpitude and spiritual insensitivity, most of the people in the Lord's day failed to comprehend even the most basic of parables, and therefore the spiritual truths that these analogies represented.

Yet, this was in accordance with the will of the Father. For, in his infinite wisdom, he had hidden these things from the wise and prudent, and revealed them unto babes. To them alone it had been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven—and this by God's sovereign grace. (Matt. 11:25; Luke 10:21)

## THE PARABLE OF THE WEEDS IN THE FIELD EXPLAINED

***Matthew 13:-36-43***

### MATTHEW 13:36

After he had finished teaching the crowd, the Lord Jesus took his leave of them and returned to the house. As soon as the Lord was alone, his disciples approached asking him to explain to them the parable of the weeds in the field. Clearly, they had not been able to understand the significance of this parable. However, they showed their earnest desire to learn the truth by asking the Lord to help them understand.

The Lord Jesus then begins to expound the meaning of the parable to them point by point, showing great patience with these spiritually immature believers. So likewise should leaders and teachers in the church today show great patience with those who fail to comprehend spiritual truths but who are eager and willing to learn.

## MATTHEW 13:37

The good seed is sown by the Lord Jesus, who here—and in many places elsewhere—refers to himself as the *"Son of Man."*

The expression 'son of man' is used frequently throughout the Old Testament to refer to any descendant of Adam and Eve; usually, with the implication that a 'son of man' (speaking of fallen sinful mankind) is distinct from a 'son (or child) of God' (speaking of God's elect). However, this expression was used also in another sense, to speak of those whom the LORD had called and appointed to his service—such as the prophets. For example, Ezekiel is termed "son of man," and so is Daniel. Again, this alludes to their association with fallen mankind. However, in this case, it speaks of those among fallen mankind whom God has chosen and appointed to his service.

In complete contrast to this, however, the Lord Jesus uses the expression *"Son of Man"* not to refer to any association with fallen and sinful mankind, but rather to refer to his identity as True Man, and as Adam was *before his fall from original righteousness*. Thus, when the Lord declares himself to be the "Son of Man" he is asserting his pure, holy and sinless character as a true and perfect Man. Unlike Adam who sinned and fell from that state, the Lord Jesus never sinned and therefore remained the only true and perfect Man—or 'Son of Man'—forever. Of course, he who was the perfect sinless Son of Man was at the same time the perfect sinless Son of God. True Man and yet true God.

## MATTHEW 13:38-39A

The field into which the seed is cast is the world of mankind. The seed itself represents the children of the kingdom, or the children of God. These children of righteousness have been cast into the world to grow there and to flourish.

However, the world is not comprised only of the children of the kingdom. On the contrary, other harmful plants have taken root in the world. These are the weeds of the parable; and these weeds represent the children of the evil one: That is, those who are obedient to, or influenced by, Satan and his evil propensities, and who are living in a state of rebellion against God.

Thus, we see that the children of the kingdom must co-exist in the world with the children of the evil one. Those who belong to the evil one will do all in their power to discourage, mislead, harm, or destroy the children of the kingdom. Nevertheless, God's redeemed children are being upheld by his almighty arms and empowered by his Holy Spirit. Therefore, the children of God must do all in their power—as the Spirit enables them—to overcome the evil one, and to spread the message of the Gospel among those whom Satan has taken captive as his own children.

Nevertheless, we see from this passage that the children of God will be involved in a constant struggle with evil and with the children of the evil one throughout the present age. Thus, they must continue to fight the good fight until their battle is won.

## MATTHEW 13:39B-41

One day, however, this conflict between the children of God and those of the evil one will cease. At the end of this age, the Lord Jesus will send forth his angels to separate, bind and gather the two categories. Then, at the harvest, these angels will reap the field: i.e., the world of mankind. In the same way that

weeds are gathered out of the fields for burning, so will everyone and everything that does evil be gathered out of the world of mankind for burning in the fire. Thus, the angels will separate and extract the children of the evil one from the world, and set them aside for final destruction.

## MATTHEW 13:42

Here, the meek and lowly Lord Jesus uses some of the most solemn and uncompromising language that he has ever uttered. But what do these words mean?

Frequently, today, people reject the notion of a fiery judgment or of hell, contending that a God of love would never send anyone to such a shocking place. This, however, is contrary to the teaching of the Bible in general, to the teaching of the Lord Jesus in particular, and to the nature and character of a holy, righteous and just God who will by no means clear the guilty. (Exod. 34:7; Nahum 1:3)

If there is no such place as hell, then the Lord Jesus was not only mistaken in his teaching but also deliberately misrepresented the truth. Clearly, this is unthinkable. God cannot lie, nor can he prove unfaithful to the word he has spoken. God is a God of love, grace and mercy; but he is a God also of truth, righteousness and justice. Those who will not be saved from sin and delivered from his wrath in his own appointed way must inevitably face his judgment. The wages or penalty of sin is death. This means not only physical and spiritual death, but also eternal death: i.e., eternal conscious torments of body and soul in that place prepared by God for Satan and the fallen angels. (Matt. 25:41)

To deny this is to deny the plain teaching of the Bible, and the express teaching of God the Son. These teachings speak very clearly of one thing: the eternal nature and suffering of those who are separated from God forever in the lake of fire. The very idea of using expressions such as 'fiery furnace,' lake of fire', 'everlasting burnings', 'outer darkness', etc. is not to indicate the precise nature of hell, but to indicate unmistakeably its existence, its eternity and the degrees of its sufferings. (Mark 9:43-49; Luke 16:23-24; Rev. 14:10)

It may be argued that expressions such as 'fiery furnace', 'outer darkness', etc. are metaphorical or symbolic expressions. However, this argument is wholly fallacious: For, when, in the Bible, God uses metaphorical or symbolical language to illustrate something, the reality must be *equal to or greater than* the symbol employed to represent it. Thus, when the Bible speaks of 'God's wrath burning like fire' (Ps. 89:46; Jer. 4:4; Rev. 14:10), it is speaking of his enduring and unmitigated anger against sin and against the impenitent sinner. In this case, God's righteous and holy anger is likened to the searing and unending heat of an everlasting fire. Again, when the Lord Jesus speaks of a 'fiery furnace', etc., he means that the reality of hell is equal to or greater than the pains that would be endured if a person should be cast into a continually burning furnace here on earth.

We must bear in mind, of course, that those consigned to hell will not be occupying their present mortal and perishable bodies. Rather, their earthly bodies will be so adapted that they are incapable of destruction or annihilation by the flames. Thus, body and soul will endure for all eternity the torments of hell.

These torments include, but are not limited to:

- the knowledge of one's eternal separation from God forever with no possibility of salvation at any point in the future;

- the torments of an ever-accusing conscience over sins committed while living in the world, but not repented of; and
- the torments occasioned by the miseries that these sins induce in the mind or soul.

Thus, because of their interminable pains, those who suffer in hell will have no thought for others who share the same fate and no desire for the company of others enduring a like eternal punishment. The Lord Jesus sums this up by declaring, *"In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"* (v.42b; see also v.50).

When the Lord Jesus spoke of a 'fiery furnace', these must have been solemn and frightening words to those who heard them, and so they should be to us today. Hell is a reality; and to that very real and dreadful place, everyone will be sent if they have not repented of their sins and believed on the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the children of God must do all in their power to show the love of God to those bound for hell, that they may find the salvation of the Lord before it is too late, and he sends forth his angels to separate the weeds from the wheat.

## MATTHEW 13:43

We have considered the fate of the children of the evil one. Now, briefly, we must consider the destiny of the children of the kingdom.

These were the good seed sown in the world. We must remember, of course, that the children of the kingdom did not become God's children because of their own righteousness or because of any superior worth or merit over the children of the evil one. On the contrary, they belonged to the world of sinful and lost mankind originally; and would have remained there among the children of the evil one if God had not chosen and called them to himself. It is only by his sovereign grace that they have been delivered from the present evil world and have been made the children of God. Thus, the good seed, or the children of the kingdom, have been made so only by the love, grace and mercy of God in election and by the redemption secured for them by his Son.

Now, however, the Lord Jesus has sent forth his angels to separate the children of his kingdom from the children of the evil one, to gather them together and to bring them into the presence of their loving Saviour and Lord. Then, when evil no longer finds any place in God's creation, his children will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

This speaks of the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus, and of the new creation. However, the Lord does not dwell upon the details of these momentous events in this passage, so we will leave them until a more appropriate occasion.

## THE TREASURE HIDDEN IN THE FIELD

### MATTHEW 13:44

Jesus now uses another analogy to illustrate the kingdom of heaven—this time, its preciousness or inestimable value.

Here, the kingdom is represented as a very special treasure that had been hidden away in a field. In other words, the treasure (representing the message of the kingdom) had been hidden, or kept secret, from the mass of mankind to be found only by those who were found in the right spot (or who were seeking in the right direction).

One day, such a person was walking across this field. As he walked, he stumbled across the hidden treasure. The man rejoiced at such a valuable find, and wished with all his heart to possess this treasure for himself. However, he realised that the treasure was not his to possess, because it lay hidden in a field owned by someone else. Therefore, in order to secure this great treasure, the man first concealed the treasure, then went to the owner of the field and arranged to purchase the field from him—probably, at some considerable price. After he had paid the purchase price, the man then took legal possession of that field, together with all that it contained. By this means, the man was able to secure for himself the great treasure hidden in the field.

Here, the Lord Jesus illustrates to his disciples something of the kingdom of heaven. It is like a treasure hidden in a field: That is, the message of the kingdom is an imperishable and infinitely valuable message (the message of eternal salvation). However, this message has been hidden (from the minds) of the mass of mankind (as though hidden secretly in a field). Nevertheless, by the providence of God, certain individuals among mankind will walk through this field and find this treasure. They will realise its spiritual value, and they will seek with all their hearts to possess that treasure, or to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Of course, this is a work of the Holy Spirit. It is he who leads certain individuals to discover the treasure in the field. It is he who causes these individuals to appreciate its infinite value to their souls. It is he who induces these individuals to seek to possess that treasure—whatever it may cost to them, and it is he who ultimately brings about that person's entry into the kingdom of heaven. Thus, entry into the kingdom of heaven is not a work of man or of man's efforts, but of the sovereign grace of God. (Eph. 2:8-10)

## THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

### MATTHEW 13:45-46

Once again, the Lord Jesus speaks of the great value to the souls of those finding the kingdom of heaven. This time, the Lord uses the analogy of a businessman or merchant who sought out only the most beautiful of pearls. On one occasion, however, he discovered a single pearl of such beauty and value that he was unable to purchase it with his existing finances. Nevertheless, the merchant realised that this pearl was beyond price—if somehow he could secure it. Therefore, in order to raise the very considerable sum required for its purchase, the merchant sold his entire property and possessions. By this means, he was able to raise sufficient capital to purchase the pearl of great value.

Now, of course, the Lord Jesus is not suggesting that one can buy their way into the kingdom of heaven. He is using an analogy to illustrate the value of the kingdom (or the value of salvation to a person's soul), and to emphasise how important it is to seek out the kingdom of God (the pearl of great value) whatever it may cost in terms of earthly comforts, wealth, possessions or other interests.

This is analogous to gaining one's life in contrast to losing one's soul because that person's heart is set on the things of this age, rather than on the things of the age to come. (Luke 12:15-21; see also Col. 3:2)

## THE PARABLE OF THE NET

### MATTHEW 13:47-50

The Lord Jesus uses yet another metaphor to illustrate the kingdom of heaven—this time, emphasising the distinction between those who belong to the kingdom and those who do not.

Some of the Lord's disciples were professional fishermen, and all of them were familiar with the fishing trade carried out around the Sea of Galilee. Therefore, the Lord uses an analogy which they would readily appreciate and comprehend.

A certain fisherman and his crew put out into the lake and let down his net into the sea. As the net was dragged from the boat, it collected many different kinds of fish—good and bad. Soon, the net was filled to capacity. At this point, the fishermen drew the net toward the shore (as it would have been too heavy to hoist into the boat).

Once ashore, the men began sorting the fish. They placed the good fish into containers. However, the fishermen rejected the bad or unsuitable fish, casting them away as unfit.

Here, the Lord is indicating that both good and bad will claim to belong to the kingdom of heaven, and to be the children of the Father in heaven. Just as good and bad fish co-existed together in the sea, so also true and false professors will exist together in the church. However, as with the rejection of the bad and unfit fish, so there will be a rejection of the bad and unfit individuals—who claimed (falsely) to belong to God's kingdom.

Now, the Lord links this analogy with that of the final separation of the just from the unjust, or of the regenerate from the unregenerate. At the close of the present age, the Lord will send forth his holy angels. Unlike those in the church who, often, find it extremely difficult to distinguish true believers from false professors, the angels of God will be able to distinguish infallibly between these two categories. Therefore, when they come at the end of the age, these holy angels will separate the evil from the righteous. This will include evil and sinful men and women within the church as well as evil and sinful mankind outside the church. At the same time, the righteous will be removed by the angels from among the presence of the wicked. (v.49; Matt. 24:31,40-41; cf. Matt. 25:31-46)

Then, the angels—acting as the authorised servants and agents of God—will cast the wicked into the fiery furnace: i.e., evil and impenitent mankind will be separated forever from the presence of God, and from the influence of his love, mercy and grace. They will be consigned to the place of everlasting torments, there to endure the unending wrath of a holy and righteous God. To all intents and purposes, God's wrath will afflict them to the same degree as would the flames of a searing furnace that can never be extinguished. In addition to this, their conscience will forever accuse them of their sin and guilt and

their memory will forever remind them of their folly in refusing to seek the Lord with all their heart that they might have been found by him.

In case the disciples failed to comprehend the horrors of hell, the Lord adds: *"…In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"* (v.50). This commonly used expression indicates the severity of the fiery furnace, or of hell. Those consigned to that dreadful place will weep forever, as their sin, guilt and misery overcomes them and afflicts them with endless grief and unremitting remorse. (They are, of course, beyond the point of godly sorrow and repentance). They are said to 'gnash their teeth', indicating the perpetual agonising nature and intensity of their suffering, coupled with their own inward rage at having been so foolish as to despise the grace of God, and for having put themselves beyond God's grace and mercy for all the ages of eternity.

## A TREASURE TROVE OF TRAINING

### MATTHEW 13:51-52

In summary, the Lord asks his disciples if they have understood everything that he has just explained to them. Perhaps humbled and overawed by the Lord's words, his disciples answered him with a simple, "Yes." They had asked him to explain the meaning of the parable of the weeds in the field. Now, they understood the significance of this parable, together with all the other illustrations that the Lord had used to portray the kingdom of heaven.

Thus, we see that to understand the meaning of the Lord's teaching, we must seek explanations from his own Word and sit at his feet to learn, as did the disciples. Furthermore, we must be willing to accept and believe all that he teaches us in his Word, and which the Holy Spirit applies to our lives—whether it be palatable or unpalatable, popular or unpopular, or whether it accords with our cherished understanding of his Word or not. If our past understanding of certain teachings has been mistaken, we must accept the true interpretation and hold steadfastly to these truths instead of to error or to mistaken or false teaching.

We are not here to please the world by presenting them with teaching which appeals to their worldly minds, or which amounts to a watered down and distorted version of the Gospel. We are here in this world to please and glorify God by presenting lost mankind with the truth of God's Word—whether they find it palatable or unpalatable. Nevertheless, we must present God's truth out of a genuine, caring and loving heart for those who are yet abiding under God's wrath. (John 3:18,36)

The Lord now explains to his disciples the effect of his teaching on their lives, and—by extension—the effect of the apostles' teaching on the lives of others.

No one is qualified to teach others the truths of the kingdom unless he himself has been instructed in these truths. This parallels the Jewish scribes or teachers of the law. These men could not teach God's law to others until they themselves had been thoroughly trained in the precepts and principles of that law. Then, as a qualified and enlightened teacher, that scribe could draw upon his vast learning and experience of God's truths to explain these truths to others. This was equivalent to drawing out of his mind or heart treasures new or old, and enriching the lives of his hearers by teaching them the sacred truths of God's imperishable Word.

Nevertheless, the Jewish scribes could learn and teach only what had been taught to them from the Old Testament by the rabbinical schools. These, perhaps, were the old treasures. By contrast, however, the Lord Jesus was imparting to his disciples teaching that was new, and that fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament. Thus, when duly instructed in these new teachings (or in the precepts and principles of the New Testament), the disciples or apostles of the Lord Jesus would be qualified and equipped to teach to others the old and new treasures of God's imperishable, infallible and unchanging Word. For this task, they would be especially led, taught and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

## JESUS TEACHES AT CAPERNAUM

### MATTHEW 13:53-56

When Jesus had finished explaining these parables to his disciples, he left that area and returned to his current hometown of Capernaum. At Capernaum, the Lord Jesus entered the local synagogue. As was customary in the synagogues, Jesus would have been invited to speak to the congregation. However, when the Lord taught the people, his gracious and convincing words utterly amazed them. They could not comprehend how this 'man' could teach with such power and authority. This was in complete contrast to the scribes or rabbis who would read the lesson and would impart their teaching to the people in a formal manner, perhaps quoting frequently from previous teachers of the law or from the teaching of the rabbinical schools. However, these scribes or rabbis lacked the inherent power and authority that was displayed so clearly in the teaching of the Lord Jesus.

Yet, the people recalled that Jesus not only taught with great power and authority, he also performed many mighty works with that same power and authority. They would remember the miracles that he had performed previously in Capernaum; some even taking place in their synagogue. Where, then, did this 'man' Jesus derive such power and authority? (It seemed beyond their comprehension that the Lord's mighty words and works testified unmistakably to his commission from the Father as the promised Messiah.)

The people then began to ask questions among themselves. They were aware (or so they thought) of Jesus' origins. They knew that he was the son of the carpenter (Joseph). (Probably, they would not have considered that Joseph was not Jesus' biological father.) They knew that the mother of Jesus was named 'Mary'. Furthermore, they knew that there were four brothers in Jesus' family: James, Joseph, Simon and Judas, and several sisters. This was the family to which Jesus belonged. It was an ordinary working family. Joseph was a skilled tradesman—a carpenter. In his youth, Jesus had learned and practised the same trade. How, then, could he now speak with such immense power and authority? How could he perform such remarkable signs, since he came from such a markedly unremarkable family?

The truth lay beyond the grasp of these people. Instead of observing the irrefutable evidence of the Lord Jesus' commission from the Father, as set forth in his words and works and in the testimony of the Father concerning his Son, these people observed only the circumstances of his family background. Yet, even in this they erred: For Jesus was not the son of Joseph, except in a legal and moral sense.

## JESUS REJECTED AT CAPERNAUM

### MATTHEW 13:57-58

Thus, in their unbelief, the overwhelming majority of the people of Capernaum rejected the Lord Jesus: That is, they accepted him as a member of Joseph and Mary's family, but they rejected his claims about himself, they rejected his words and teaching, and they rejected his almighty works testifying to his authority, power and glory as the Son of God.

In their wilful unbelief, these people despised the testimony of the Father concerning his Son. Furthermore, in rejecting his Son, they rejected also the message of the Gospel that his Son was proclaiming. But, by rejecting the Gospel of life and salvation, these people were rejecting the only means through which they might have been forgiven. Thus, they remained under the wrath and curse of God—by reason of their wilful sin of unbelief.

Of course, exceptions must be observed among the people of Capernaum. We have noted already that a number of people from this town or its surrounding area did place their faith in the Lord Jesus, and did experience God's mercy and salvation in their lives. However, the majority took offence at the Lord Jesus. Therefore, concerning them, the Lord declared: *"A prophet is not without honour except in his hometown and in his own household"* (v.57b)

What was true of the prophets whom the LORD had commissioned and sent to Israel and Judah in previous generations was true also of the Lord Jesus at the present time. God had sent many prophets to call his people to repentance and faith. However, for the most part, the people had rejected God's holy prophets, despised their message (effectively repudiating the Word of God), and abused or killed God's appointed messengers. (Luke 11:47; Acts 7:52; cf. 1 Thess. 2:15)

In all that time, these prophets were men without honour among the vast majority of the Israelite people and among the families of Israel. Only among a faithful remnant of God's people were these prophets accepted and respected for what they were—the appointed messengers and faithful servants of the Lord God. Only among that remnant, was God's message believed and obeyed when delivered to them by the prophets of God. (Rom. 9:27; 11:5)

The same was true in the case of the Lord Jesus. He came unto his own, and his own received him not; but to as many as received him, he gave the power or authority to become the children of God. (John 1:10-13)

Thus, to the majority, the Lord Jesus was as a prophet without honour. Yet, to the faithful few who believed and accepted his words, he was the Prophet of highest esteem and honour. Indeed, to them, the Lord Jesus was that Prophet 'like unto Moses' (but superior by far) whom God had promised to raise up. (Acts 3:22; 7:37)

Yet, because of the general climate of unbelief in and around Capernaum, the Lord Jesus refused to perform any further works that demonstrated his almighty power and authority. The people had had more than sufficient opportunity to respond to those works performed earlier. But rather than acknowledging that Jesus must have received his power and authority from his Father in heaven, they had rejected the clearest testimony of both the Father and the Son.

When people or nations despise wilfully and repeatedly the grace of God and the testimony of God, they will find themselves without the witness of God and the Word of God. As those perished who refused to hear and heed the Word of God preached by Noah, so too will those perish who refuse to hear and head the Word of God preached by the Lord Jesus or by his appointed servants.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 14

## HEROD'S MURDER OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

***Matthew 14:1-12***

### MATTHEW 14:1-2

At about this time, news reached Herod Antipas (the tetrarch, and a son of Herod the Great) about the mighty works of the Lord Jesus. The ESV and many other versions say that Herod *"...heard about the fame of Jesus."* However, 'fame' should not be understood in its modern sense. The phrase means simply that Herod 'heard news of', 'heard a report about', or 'heard word concerning' Jesus, etc.

On hearing about the mighty works performed by the Lord Jesus, one thought immediately came into Herod's mind: John the Baptist had been raised from the dead; thus, he was able to perform such miraculous signs.

### MATTHEW 14:3-5

But why should Herod be so deeply concerned about John the Baptist?

The reason was that Herod the tetrarch had arrested and imprisoned John the Baptist for offending him. John had been declaring to Herod that it was unlawful for him to co-habit with his brother, Philip's, wife (Herodias, the mother of Salome). Philip, of course, was still alive at this time, and he was the lawful husband of Herodias.

Herod was unwilling to put Herodias away. However, accused by his guilty conscience and convicted of his sin by the words of John, Herod desired to silence the Baptist permanently by putting him to death. However, he was afraid of public opinion and a possible backlash against him, since many of the people considered John the Baptist to be a genuine prophet of God. Therefore, at that time, Herod had spared John.

### MATTHEW 14:6-7

Some time later, a great banquet was held to celebrate Herod's birthday. During the course of the celebrations, entertainment was provided which included a dance performed by the daughter of Herodias. Herod was so impressed by this woman's exquisite but sensual performance that he promised to reward her with anything that she asked. Foolishly, however, Herod took a public oath to fulfil this promise. This meant that the tetrarch could not break his publicly-proclaimed vow *without losing credibility*—even if the circumstances might have required him to revise or revoke his oath.

### MATTHEW 14:8

Herodias' daughter then sought her mother's advice about what reward to ask from Herod. Enraged and bitter that John the Baptist had declared to Herod that his union with her was unlawful, Herodias told her daughter to say to Herod, *"Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter."*

Here is an example of a woman intent on the wilful and premeditated murder or homicide of a prophet of God. John the Baptist had been called, appointed and sent by God as the forerunner of his Messiah. Now, out of bitter hatred for the message he brought to her—essentially, the word of the LORD—Herodias determined to have John executed, thereby silencing the messenger.

Thus, Herodias instructs her daughter to ask Herod for the head of John the Baptist—presented on a platter, so that she and all the company could see that John had been beheaded. Such are the evil measures that certain people resort to in their attempts to silence the Word of God when it accuses their conscience and convicts them of their sin.

Therefore, prompted by her evil mother, the daughter of Herodias returns to Herod and declares to him: *"Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter."*

## MATTHEW 14:9

How foolish to make promises that one may not be able to keep!—at least, not without violating the law of God.

Herod had never anticipated a request of this nature when he made his promise to Herodias' daughter. Therefore, he was deeply shocked when he heard it from her lips. He had listened to the words of John the Baptist, and knew that he was a prophet of God. When John accused him of living with his brother's wife, Herod was greatly offended and might have put the Baptist to death were it not for the perceived weight of public opinion. Nevertheless, when Herodias' daughter asks blatantly for John's head on a platter, Herod is clearly troubled and dismayed. Yet, because of his public oath, he feels compelled to fulfil his promise.

Here, Herod compounds his original foolishness in making such an unconditional oath by being prepared to perform that oath in violation of justice and of God's holy and righteous law. Furthermore, Herod was not about to order the execution of a common criminal who deserved such a penalty, but of a holy prophet and servant of God whose only offence was to tell the truth faithfully—as God required him to do.

Clearly, Herod thought more of breaking his oath than of breaking the law of God. Granted, God's Word declares that oaths must be fulfilled. Nevertheless, God never expects any oath to be fulfilled that contradicts or violates his own holy law. Where a choice must be made, the principles and precepts of God's law must take precedence over a person's oaths, vows or promises to other people.

From this we learn to exercise the utmost caution in making solemn pledges or promises to other people lest we should be unable to fulfil them without breaking some principle or precept of God's Word or of violating God's will and purposes for our lives. As the Lord Jesus said, we should refrain from taking oaths making solemn vows in everyday situations.

## MATTHEW 14:10-11

Under orders from Herod, his officers made their way to the prison where John the Baptist had been incarcerated. Then, taking him to the place of execution, they carried out the death sentence—in this case, by beheading the victim.

The officers then placed John's head on a platter, or large plate of gold or silver, and delivered it to the daughter of Herodias. Herodias then took the platter and presented it to her mother to show that the evil deed had been accomplished, and that the prophet of God would no longer accuse them for their sins and iniquities. Yet, they did not seem to realise that although a person can silence the messenger, he cannot silence the Message. The Word of the Lord would continue to accuse and condemn them for their wicked deeds until they stood before God on the Day of Judgment to answer for their crimes.

### MATTHEW 14:12

When the disciples of John learned that Herod had put the Baptist to death, they came and took the body away from the scene of Herod's crime. Finding a suitable burial place, they laid Johns' body to rest. Then, John's disciples hurried to tell Jesus what had happened to the Baptist. Of course, Jesus would have known in advance of all their circumstances leading up and surrounding the death of John the Baptist.

## THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND

***Matthew 14:13-21***

### MATTHEW 14:13-14

When Jesus had been informed of John's death, he withdrew from the immediate area. Taking a boat, the Lord crossed over the Sea of Galilee to a remote and desolate part of the land. There is no suggestion here that Jesus felt threatened by the events surrounding the death of John, or felt that he himself might become the next victim of Herod's folly and rage. On the contrary, the Lord knew all that would befall him. He knew when, where and how these events would take place—in accordance with the sovereign will of his Father. Furthermore, the Lord knew that no power or person in heaven or earth could interfere with the Father's divine plan and purposes for the Son.

Nevertheless, the Lord considered it advisable to move away from the present area to a remote location. Perhaps, this would give him time and opportunity to mourn for John, to instruct and comfort John's disciples, and to remove any possibility of the crowds that had been listening to him to find themselves exposed to any possible unlawful copy-cat executions or unwarranted persecution, either from Herod's court or from his sympathisers.

However, the Lord Jesus and his disciples had not long left the area when the crowds heard of it. Probably, they had seen or heard of the Lord's departure by boat. Now, others had informed them of the boat's heading and probable destination. Thus, the people began leaving their towns and villages to make their way around the Sea of Galilee on foot to the place where they expected the Lord Jesus to arrive.

Soon, the Lord arrived at his intended destination—only to find that a great crowd of people were awaiting him. Looking upon them, the Lord felt deep compassion for these lost souls. Thus, he began to demonstrate once again something of his mighty and everlasting power to save by healing their sick. Clearly, what the Lord was able to do in healing physically, mentally, and emotionally he was able to do also in healing spiritually.

## MATTHEW 14:15-16

At the onset of evening, the Lord's disciples approached their Master. Realising that night was fast approaching and that they were located in a desolate and remote location, the disciples besought the Lord Jesus to dismiss the crowd. They knew that the people had spent the greater part of the day with the Lord Jesus. Now, the Lord's disciples believed that it was necessary for the people to return home so that they could buy food for themselves.

The Lord Jesus, however, greatly astonishes his disciples by telling them that the people need not depart. Then, the Lord says to his disciples, *"...you give them something to eat."*

This must have further amazed the disciples, considering that they were located in a remote and desolate region with no facilities anywhere in the immediate vicinity for obtaining food. Furthermore, they had already determined that among the vast crowd gathered, they could find only five loaves and two fish. Clearly, the people had left their homes in great haste, without bringing any meals. Thus, as the day neared its close, the crowd must have been very hungry—hence, the disciples' concern. Yet, to be told by the Lord Jesus to feed this great crowd amazed them.

## MATTHEW 14:17-18

Still astonished at the Lord's words, the disciples said to him, *"We have only five loaves here and two fish"* (v.17). By implication, the disciples were saying, 'What can we possibly do with so little? How can this meagre amount suffice to feed this multitude?'

It seems that the Lord's disciples had forgotten already all his mighty works that he had just performed. Could not he who performed outstanding miracles of healing also perform other miraculous works? Could not he by whom and for whom God created the universe create all that was necessary for the sustaining of life or for the nourishment of the body?

Yes, the disciples lacked faith—even although they had witnessed Jesus' almighty power at work on many different occasions. Yet, how many of us today lack faith in his power or promises, even although we have experienced something of his almighty grace, power and mercy on many previous occasions?

Then, the Lord Jesus commands his disciples *"Bring them here to me."*

## MATTHEW 14:19

At this point, the Lord Jesus ordered the crowd to sit down on the grass. Then, taking the five loaves and two fish, Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and thanked his Father above for his gracious and bountiful provision. Thus, we learn to offer thanksgiving to the Father for everything that he provides—whether little or much—for our Father in heaven will always provide that which is needful; although not necessarily that which *we think* is needful.

After blessing the five loaves and two fish, the Lord broke them and handed portions to each of his disciples for distribution among the crowd, which numbered well in excess of five thousand people.

### MATTHEW 14:20

The disciples must have been astonished to see that the loaves and fish showed no signs of diminishing as they handed them out to the crowd sitting on the grass. Furthermore, they noted that they were handing out an abundance of food: so much so that, when they had eaten, the crowd were fully satisfied. Even so, they had not exhausted the available supply of bread and fish. Indeed, the broken pieces remaining were sufficient to fill twelve baskets—probably, new and unused large wicker baskets destined as containers for fishermen.

### MATTHEW 14:21

Matthew now tells us specifically that those present on this occasion amounted to five thousand. We must not consider this number as hyperbole or exaggeration, but as a round number for the number of adult males present. Thus, Matthew is careful to add that the five thousand refers specifically to adult males, and did not include the women and children also present. Hence, if we include the women and children, there must have been about ten thousand or more people present.

It may be objected that such large numbers of people could not have been found in the surrounding towns and villages. This may be true. However, we must remember that Jesus performed many such miracles when the ordinary population of the area was being augmented very considerably by pilgrims from throughout the whole of Israel and from lands beyond Israel who were making their way to the temple in Jerusalem and for the Jewish feasts. Thus, there is no difficulty in accounting for such large numbers—especially, at specific times in the Jewish calendar.

## JESUS WALKS ON THE WATER

***Matthew 14:22-27***

### MATTHEW 14:22-23

As soon as the Lord had fed the multitude, he told his disciples to take a boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, where he planned to meet them. Then, the Lord dismissed the large crowd, intending to make his way into a mountain alone, where he could pray to his Father in heaven. The Lord was still there praying to his Father when evening fell.

### MATTHEW 14:24

Meanwhile, the disciples had been making their way across the Sea of Galilee. However, when they were some distance from the shore, a strong wind arose and began to stir up the waves. Very soon, the rising swell threatened the safety of the small vessel. Undoubtedly, the disciples must have been growing increasingly concerned, as the wind showed no signs of abating and the waves continued to beat upon the frail boat.

Nevertheless, the disciples need not have feared; because the Lord knew their exact circumstances. His presence would be with them, even in the storm—as we are about to see.

## MATTHEW 14:25

While the disciples continued to battle desperately against the elements, the Lord was about to come to their aid. The night was now well advanced; being at the fourth watch. The Jews divided the night into three four-hourly watches. Later, however, the Romans changed the night watches to four three-hourly periods. The fourth (Roman) watch ran from three until six in the morning.

At this early hour, as the disciples continued to struggle in the darkness against the strong winds and seas, the Lord Jesus appeared to them—walking on the sea! Thus, we see that the Lord comes to the aid of his saints, even amidst their greatest trials, difficulties and tribulations; and that nothing can hinder or prevent the Lord from reaching out to his people in their distress.

## MATTHEW 14:26

The disciples must have been greatly alarmed to find their boat in the midst of such turbulent and wild conditions. However, when they caught sight of the Lord walking across the raging sea toward them, their consternation knew no bounds.

As if it were not fearful enough that they had been caught in the midst of a sudden squall, now the terrified state of their minds was causing them to hallucinate! Now, they were being haunted by the spirits of the departed, descending upon them across the top of the water! Thus, in utter consternation the disciples cried out, *"It is a ghost!"*

## MATTHEW 14:27

The Lord Jesus, however, takes steps to calm and reassure his terrified disciples with the words, *"Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."*

What greater words of comfort could the Lord have uttered? He tells his frightened and distressed disciples to *"Take heart."* They were to be reassured. They were to be encouraged beyond all doubt that they had no cause for fear or alarm—even in the midst of such frightening, difficult and distressing circumstances. They were to take heart, because their lives and their circumstances were not in their own hands but in the hands of One who is almighty to save.

To this end, the Lord Jesus says to them, *"Take heart; it is I..."* It is not a ghost that you see. It is I. It is not your imagination playing tricks with your mind. It is I—and I have come to deliver you. It is I, your Lord and Master; and it is I who exercises sovereign control over the entire universe, including the natural elements such as wind and sea.

Thus, the Lord continues, *"Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."* What reason have we to fear when the Lord is near? The disciples distress had been compounded by the unexpected, sudden and unusual appearance of the Lord in their midst. Yet, now they knew that it was their Lord and Master who had come to their aid, they no longer had cause to fear. The Lord was in their midst, and he would deliver them.

So it is with us. In our distresses, we may think the Lord is unaware of our circumstances, or has left us to struggle alone. However, this is not so. The Lord is always aware of every circumstance in our lives. At his appointed time, he will come to our aid; and in the manner of his appointing. Therefore, let us cherish these words in our hearts: *"Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."*

## PETER SEEKS TO COPY JESUS

***Matthew 14:28-33***

### MATTHEW 14:28

As soon as Peter realised that it was the Lord Jesus who was approaching them on the water, he called out to his Master, *"Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."*

However, it is doubtful if Peter made this request with pure motives. Why would he want to put his faith to the test, or to test the Lord's power in this way? Perhaps, Peter simply wanted to be like his Lord and to walk like his Lord—but in this case, Peter was taking a step too far.

### MATTHEW 14:29

Although the Lord knew what was about to happen, he did not command Peter to remain in the boat. Rather, he invited him to *"Come";* i.e., to leave the relative safety of the boat and to commit himself in faith to the power of the Lord. Had Peter done this, he would have succeeded. Unfortunately, however, Peter failed to trust the Lord completely, as we shall see.

### MATTHEW 14:30

Peter then stepped out of the boat and on to the water. Looking steadfastly toward his Master, the disciple began to make his away across the rolling swell toward Jesus. However, at some point, Peter became distracted. Instead of keeping his gaze fixed on his Master, he started to pay attention to the rolling waves and strong wind. Thus, as he gazed at the power of the natural elements, Peter began to lose sight of the power of the Lord to uphold and to keep him. He had taken his eyes off the Lord. Consequently, his faith in the Lord's sustaining power began to waver. Very soon, Peter began to sink beneath the waves. Then, in terror, the disciple cried out to Jesus, *"Lord, save me."*

Yet, the Lord is merciful toward his weak and faltering saints. When Peter cried out in terror, *"Lord, save me*" the Lord did not abandon his disciple—as we shall see in the next verse.

### MATTHEW 14:31

As soon as Peter cried out to his Lord, Jesus responded. Before his disciple could slip beneath the waves, the Lord reached out and caught him with his almighty arm. Though in the midst of a life-threatening situation, the Lord had rescued Peter and brought him to safety.

So it is with his people. Perhaps through no fault of our own, we might find ourselves in a life-threatening situation. Yet, if we cry out to the Lord, he has the power to deliver us. The apostle Paul found himself in many such situations during his ministry. Yet, the Lord delivered Paul out of them all. Throughout the ages, the Lord's people have found this to be true of them.

Nevertheless, we must realise that the Lord does not always deliver his saints from life-threatening situations. He always preserves their soul. Yet, in some situations, the Lord may have determined to allow his saint to pass through death in order to fulfil his greater will and purposes and to bring that believer into his immediate and glorious presence.

Once Peter had been delivered from the waves, the Lord Jesus asked of him, *"O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"*

This illustrates very well the unnecessary difficulties faced by the Lord's people when they become distracted by other concerns, events or circumstances in their lives. Instead of looking onward and upward toward the Lord Jesus, they look downward or around them at the seemingly insurmountable difficulties. By taking their minds off the Lord Jesus—as did Peter—they have lost sight of his power. They have forgotten that he is the sovereign of the universe, and that no power in heaven or on earth can affect their lives without his express knowledge and consent. They have forgotten that their lives are in his hands. This is what happens when we take our eyes off the Lord; when we lose sight of his word and his promises, and when we fail to trust him implicitly for every aspect of our lives. But, when we remember who the Lord is—our Redeemer, the King of Glory and the Sovereign of the universe—we will have no reason to doubt his willingness to act on our behalf or his power to uphold and to keep us through every circumstance of life.

## MATTHEW 14:32

At this point, the Lord Jesus stepped into the boat, which was still heaving and rolling in the rough seas. However, as soon as the Lord set foot in the boat, the wind ceased and peace was restored to the formerly troubled sea.

Here we learn that we may experience many troubling and difficult times in our lives, and be exposed to situations and events that threaten to greatly disturb our peace or place us in great danger. However, in all these situations, the Lord is near. In the midst of our greatest troubles, trials or dangers, the Lord remains in absolute control of all events and situations. Nothing can harm us except he permits it, and except it be in accordance with his sovereign will and purposes. And when it is the will of the Lord to intervene in our lives to restore peace, calm or tranquillity, nothing can prevent this from taking place: For the lives of the Lord's saints are in his hands, and he will uphold each one of his redeemed children with his almighty and sovereign power. They are precious in his sight, for he has redeemed them with his own blood and for his glory.

Thus, the disciples had no cause to fear the storms at sea or the storms of life. The Lord their Redeemer held them with his almighty hands, and they could never perish.

What, however, was the effect of the Lord's sovereign power over wind and sea upon the disciples?

## MATTHEW 14:33

They worshipped him. As was fitting for the Holy One of God, the disciples poured out their heartfelt praise and adoration on him who had just delivered Peter from the waves and who had brought great peace and calm by his very presence with them in the boat.

Their worship of the Lord Jesus, however, showed that they were maturing spiritually in their faith. They had been taught frequently about Jesus' divine mission from the Father in heaven and about his work as the Saviour or Messiah. However, they had failed to comprehend fully that Jesus was the Son of God, or what that title implied. Now, they had just witnessed another example of his power over nature or the natural elements. Now, they began to appreciate that Jesus was able to exercise control over nature and command it to obey his will. However, they would have realised that only God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, was able to exercise control over nature by his word of command or by the exercise of his will. Therefore, they must have reasoned, since Jesus is able to will the wind and the waves to obey him, and to restore peace and calm, then he must be divine. He must be the Son of God. Hence their confession, *"Truly you are the Son of God."*

This was an amazing confession for men of Jewish backgrounds. Jews recognised no one but God in heaven (Yahweh) as divine. Being monotheists, Jews proclaimed God as one, refusing to recognise any other persons in any supposed Godhead or Trinity. Here, however, the disciples were being compelled by the very evidence to confess Jesus the Christ as the Son of God—thus demonstrating that the third person of the Godhead (the Holy Spirit) was working in their hearts and lives to convince them of these momentous truths.

# JESUS ARRIVES AT GENNESARET

***Matthew 14:34-36***

## MATTHEW 14:34-36

With the Lord Jesus now accompanying them in the boat, the small vessel was able to continue its heading across the lake without further difficultly. Eventually, they came to land near Gennesaret—a town situated between Capernaum and Magdala on the north-west shore of Lake Galilee. However, as soon as the Lord Jesus set foot in that area, the people recognised him. Probably, many of the people from Gennesaret had met the Lord while he was living in Capernaum, some miles to the north.

No sooner had the Lord Jesus been recognised, than the men of the area sent word around the whole district announcing the Lord's arrival. Consequently, large numbers of sick people sought assistance from their friends and relatives so that they could be brought to Jesus for help and healing.

Soon, a great crowd had gathered around the Lord, pleading with him to heal them of their various afflictions or diseases. Indeed, believing that it was only necessary to reach out in faith to the Lord Jesus and touch the hem of his garment, many experienced perfect healing of body and mind in this manner. It was not essential to communicate verbally with the Lord. Provided a person came to the Lord with faith in his ability and willingness to heal, then all who reached out to him would receive healing. This was true whether the person reached out in faith nearby (as did those who touched the fringe of his garment) or

whether they reached out from a distance (as did the Roman officer who believed that the Lord Jesus could heal his servant without actually travelling to his home).

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 15

## UNCLEAN HANDS

***Matthew 15:1-9***

### MATTHEW 15:1-9

Once again, the Lord Jesus encounters the Jewish religious authorities, represented here by a party of Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem. The Pharisees and scribes were members of the Sanhedrin—the highest religious council or assembly in the land. The members of the Sanhedrin purported to preserve, uphold and teach the Law of Moses. However, in addition to the Law of Moses, the scribes and Pharisees insisted that the traditions of the elders or ancients of Israel were of equal validity to God's Law, and that it was essential to observe the traditions of the elders in every detail—even although these rules and regulations formed no part of the written Word of God (the Old Testament).

Over the centuries, the elders of the Jews had instituted and accrued many civil and religious rules and regulations and imposed them on the people of Israel. This became known as the traditions of the elders. These teachings and traditions were incorporated into the *Mishna* (from a verb meaning *'repetition'*), and later the *Talmud* (meaning, '*doctrine'*, from a Hebrew word meaning 'to learn'). The scribes and Pharisees considered the Talmud as at least equal with—if not greater than—the Law of Moses. However, the Talmud contains many trivial rules and regulations, and many absurd requirements and statements—none of which were given by God. For example, on the basis of these age-old, but man-made, traditions Rabbi Jose declared that *"to eat with unwashen hands is as great a sin as adultery"* (Rabbi Jose quoted in Matthew Henry's Commentary on Matthew 15:1).

This, then, was the background to the beliefs and teachings of these scribes and Pharisees, and formed the basis of their complaint to Jesus in the next verse.

### MATTHEW 15:2

Note the nature of the Pharisees and scribes' complaint here: They are not asserting that the Lord's disciples have broken the Law of God (as expounded by Moses and the Prophets)—for this manifestly they were unable to do. However, since they could not find support for their complaint anywhere in God's written Law, they resorted to the oral law, or traditions of the elders. In their minds, these oral laws and customs were every bit as binding and important as the Law given by God to Moses.

Yet, this is where these religious leaders erred grievously; and, indeed, this is one of the reasons that made them hypocritical and false teachers in the eyes of the Lord. Oral laws, rules and traditions of the elders—followed later by the Talmud—formed no part of God's written Law.

From this, we observe that no church leadership or church council—however eminent or knowledgeable—has the right or authority to impose on God's people any rules, regulations, observances, or other customs of a moral and spiritual nature that are not required by God in his written Word, the Bible. From a moral and spiritual standpoint, God never requires his people to observe or obey any rule, regulation or

other commandment that he has not himself expressed in his written Word, or that cannot be deduced as an unambiguous and necessary principle from that written Word.

Based on the rules and regulations handed down by the elders, the Pharisees and scribes asserted vehemently to the Lord Jesus, *"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat."* (v.2)

Note the nature of the objection raised by the religious authorities. On this occasion, they are not complaining about a breach of moral issues (although, probably, they would class this as a moral issue), but about a failure to observe a physical matter: the act of cleansing one's hands. However, it is typical of these apparently pious individuals that they are more concerned about outward cleanliness than about inward cleanliness or purity of heart.

The Lord will soon address this issue directly (vv.10,15-20). Meanwhile, in verses 3-4, the Lord Jesus challenges the religious leaders' pretence at observing the Law of God.

## MATTHEW 15:3

The Pharisees and scribes had accused the Lord's disciples—and implicitly, the Lord himself—of breaking the traditions of the elders. The Lord counters immediately by challenging the priorities of these religious individuals. Which is greater—the law of men or the law of God?

Thus, the Lord demands, *"...Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?"*

Such a remark caused considerable offence to the 'pious' scribes and Pharisees (v.12). They reckoned that their oral laws and traditions amounted to nothing more or less than an authoritative explanation or commentary on God's written Word. However, they had exalted the views and opinions of their fallible elders to a level where this commentary was considered as valid as the Word of God itself. Clearly, this could not be. No commentary on God's Word can ever be considered as valid as God's Word itself: For God's Word is of absolute and final authority. Again, the Word of God is infallible, inerrant and eternal—something that no commentary written by fallible and fallen human beings can ever be.

Yet, the Lord Jesus knew that these religious men would object most strongly to the remarks that he had just made. Therefore, before they can reply, he cites them an example which shows unmistakably where they had exalted the opinions and decrees of men above the Word of God. Thus, in verse 4, the Lord declares:

## MATTHEW 15:4

God's Law states expressly: *"Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you."* (Exod. 20:12 ESV; cf. Lev. 19:3) And, *"Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death."* (Exod. 21:17 ESV).

Such was the degree of respect and honour that the Lord God required children to show toward their parents that the death penalty was to be imposed on any son or daughter in Israel who showed utter contempt for their parents or who reviled and degraded them in other ways.

This was a measure of the importance attached by God to the respect, care and welfare of parents by their own children. However, the scribes and Pharisees had virtually repudiated the express commandments of God by their malicious misinterpretation and misapplication of those commandments. Thus, in verses 5 and 6 we read:

## MATTHEW 15:5-6

The religious authorities had provided children with a way of avoiding or evading their responsibilities toward their parents. Instead of providing for their parents' needs as and when circumstances required, the children could inform their parents that the support which otherwise would have been theirs had been devoted to the service of God.

This, however, was a travesty of justice and a wilful and inexcusable breach of God's law. God had commanded that children provide for, or support, their parents in their need. Now, the Pharisees and scribes had nullified God's express command and replaced it with their own misinterpretation and misapplication of God's holy Word. This showed not only a deliberate breaking of God's Law and disregard for his Word, but it showed also utter contempt for the God who had given that law to Moses. The traditions of men—albeit of religious men—had superseded the perfect Law of God (v.6).

However, by their ungodly actions and corresponding hypocritical lifestyle, the 'religious' Pharisees and others of their kind had placed themselves outside the people of God. They had demonstrated that they had no part among the true people of God by refusing consistently and wilfully to hear and to heed the Word of God, and by placing their own traditions above or alongside the eternal Word as given to them in their (Old Testament) Scriptures (vv.7-9).

These remarks must not be considered as unduly critical or unkind—as the Lord Jesus will reveal in due course (cf. v.7). With a few notable exceptions such as Nicodemus, Gamaliel, Joseph of Arimathea, Saul of Tarsus and some others, many of these religious leaders were imposters. They purported to be the leaders and teachers of Israel. They sat in the highest and most authoritative council in the land, the Sanhedrin. They possessed great knowledge of scriptural matters; although this was an intellectual knowledge only and involved no inward change in their hearts (or minds) or outward transformation of their lives. Instead of leading the people in the ways of holiness and righteousness, truth, justice, mercy and compassion, these religious leaders and teachers were misleading the people and turning them away from the truth of God's Word into the paths of error and false teaching (vv.13-14).

How great will be the judgment by God on those who profess to be religious leaders, who occupy eminent positions in the church of God, and yet who distort and misapply the Word of God and lead God's people into the ways of sin and unrighteousness. Like so many others of their kind, the Lord will say to them on the Day of Judgment, *"…'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'."* (Matt. 7:23 ESV)

## MATTHEW 15:7-8

An external and formal religion was not new among the people of Israel. They and their leaders had been guilty of empty and pretended shows of worship on many occasions in their history. Their rules, regulations, rituals and ceremonies had become more important to them than the humble and heartfelt praise and worship of God.

In this context, the prophet Isaiah had declared:

> Isa. 29:13-14 ESV
>
> 13 And the Lord said: "Because this people draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,
> 14 therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden."

The Lord Jesus now applies this solemn prophecy to the scribes and Pharisees, when he declares:

> Matt. 15:7-9 ESV
>
> 7 You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:
>
> 8 "'This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 9 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'"

In verse 7, the Lord Jesus addresses the religious leaders of Israel with the words, *"You hypocrites….!"* This was not intended as an insult—although it would be taken as such—but as a statement of fact. For the most part, the very strict Pharisees and scribes were not genuine people of God or teachers of God. Literally, a 'hypocrite' is a 'play actor' or 'one who acts a part'. This word aptly described the Pharisees and scribes. They were actors. They played the part of teachers of God and servants of God—but they were neither. God had never called them to his service, or appointed them as teachers of his Word. Like so many religious leaders today, they were acting without divine calling or appointment. It is for this reason that the Lord was able to refer to them as hypocrites; and elsewhere to describe their true character by likening them to whitewashed tombs. (Matt. 23:27)

The Lord illustrates this by his quotation derived from Isaiah's prophecy: *"'This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me…'"*

Lip service to God is never an acceptable form of worship. Indeed, unless it be from a humble and renewed heart, prayer and praises from the mouth are an abomination to the Lord. Therefore, concerning such people, the Lord says to the Pharisees, "*'In vain do they worship me…'"* (v.9a). Formal and external religion is no religion at all. Those who 'worship' God from an unregenerate heart and an unrenewed and unsanctified life worship him in vain. Such was the situation with many of the scribes and Pharisees, and such is the situation with many eminent church leaders (so-called) today. Such also is true of many of the ordinary people who profess faith in God or in the Lord Jesus Christ, but who have never experienced the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration or sanctification.

## MATTHEW 15:9

However, referring to the scribes and Pharisees, the Lord adds these words, *"'…teaching as doctrines the commandments of men'"* (v.9b).

Those who have never experienced spiritual regeneration do not understand God's Word from a spiritual perspective. In the case of the scribes and Pharisees, their theology was a theology of the head or intellect, but not of the heart and soul. They may have acquired or amassed great learning. They may have been extremely competent in their *knowledge* of the Scriptures—but not in their *understanding* of the

Scriptures: For it is impossible to comprehend Scriptural or spiritual truths aright without the presence and power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Those without the Spirit of God cannot correctly comprehend the things of God. (1 Cor. 2:14) Therefore, the scribes and Pharisees did not teach the pure and infallible Word of God—although they quoted from the Scriptures in a formal manner. Rather, they taught the people the rules, regulations, opinions and citations of the elders—asserting that these teachings had been derived from oral instructions given to the elders by the Lord God himself, but not committed to writing until encapsulated in the Mishna, the first part of the Talmud.

From this we learn that there will be many apparently righteous and plausible leaders in the church of God who have never experienced regeneration, and who therefore do not belong to God. They may be well versed in the Word of God—intellectually, at least. They may be very pleasant to their members and perform many commendable works. They may be found in a variety of positions in the church, from leaders of children in Sunday School, through deacons, elders (or bishops) to archbishops of the church. However, if these individuals have not experienced spiritual regeneration and do not possess the Spirit of God, then they do not belong to God. Like the Pharisees, they are 'play actors' or 'hypocrites'; and, like the Pharisees, the Lord will judge them as their deeds deserve.

But how do we recognise such imposters? The Lord Jesus has told us already: "*By their fruits you will know them."* (Matt. 12:33; Luke 43-45) Those who truly belong to the Lord Jesus must produce the fruit of holiness and righteousness in their lives. The good fruit that they produce consistently is one of the evidences of their salvation. (Col. 1:10) However, if a person produces bad or corrupt fruit—as evidenced by the nature of their teaching or by their personal lifestyle, then this is a sure sign that this person does not possess the Holy Spirit and therefore does not belong to Christ. Regardless of his or her position in the church, and however highly esteemed in the eyes of men, such a person is a wolf in sheep's clothing intent on destroying God's flock by the evil nature of their teaching or by their ungodly lifestyle. (Matt. 7:15; Acts 20:29) Therefore, it is essential that God's true people learn to discern the spirits, and to distinguish between those leaders who are called of God and those who are not. (1 John 4:1-6)

Let us praise and thank God, then, for those ministers and servants who remain true and faithful to God's Word and to their divine calling. Often, they will be despised for their uncompromising adherence to the truths of God's Word. They will be denounced or vilified by certain religious leaders (so-called) because these faithful servants of God present his truth in all its fullness, and because they refuse to pander to the sinful ways of the world or conform to the adulterated or perverse teaching of some of their religious contemporaries. Pray for them. For the evil one is intent on discrediting or destroying the true and faithful servants of the Lord—just as he did to the prophets of Israel.

## UNCLEAN HEARTS

***Matthew 15:10-11***

### MATTHEW 15:10

At this point, the Lord Jesus turns from the scribes and Pharisees to address the crowd standing not far off. Calling them to him, the Lord begins his remarks by declaring, *"Hear and understand..."* (v.10). It was not sufficient for the people to hear with their ears the words or teaching of the Lord Jesus. The Lord required them to hear and to understand—and to apply his teaching. In this present case, this would not

be difficult. With the application of reason and common sense, even unregenerate individuals among the crowd would readily comprehend what the Lord was about to say.

## MATTHEW 15:11

The Lord Jesus uses this illustration on other occasions, for it describes the situation very aptly. The Pharisees and scribes had told the people repeatedly that it was essential to observe the utmost physical cleanliness. They had laid down a complete set of rules (in addition to those found in the Scriptures) that required the people to wash in a certain way at certain times of the day and with specific amounts of water. Their fear was that some individuals might have become contaminated ceremonially by contact with an 'unclean' object or person. However, the religious authorities took these rules to absurd extremes and required standards of hygiene that even the Lord did not require of his people.

In all of this, the Pharisees and scribes had missed the point completely. They had enlarged upon the laws given by God and insisted with the utmost vigour that the people observe every minutiae of their enlarged rules and regulation relating to physical cleanliness. However, they had failed completely to insist on inner cleanliness or cleanliness of heart—either for themselves or for the people. Once again, this demonstrates that these religious leaders had no experience of a renewed heart and life, no appreciation of its significance, and no knowledge of its necessity. Yet, their own Scriptures asserted clearly that it was impossible to enter the presence of God without clean hands, *and a pure heart*. (Ps. 24:3-5; 73:1; Matt. 5:8)

But what was the significance of the Lord's remarks here? Simply this: No one can become contaminated or corrupted (morally or spiritually) by contact with something or someone 'unclean'. At worst, he may become ceremonially defiled; but ceremonial uncleanness has no bearing on a person's inward life nor can it affect it in any way. What constitutes uncleanness in the sight of God is not that which is external, but that which is internal. Like a foul stream, moral or spiritual uncleanness proceeds from within a person's heart (or mind). And the heart or mind demonstrates the state or condition of a person's innermost being. From that heart or mind flows forth every kind of evil, impure or unkind thought—and it is this corrupt stream that causes moral or spiritual uncleanness. It is this corruption that people must address as a priority, but without excluding all reasonable requirements for external cleanliness. (Rom. 3:9-20)

# PHARISEES BLIND TO THE TRUTH

***Matthew 15:12-14***

## MATTHEW 15:12

Naturally enough, Jesus' remarks caused considerable offence to the scribes and Pharisees. These austere religious authorities were unaccustomed to being called 'hypocrites'. And for the Lord to have described them as such must have enraged them.

The Pharisees and scribes were considered to be among the most pious and learned group of people in Jewish society. The rabbis or teachers of the law came from among the scribes. Together with the Sadducees, the Pharisees sat in the council of the Sanhedrin; but, of the two groups, the Pharisees were the stricter by far.

The scribes and Pharisees claimed to be the teachers and exemplars of God's holy law; and, for the most part, the ordinary people respected them and considered them as especially devout Jews and pillars of Jewish society. Now, however, the Lord Jesus had implied unambiguously that their religion was a mere pretence; that their experience of God and of his saving power was not merely superficial, it was non-existent. This would become evident on other occasions where the Lord would show that—inwardly—many of these religious leaders and teachers were corrupt, ungodly and materialistic individuals, concerned only with worldly gain and advancement under a cloak of (false) piety. They were far off from the kingdom of God, as the next few verses will reveal.

Thus, to his disciples, the Lord Jesus explains:

## MATTHEW 15:13

These remarks may be understood in two ways, and possibly the Lord intended both interpretations to apply to these false religious leaders and teachers.

1. Those plants which Jesus' heavenly Father has not planted may be understood of the doctrine or teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. These men were teaching many doctrines which the Lord God had not given to Moses or the prophets in the Scriptures. They were merely the doctrines or commandments of men, and therefore of no moral or spiritual validity or authority in the eyes of God. Essentially, the scribes and Pharisees had been guilty of adding to the Word of God and claiming that these additions were of equal authority to the Word of God itself. However, such is a mark of false teaching and false teachers. Those who add any teaching to the Word of God, or subtract any teaching from it, bring upon themselves the curse and condemnation of the Lord (cf. Rev. 22:18-19). Therefore, since these men were false teachers propounding false doctrine, the Lord would root them out of the ground: That is, in due time, he would depose them from their position and set aside their man-made rules and regulations.

2. The second interpretation is connected with the first: The scribes and Pharisees distorted the Word of God and made many additions to that Word because they did not recognise the written Scriptures (or scrolls) *alone* as the sacred and imperishable Word of God. They did not observe the command given by God in Deuteronomy forbidding anyone to add to his words (Deut 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:5-6). However, the reason that they did not recognise the authority and finality of their (Old Testament) Scriptures was because God had never enlightened their hearts or minds to the truth. For the most part—although with some exceptions—these men had never been called or appointed by God to religious office or service. Rather, they were self-appointed, or had been appointed by other men, to the offices that they now held. However, since they were unregenerate individuals, they lacked the power and presence of the Holy Spirit to guide them into spiritual truths. Thus, their teaching was the teaching of unregenerate ('unsaved') men, lacking spiritual power and authority from God. Again, since these Pharisees and scribes had never been called or appointed by the Lord, then the Lord would remove or uproot them from their office and from their standing among the people.

Thus, the Lord's people must learn that not everyone who claims to be a servant of the Lord has in fact been called or appointed by the Lord. False teachers and false teaching abounds (Matt. 7:15-20; 24:4-5; 2 Pet. 2:1). The people of God must learn to distinguish between those whom God has called and empowered by his Holy Spirit and those whom he has not. (Isa. 8:20; 1 Thess. 5:20-21; 1 John 4:1-3)

Clearly, anyone who teaches anything not contained in the Word of God, or who distorts God's unchangeable and infallible Word, is no true servant of God or of the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 16:18).

Some may object that it is unjustified to assert that many of the scribes and Pharisees were unregenerate and ungodly men. However, the Lord sets aside this objection by his remarks in the next verse.

## MATTHEW 15:14

Far from modifying his words referring to the scribes and Pharisees, the Lord tells his disciples to leave them alone. In other words, no amount of spiritual instruction will be of any avail in their case, since they have hardened their hearts and minds against the written Scriptures (the Law and the Prophets) as being the sole source of God's revealed truth. Those who set the words of man over and above the written, living and infallible Word of God show by their actions that they do not worship God but man—either in the form of self, or in the form of exalting man's teaching, opinions or ideas above the clearly revealed Word and will of the eternal God. This, however, is idolatry—the worship of false gods under the pretence of true religious worship.

But what does the Lord Jesus say of such people? *"…They are blind guides…"* (v.14a).

Here, the Lord Jesus reveals the truth of the matter; these scribes and Pharisees were blind: i.e., they were blind spiritually. They were blind, or unable to see—i.e., to understand—the truth. Granted, they possessed great knowledge of the Scriptures. However, knowing the Scriptures is not the same as understanding the Scriptures. Knowing the Scriptures involves the exercise of the intellect only. Understanding the Scriptures involves not only an exercise of the intellect, but also the exercise of every related faculty of the mind or soul leading to a person believing and accepting the truths of the Scriptures—as the Spirit of God enables him or her.

Therefore, possessing only a 'head' or intellectual knowledge of God's Word and God's laws, the Pharisees and scribes were blind, from a spiritual point of view. They could not possibly see the spiritual truths of God's Word any more than a blind person could see the light of day (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14). This was why the Lord adds, "*And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a pit"* (v.14b)

The people recognised their Pharisees and scribes as authoritative teachers of God's Law. However, the ordinary Jewish people failed to realise that—although appearing pious and righteous—their religious teachers had never experienced God's salvation personally, nor did they possess a true and living faith in the God of Israel. They resembled certain church leaders today who teach the people with power and authority—but, nevertheless, with misguided, perverted and false teaching (cf. Jude 1:3-19). Again, *unlike* Anna in the temple who worshipped God in spirit and in truth (Luke 2:36-37), the scribes and Pharisees exhibited only an outward show of religion, void of the reality. Thus, when they taught the people, many of these scribes and Pharisees were incapable of expounding God's Word in truth. Although they could—and did—read from the written and infallible Word of God as recorded in their Scrolls, their exposition or teaching of that Word was the teaching of men, resulting in part from their misunderstanding of many scriptural truths and of their real significance and interpretation. Thus, the ordinary Jewish people in the synagogues were being misled by their religious teachers or rabbis. To all intents and purposes, the blind (teachers) were leading the blind (congregations). However, as the Lord declares, this

could result only in both falling into a pit, and becoming enveloped in even deeper spiritual misunderstanding and darkness.[42]

## DISCIPLES FAIL TO UNDERSTAND

***Matthew 15:15-20***

### MATTHEW 15:15-16

Peter and the other disciples, however, were still turning over in their minds something that Jesus had said earlier to the scribes and Pharisees, when they had challenged the Lord about his disciples eating with unwashed hands. Thus, Peter seeks an explanation from Jesus about the meaning of his reply to the Pharisees and scribes.

Clearly, Peter and the other disciples had much to learn about spiritual truths. Verse 16 seems to indicate that the Lord thought his disciples should have been able to comprehend this teaching. Unlike the scribes and Pharisees, the Lord's disciples had experienced spiritual regeneration and possessed much better insight into spiritual truths than the religious leaders of the Jews. Even so, the Lord's disciples could not appreciate the significance of their Master's teaching on this occasion, so they sought an explanation from him. Later, when the Holy Spirit descended upon them in power, the Spirit would lead them into all truth and he would enable them to understand many things that now perplexed them. In the meantime, and although regenerated by the Holy Spirit, the disciples relied on the Lord Jesus primarily to teach them; and this he would continue to do until the day that he was taken up from them into heaven.

Now, however, the Lord Jesus begins to expound the teaching about cleanliness or purity of heart or mind to his disciples.

### MATTHEW 15:17-18

Here, the Lord Jesus draws a clear distinction between physical uncleanness and impurity and moral or spiritual uncleanness and impurity. The Pharisees and scribes had objected strenuously to the Lord Jesus when they noted that his disciples had been eating without first washing their hands: That is, without washing their hands in the exact manner prescribed by their man-made traditions and encapsulated in the Talmud. This dispute arose over a matter of *physical* cleanliness.

In his reply, the Lord had rebuked the Pharisees and scribes for elevating their own traditions above the law and requirements of God; and, indeed, for nullifying the express command of God by their own dis-

[42] *Pharisee and scribes:* We should note that, although the Pharisees and scribes were blind spiritually, they were nevertheless highly intelligent men. Over the centuries, certain schools of the scribes—including Ezra and many others—had been responsible for preserving the Scriptures, and transcribing God's holy Word with the utmost care and diligence. Because of their meticulous attention to detail, the Word of God had been preserved, copied and passed down through many generations in its original inspired state. Thus, although a number of these men may not have been regenerate individuals (with the exception of Ezra and others like him), God was pleased to use them and the natural gifts that he had given them to preserve his Word intact over almost 1,600 years until the coming of Christ. To men such as these we owe a great debt; for, without them, succeeding generations may not have received the Word of God in its pure and perfect state.

torted teaching of God's Word. Then, the Lord had addressed the true cause of uncleanness in the sight of God: viz., *moral and spiritual* uncleanness and impurity. It was this—rather than the former—that alienated a person from God and placed that person at enmity with God. External physical contamination could not corrupt a person's inner being (heart or soul), and therefore could not ultimately alienate a person from God. However, the type of corruption that proceeded from a person's inner being was what polluted that person and separated him or her from God.

The Lord now begins to cite some examples of moral and spiritual impurity or corruption:

## MATTHEW 15:19

The cause of all personal sin, or moral and spiritual corruption, is the outflow of the heart. In this context, the 'heart' means the source or core of a person's innermost being or the root of his or her thought processes (i.e., the mind or soul), rather than the physical heart.[43]

From a person's innermost being, proceed all kinds of thoughts—good and bad. However, since the Fall, everyone on earth has been permanently predisposed toward evil thoughts and averse by nature to that which is good. And from these evil thoughts, inclinations and dispositions come all manner of evil or corrupt expressions. Thus, unless restrained, evil thoughts may give way to unkind and evil expressions of the mouth, or unkind and evil acts against other people.

The Lord gives some examples of evil thoughts expressed outwardly (Mark adds some more): Murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness and slander:

- Murder includes not only the outward act but also the inward dispositions such as hatred, malice, resentment, or unjustified and bitter anger against someone (murder of the heart).
- Adultery includes not only all forms of unfaithfulness to one's marriage partner, but also lusting after another person in one's mind (adultery of the heart).
- Sexual immorality includes not only all forms of sexual relations or impurity outside the marriage bond, but also all other forms of sexual lust, together with all unnatural, perverse, or deviant forms of sexual practises or behaviour.
- Theft includes not only stealing, but also any form of misappropriation of goods or services, misrepresentations of facts for gain, dishonesty or deception, fraud, and many others.
- False witness includes all forms of lying (whether in a court of law or not), together with all forms of misrepresentation of the truth, perversions of the truth, and malicious or unfounded allegations against any other party.

[43] *Heart / mind / soul:* The Word of God refutes the notion that thought processes are a function of brain cell (neurological) activity alone, and which dismisses mind or soul as non-existent. This is a fallacy adopted by some, who—in their attempt to deny the existence of God and man's personal responsibility toward God—assert that man is no more than a biological and physical being with no immortal soul. These are they of whom the Scripture declares, *"The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'."* (Ps. 14:1; 53:1; Rom. 1:21) In the Bible, a 'fool' is one who is morally or spiritually deficient or lacking in spiritual insight or comprehension. One may attain or acquire great knowledge and learning and yet remain utterly foolish in God's sight.

- Slander includes all forms of untrue, scurrilous, wicked, and defamatory remarks made against another person. Where such remarks are made against God, this is known as '*blasphemy*'; where made against another person verbally, they are known as '*slander*', and where these defamatory and scurrilous accusations are committed to writing, they are known as '*libel*'.

### MATTHEW 15:20

This, then, is the source of corruption and evil in a person's life. An unclean or impure heart or soul is what defiles a person in the sight of God—not failing to wash one's hands. Were a person to follow to the letter the strict injunctions of the Pharisees, and wash himself in the prescribed manner for the prescribed number of times, that person would remain unclean—morally and spiritually—in God's sight. Thus, his priority must be to seek inward cleansing—i.e., atonement and forgiveness—before or together with external cleansing.

However, because their religion was outward and formal, lacking the work and power of the Holy Spirit, the Pharisees and scribes built their faith and teaching around the opinions, rules and regulations of men—rather than upon the Word of God alone. Outwardly, at least, they were very 'religious' people. However, for the most part, it was not a religion of the heart and soul, and therefore not acceptable to God. The Pharisees and scribes were as much strangers to God and to God's grace as any other sinners in the land. Yet, even from their own midst, some would arise to seek the Lord.

From this we learn that a person can appear very religious (externally); he can occupy a seat of learning in the church; he can teach with authority from that position (although not with an authority given by God); he can exercise considerable influence over his pupils and over ordinary people with his teaching, and yet such a person is not a servant of Christ. Rather, he is a false apostle or false teacher. The message he propounds is not the pure Word of God, but a distortion of that Word augmented by teachings not found in God's Word or expressly forbidden by God's Word. Although they appear ever so righteous (or like an angel of light; i.e., a holy angel), these individuals are ministers of Satan (2 Cor. 11:13-15). Regardless of their standing in society or in the church, the people of God must not heed these evil men or their teachings.

## A WOMAN'S GREAT FAITH

***Matthew 15:21-28***

### MATTHEW 15:21

When the Lord Jesus had finished ministering in that area, he and his disciples headed north-west to the region of Tyre and Sidon. This took them out of Galilee, beyond the borders of Israel and into pagan territory. Clearly, the Lord Jesus needed to travel to Tyre and Sidon at this exact time in order to fulfil the purposes of his heavenly Father. Insofar as the Lord is about to meet a non-Jewish person, this event bears some resemblance to Jesus' encounter with the woman of Samaria, who also was not of pure Jewish stock. (John 4:1-29)

Again, this is an early indication that the Gospel will not be confined to the Jewish people alone, but will be extended in due course to other races and nations.

## MATTHEW 15:22

Possibly, while still in Tyre and Sidon, a Canaanite woman had heard of the Lord's presence in the area. Mark refers to this lady as a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth (Mark 7:26). All appellations were true. In antiquity, Tyre and Sidon was occupied by the Canaanites, and formed part of Canaan. The sea-going Phoenician people were descendants of the Canaanites. At this time, the area including Tyre and Sidon became known as 'Phoenicia'. Later, under Alexander the Great, this area fell under Greek control. Hence, this woman was of Canaanite stock originally. Later ancestors were of Syro-Phoenician stock. From the time of the Greek conquest, her ancestors would be known as 'Greeks'; although, of course, this designation did not affect her or their racial identity or ethnic origin.

The woman appeals to the Lord Jesus to help her. She addresses Jesus as *'O Lord, Son of David...'* Here, she confesses the Lordship of Christ and acknowledges him as the 'Son of David': i.e., the promised Messiah of God. This demonstrates not only great insight spiritually, but also great faith. This lady came from a nation outside the borders of Israel. She would not be accustomed to hearing the Word of God, except perhaps from a few Jewish immigrants in her area or during visits she might have made into Galilee. However, she is unlikely to have been welcomed among the Jewish people of Galilee. Nevertheless, she may have been present during Jesus' ministry in that area, and may have heard him preaching. However, this is speculation, as the Scriptures do not tell us expressly that this woman ever set foot in Israel.

Even so, this lady believed that Jesus was Lord (Gk., κύριος kurios). However, we are not to understanding that she was using this term merely to address Jesus as 'Sir'; because, in the same sentence, she addresses Jesus as the 'Son of David'. Thus, this woman believed that the Lord Jesus was the Son of David in the sense that Jesus was King David's greater Son, or the Messiah. Although we cannot know with certainty how she learned of these matters, we must commend her for her faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. She is convinced of Jesus' Person and mission; and she believes implicitly that the Lord is able to help her in her hour of need. She believed where many in Israel refused to believe—in spite of their much greater light and clearer teaching.

However, this Canaanite woman had not come to Jesus to seek help for herself, but for her afflicted child. Her beloved daughter was suffering from demon oppression or possession, and no one had been able to help her. Thus, the woman appeals to the Son of God, *"Have mercy on me...my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon."*

It is tempting to question the lady's diagnosis of her daughter's condition. How could she be sure that this was demon oppression (or possession) and not some psychological or psychiatric condition? The answer to this lies in the subsequent response and actions of the Lord Jesus, which we will observe in due course.

## MATTHEW 15:23

Probably, much to the woman's amazement and distress, the Lord Jesus remained utterly silent. He had just heard her heartfelt plea, but he made absolutely no response. Was he unwilling to help this lady because she was not of the Hebrew race, and therefore did not belong to the people called and chosen of God?

The Lord remained silent. Thus, in desperation, the woman turns to the Lord's disciples and implores them to help her little daughter. So persistent are her pleas, that the disciples eventually begged the Lord to send her away. But, would the Lord send away someone who called upon his name for mercy?

Addressing his disciples, the Lord declared:

## MATTHEW 15:24

Although spoken to his disciples, these words would have been overheard by the woman still imploring help nearby. Yet, the Lord Jesus states categorically that he has been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel; i.e., to the people whom God had called and chosen in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (Matt. 10:5-6) This was God's chosen nation. This was the nation elected for redemption. Those only could receive the mercy and grace of God who belonged to the Israelite people, or who became a proselyte to that people and to their faith. This Canaanite woman was neither.

Why would Jesus say this? After all, he had healed other people in the land of Israel who were not true Israelites or descendants of Abraham.

The Lord Jesus was testing this woman's faith. She had confessed him as 'Lord'. She had addressed him as the 'Son of David'. But did she really believe in her heart that Jesus was Lord? Did she genuinely accept that Jesus was the Son of David and the Messiah or Saviour of lost men and women?

If her profession of faith in the Lord Jesus was superficial and without substance then soon this woman would cease appealing to the Lord for help. However, if her confession was genuine, nothing could compel her to desist. She would 'wrestle with God'—as did Jacob—but she was determined to experience God's blessing, by his grace and mercy.

## MATTHEW 15:25-26

In response to the repulse of the Lord Jesus, the woman comes before the Saviour and kneels down at his feet. Once again, she pleads with him for help—only to be met with the words, *"It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."*

The woman knew well what this meant. The 'children' represented the people and nation of Israel. The 'bread' was the message of salvation and healing contained in the Gospel. The 'dogs' was a common designation given by Jewish people to the Gentiles, and therefore was a term of reproach. Here, the Lord was telling this woman that it was not right—fitting or appropriate—to take the message of salvation intended for God's own people and cast it among people who did not belong to God, and who—over the centuries—had scorned and rejected God's will and ways: and this included the original Canaanites.

But how does the woman respond to this undisguised reproach?—which nevertheless constituted a further test of her faith.

## MATTHEW 15:27

Picking the Lord's words, the woman replies with great wisdom and understanding, *"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."*

'You have made it clear to me that since I do not belong to the people of Israel, then I am not entitled to any share in the blessings and benefits that God bestows upon his own chosen people. However, I do not seek these great benefits, for I know that they are not intended for me or for anyone other than God's own people. Nevertheless, I recognise—and you must acknowledge—that even dogs benefit from the crumbs that fall from their masters' table. I seek only the crumbs—for a crumb of God's mercy is plenty for me.'

The Lord had put this woman's faith to the test—not because he could not see her heart and know her thoughts—but because he needed to demonstrate to the woman and to his own disciples that true faith involves perseverance: perseverance or persistence in prayer, or importunity—the determination not to let go unless God blesses. Such was the case of the widow who implored justice from the unjust judge, and was rewarded eventually for her persistence. (Luke 18:1-8)

Thus, we see that professing faith in Christ must be accompanied by active persistence, both in prayer and in persevering in the faith.

## MATTHEW 15:28

Now, the Lord Jesus commends this Gentile woman for her great faith. Furthermore, the Lord now responds positively to her repeated pleas for help. He tells her that her prayers have been answered in accordance with her wishes. Her daughter had been healed—at that very instant.

With faith such as this woman possessed, she believed the words of grace, comfort and assurance from the Lord Jesus. She knew that her daughter had been healed. Unlike so many, she did not believe that it was necessary for the Lord to come to her home to heal her daughter. He needed only to speak the word—and his word would be obeyed.

So it was. The demon was expelled immediately from the daughter's life. No longer would her body and soul be tormented and abused by the powers of evil; for the Lord Jesus had made her whole.

Earlier, we asked how this woman was able to distinguish between demon possession and a medical condition, such as psychosis. We see from Jesus' response that he was treating a case of demon-possession rather than a medical condition; although, undoubtedly, the demon-possession probably resulted in concurrent psychotic or similar episodes. Matthew does not expressly state that Jesus cast out a demon, but Mark does. In his Gospel, Mark writes, *"And he said to her, 'For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter.'"* (Mark 7:29 ESV) Matthew does not mention it, but Mark tells us that when the woman arrived home, she found her child lying in bed and the demon gone (Mark 7:30).

Thus, we see that Jesus is fully able to heal all manner of illnesses and diseases, irrespective of their nature or degree. Furthermore, he is fully able to deliver all those who are oppressed or possessed by demons, irrespective of their number, power or degree of malevolence.

## JESUS HEALS IN GALILEE

***Matthew 15:29-31***

### MATTHEW 15:29-30

Following his encounter with the Canaanite woman, the Lord Jesus and his disciples returned to Galilee. The Lord walked along the shore of the lake, eventually climbing up a hillside with his disciples and sitting down.

However, the Lord's presence in the area had been observed. In a short space of time, people began ascending the hillside to meet him. As the crowds came up, they brought along with them many ill or disabled relatives and friends, knowing that Jesus would be able to heal them.

From the list of conditions given, we can see some of the ailments treated by the Lord: this included paralysis of various kinds; blindness, from a variety of causes; speech loss or impediments, and many others not listed in this verse.

Whatever the nature or degree of their affliction, the Lord healed them; causing the crowd to stand in awe at this demonstration of the Lord's sovereign and almighty power.

### MATTHEW 15:31

Amazed to see these formerly lame, blind, paralysed, mute and many other afflicted men, women and children now restored to full health and strength, the people began praising and glorifying the God of Israel. On this occasion, they were acknowledging that the Lord Jesus had received his power to heal from God in heaven and that, effectively, God himself was healing these sorely afflicted people in accordance with his promises in the Scriptures.

However, not long afterward, many of these same people would deny that God had sent Jesus or that he was the Son of God. Instead, a significant number of them would be calling for his crucifixion. Hence, the reason the Lord Jesus did not trust himself to anyone, for he knew their precise thought processes, motives and intentions of their hearts.

## THE FEEDING OF THE FOUR THOUSAND

***Matthew 15:32-39***

### MATTHEW 15:32

(Mark 8:1-10)

This event is similar to the feeding of the five thousand which took place earlier (Matt. 14:14-21) in a different location, also on a hillside near the Sea of Galilee. However, they are not the same event. In Matthew chapter 16:9-10 the Lord Jesus distinguishes clearly between the two events.

We note from this verse that the crowd of people had remained with the Lord Jesus on this hillside for three days. During that time, they had used up any food that they had brought with them. Now, they

were very hungry. The Lord Jesus looked upon them with compassion. He knew that he could not dismiss the crowd in their present condition, since a number of them might collapse on their way back home.[44]

## MATTHEW 15:33

The Lord had told his disciples that he was unwilling to dismiss the crowd without food. However, from their response, we see that the Lord's disciples still lacked faith—which, on this occasion, was particularly culpable. Over a three day period, they had witnessed something of the Lord's sovereign power and glory in healing all kinds of illnesses and other conditions. They had seen his power over nature. They had seen his miracles of healing performed repeatedly. They had seen the results of these miracles, as people who formerly had been paralysed, blind, or mute, etc. had now been healed completely.

Why, then, did the disciples question where or how they could find food? Furthermore, if we assume that the feeding of the five thousand occurred earlier in the Lord's ministry—and not unduly far from their present location—why did the disciples not remember the Lord's actions on that occasion?

It seems that no matter how many times the Lord demonstrates his power on behalf of his people, or shows something of his power to intervene on their behalf, yet—all too often—we, his people, fail to remember the gracious works that the Lord has accomplished for us in the past. As soon as a new crisis arises in our lives, we question to Lord's ability or willingness to intervene—according to his will.

So it was with the disciples: They questioned where or how they could find food for such a large crowd, especially since they were located in a remote region.

## MATTHEW 15:34

The Lord Jesus did not reply to their query. He simply asked them to ascertain the number of loaves presently available among this vast crowd. After the twelve had checked with the five thousand, they returned to their Master to report that they found seven loaves, together with a few small fish. *"But what was this among so many?"*

## MATTHEW 15:35-36

At this point, the Lord Jesus instructed the crowd to sit down on the ground. Perhaps, they had been standing in readiness to begin their descent back down the hillside, and unaware that the Lord was about to meet their immediate needs for food.

The Lord Jesus took the seven loaves and the fish. Firstly, he gave thanks to his Father in heaven for his bountiful provisions, teaching us to offer thanks to the Lord for everything that comes from his hands—

[44] *faint or collapse:* Even supposing that most of the crowd had not eaten anything at all for the past three days, this, in and of itself, would not have been unusual. Water may have been available from the streams or burns flowing down the hillside, or from beneath the ground. Furthermore, Jewish people were accustomed to sometimes prolonged periods of fasting, and therefore would experience no great hardship under normal circumstances. However, on this occasion, the Lord was ministering on a hillside in a remote and desolate area. Having spent the last few days on the hillside, exposed to sun and wind, the crowd would now need to use their remaining and depleted resources of energy to begin the descent and then the long journey back to their home towns and villages. Under these circumstances, lack of food could have proved not only exhausting for many, leading to their collapse by the wayside, but also potentially fatal for some older people, especially in the heat of the day.

including our daily food. Then, breaking the loaves and fish, he passed the pieces to his disciples who in turn distributed the pieces of bread and fish among the four thousand.

Here, we must observe another miracle performed by the Lord Jesus. In multiplying the loaves and fish to such an extent as to feed such a crowd of people, the Lord was performing a miracle of creation. However, God alone is the Creator of the universe and all it contains; and God alone upholds, sustains, or modifies his creation—directly or indirectly—as he sees fit. Therefore, the fact that Jesus could perform miracles of creation on this and on other occasions, demonstrates both that he is God the Son and that he possesses exactly the same attributes as his Father. Indeed, we must remember that God the Father created all things through and for his Son, and that nothing was created apart from the Son or except through the almighty and sovereign power of the Son. (Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 1:2)

## MATTHEW 15:37

The vast crowd all took of the seven loaves and the few fish. All ate, and all were fully satisfied. Clearly, the Lord had not only met their needs, he had met it abundantly. This is evident when the Lord instructs his disciples to gather up the remaining pieces. Securing a number of baskets for the purpose—perhaps loaned by some of the crowd—the disciples succeeded in filling seven of these containers with the remaining broken fragments of bread and fish.

Thus, we see that the Lord provides more than was actually required. The surplus would be put to good use within the next few hours.

## MATTHEW 15:38

Until this point, we have been assuming that the Lord was dealing with approximately four thousand people. However, now we learn that Matthew was providing a count of the men only. Now, he tells us that many women and children were present also—and not included in the original count. Therefore, the total number of people present was well in excess of four thousand, and perhaps closer to eight to ten thousand. The total number is not significant. Whether it was four thousand, eight thousand, or ten thousand, the Lord met their needs. He healed all their illnesses and disabilities. He fed and fully satisfied every single individual in that vast assembly. He showed by the extent of his power that nothing was impossible for him to accomplish. If this should not have convinced these men and women of his Person and work, then nothing else could. Yet, although many professed faith in him, many others refused to believe that he was the Son of God and the promised Messiah—in spite of the clearest evidence supporting his divine Person and mission.

## MATTHEW 15:39

Once dismissed, it is likely that the crowd would return to their homes by walking around the Sea of Galilee. Certainly, there were far too many to travel by boat.

The Lord Jesus, however, together with his disciples, made their way across the Sea of Galilee by one of the boats in that area. On this occasion, they set course for the region of Magadan (or the Coasts of Magdala). Probably, this is the same as Dalmanutha (cf. Mark 8:10), which lies on the western side of the Sea of Galilee, and not far from Tiberius in Galilee.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 16

## PHARISEES AND SADDUCEES SEEK FOR A SIGN

***Matthew 16:1-4***

### MATTHEW 16:1

(Matt. 12:38-39; Mark 8:11-21)

Once again, some of the religious leaders approached the Lord Jesus. This time, the groups represented were the Pharisees and the Sadducees—both of which were members of the prestigious ruling Council of the Jews, or the Sanhedrin. However, Pharisees and Sadducees differed radically in their faith and practise. Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead, the spiritual realm or world, and the providence of God. The Sadducees, however, denied the resurrection, and other foundational truths of the Scriptures that were held by the Pharisees.

Thus, although very much opposed to one another in matters of belief and doctrine, the Pharisees and Sadducees had united on this occasion to tempt the Lord Jesus. Apparently, fundamental differences in doctrine can be set aside in the interests of discrediting or denouncing the real source of Truth.

Thus, these two groups tested the Lord Jesus by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. However, this demand amounted to hypocrisy of the highest magnitude. The Lord Jesus had demonstrated repeatedly and in many different locations something of the extent of his power. This had been seen, for example, in his miracles of healing, in his casting out of evil spirits, and by his raising of the dead. All of these were acts of God; acts of the divine Person and nature inherent in Jesus the Son of God. If these were not signs from heaven, or signs from God above, then nothing was.

We know, of course, that the Pharisees did not accept the miraculous works of the Lord Jesus as deriving from the Father above or as being accomplished in God's name and by his will or authority. Indeed, rather than accept the irrefutable and inescapable evidence of Jesus' divine nature and mission from the Father above, the Pharisees resorted to denouncing the Lord and his miracles. According to them, these outstanding works of power could be attributed to Satan; and from the evil one alone *"this 'Man'"* received his miraculous powers.

We have already pointed out the absurdity and illogicality of this vile and blasphemous assertion, so we will not repeat it here. However, it is possible that what the Pharisees and Sadducees were actually seeking on this occasion was a sign taking place in the heavenly realms itself: i.e., some cosmic or similar phenomena in the heavens that would demonstrate to them that the Lord Jesus really did possess almighty and sovereign power and authority over the entire universe. However, if this was their intention, then they were most certainly putting the Lord God to the test. They were demanding that God should prove his power and glory to fallen and sinful mankind so that fallen and sinful mankind would be convinced of his existence, power and glory.

Again, this is wilful and inexcusable hypocrisy. God has already made himself known—his existence, and his eternal power and deity—in the works that he has made: viz., the created universe. (Rom. 1:19-20) And for sinful mankind to require a sign from heaven to prove the authority, power and glory of God or of

his eternal Son, is not only the worst form of tempting God but also the worst form of treating God with contempt. For it utterly disregards God's express command concerning putting him to the test, and it despises both God and his Word for setting aside what God has revealed already about himself in his Word, what he has declared publicly about his Son, and what he has shown of his power and glory in the universe that he created and sustains. (Deut. 6:16; Matt. 3:17)

## MATTHEW 16:2-3

(Luke 12:54)

Knowing their hearts, the Lord Jesus calls their attention to a well-known phenomena—the signs in the heavens. By looking at the colour of the sky, they could determine whether the weather would be favourable or unfavourable. Then as now, a red sky at night indicated fair weather the next day, while a red sky in the morning indicated poor or stormy weather. The Pharisees and Sadducees were well able to interpret these heavenly signs. However, it seems that they were completely unable to interpret the signs of the times.

The Lord God had given the Jewish leaders and people very many signs in the forms of prophecies and demonstrations of God's power working through the prophets. These had continued for many centuries, right up until the coming of the prophet John the Baptist, and then of the Lord Jesus himself.

Yet, people like the Pharisees and Sadducees had refused wilfully to hear and to heed the voice of the prophets and the word of God calling them to repentance. They had despised God's servants—as they did now with the Lord Jesus—and had treated God's prophets and their prophetic words with contempt. The prophets had declared to them the words of God—from heaven. But they had rejected both God and his Word. Now, they were calling on the Lord Jesus to show them a sign from heaven—that they might believe! God, however, never panders to the demands of evil men, who do not seek repentance or the knowledge of God, but merely attempt to disprove the existence of God or to discredit his genuine servants.

Yes, without any difficulty, the Lord Jesus could have provided these hypocritical individuals with a sign from heaven. As the Sovereign Lord of all, nothing was beyond his power or ability. However, this would not have accorded with the Father's will and purposes for his Son. Furthermore, the Lord would not have permitted these evil men to put him to the test. He was not about to yield to their wicked demands.

To this end, the Lord declared:

## MATTHEW 16:4

(Matt. 12:39)

Here, the Lord asserts that *"An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign..."* thereby including the Pharisees and Sadducees among the unfaithful. Primarily, the Lord was declaring that the leaders and people of Israel were unfaithful—unfaithful in their commitment to God. Like an adulteress, they had turned away from the one to whom they had been united, and had turned aside to idols. They had forsaken the ways of the LORD, together with truth, righteousness and justice, to follow their own cherished ideals or ambitions. However, in forsaking God and his Word, they had embraced the ways of deceit, unrighteousness and injustice.

This, then, was the true state or condition of these religious leaders. With few exceptions, they had abandoned God and his Word and had set up the opinions, traditions, rules and regulations of men in place of God's written Word. (Mark 7:7-13)

However, those who are unfaithful to God and his Word cannot expect to receive favourable answers or blessings from the Lord—until they repent. The Pharisees were religious people externally; but no more than this. From this, we learn that people may be very religious externally, attending fastidiously to all the rules, rites and regulations of their faith, and yet may never have experienced God's saving grace and mercy. Such people are still in their sins; still alienated from God, and still abiding under the wrath and curse of God. (Cf. John 3:36; Eph. 4:18) Let us pray for such—for there by the grace of God go we. Let us pray for such—for such unregenerate and spiritually blind men and women are in danger of leading many others to hell with their ungodly lifestyle and teaching.

The Lord asserts categorically to the Pharisees and Sadducees: *"...but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah"* (v.4b; cf. 12:38-40).

The religious leaders had received all the signs from God that they needed, and all that he was prepared to give to an unfaithful generation. Indeed, as rebels against God and his Word, the nation was not entitled to any signs or blessings from the God whom they had despised. Nevertheless, in his love and mercy, the LORD had continued to send prophets to his people calling them to repentance—but they would not listen.

On another occasion, the LORD had sent one of his prophets—Jonah—to the citizens of Nineveh. However, the sailors had cast Jonah overboard from the ship on which he was travelling, and the prophet had been swallowed by a great sea creature. (Jonah 1:12,15,17) God preserved the prophet alive inside this sea creature for three days, until the mammal vomited Jonah out of its mouth. (Jonah 2:10) Thus, the sign of Jonah is that—just as the prophet spent three days and nights in the belly of the great fish—so the Lord Jesus would spend three days and nights in the bowels of the earth. Although not mentioned in this passage, the Lord Jesus had provided this explanation to the Pharisees on an earlier occasion (Matt. 12:4).

After addressing these religious leaders, the Lord and his disciples left that region again to travel across the lake.

## THE LEAVEN OF THE PHARISEES AND SADDUCEES

***Matthew 16:5-12***

### MATTHEW 16:5

(Mark 8:13-21)

On arriving at the other side of the Sea of Galilee, the disciples realised that they had forgotten to bring bread with them. This must have been preying on their minds; because they felt guilty immediately the Lord began speaking to them—although not about their failure to bring bread.

## MATTHEW 16:6-7

Taking up his discussion with the religious leaders, the Lord Jesus tells his disciples to observe the utmost diligence regarding the 'leaven' of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Lord was referring to the distorted or perverted teaching of these religious leaders, which expanded like yeast or leaven among the unwary, contaminating their hearts or minds. However, the disciples misunderstood the Lord's remarks. When the Lord mentioned leaven, the disciples thought that he was upbraiding them for failing to bring bread with them. Thus, in consternation, they began to discuss among themselves how they might remedy this desperate situation.

## MATTHEW 16:8

Now, the Lord does find occasion to upbraid his disciples: *"O you of little faith...."* How many more times did the Lord need to demonstrate something of his sovereign power and glory before his own disciples would understand and believe? They had witnessed numerous examples of the Lord's miraculous power. Yet, they could not comprehend that a lack of bread would present no difficulties to the Lord Jesus. Thus, the Lord takes his disciples to task for discussing this matter among themselves, instead of leaving the situation to the Lord Jesus and trusting him to meet their needs.

To this end, Jesus said to them:

## MATTHEW 16:9-10

Now, the Lord Jesus brings the truth home to his disciples. He challenges their lack of understanding and faith. They had witnessed many outstanding signs or miracles. They had seen with their own eyes how the Lord Jesus had multiplied five loaves and fish to feed well over five thousand people. They had seen that every one of these people had been satisfied. Indeed, with the surplus that remained, they had filled twelve baskets. (Matt. 14:17-21)

If this were not enough, the Lord reminds them of another occasion—just a short time before. With only seven loaves and a few fish they had fed well in excess of four thousand men, in addition to the women and children. From the surplus remaining, the disciples had filled seven baskets. (Matt. 15:34-38)

Logically, if the Lord could meet the needs of many thousands of people with ease, how could meeting the needs of twelve disciples pose any difficulty?

Possibly, the disciples considered that expecting the Lord to provide them with bread miraculously, would be inappropriate, and might even be thought of as putting the Lord to the test. However, in this situation, such reasoning does not reveal a spiritual or godly mind but rather a sceptical and unbelieving mind. The Lord expected his followers to trust him implicitly with every detail of their lives, including their need for daily provisions. The disciples had been called to leave their ordinary vocations and to follow the Lord. Thus, under these circumstances, their primary source of provision for their daily needs would come from the Lord. Granted, they should have obtained bread before leaving on their journey. Nevertheless, this oversight does not negate the fact that—whenever his servants are acting according to his will (as here)—the Lord will provide.

### MATTHEW 16:11

Yet, in spite of all these evidences of the Lord's power, the disciples failed to understand: i.e., they failed to comprehend that the Lord could exercise his sovereign and almighty power at any time and under any circumstances that accorded with the will and purposes of his Father in heaven. Unfortunately, even today, we fail at times to understand the Lord's power and to trust him as we should—in spite of having experienced many past blessings or demonstrations of providence and power on our behalf.

Then, the Lord Jesus explains to his disciples that he was not speaking about bread, but about the 'leaven' of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Of course, with their Jewish backgrounds, the disciples should have understood—as they did now—that 'leaven' was a term used by the rabbis and other religious teachers when referring to the fermenting, permeating, and corrupting influence of evil or false teaching.

### MATTHEW 16:12

All too often, the disciples placed a literal interpretation on something that the Lord Jesus intended to be understood metaphorically. There were very many occasions when the Lord used straightforward narrative in his teaching. On such occasions, he intended every word that he spoke to be understood literally and to be acted upon wherever appropriate and necessary. However, in his teaching, the Lord Jesus often employed illustrations in the form of parables, analogies, metaphors, etc. Such was the case here. However, these methods were in common use among the Jewish rabbis; therefore, the disciples should have been able to recognise such teaching when they heard it.

Now, however, the disciples realised that the Lord was not speaking about the leaven or yeast associated with bread, nor about their failure to bring bread with them. Rather, Jesus had been speaking about the 'leaven'—i.e., the teaching—of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Metaphorically speaking, the teaching of these religious groups resembled the action of leaven, insofar as their teaching spread like leaven or yeast throughout the whole body: That is, slowly but surely, their teaching permeated and influenced the hearts and minds of the ordinary people. However, when the expression 'leaven' was used in this metaphorical sense, it was generally with the meaning of a bad, evil, or corrupting influence on people's minds and hearts. Such was what the Lord meant when he referred to the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Thus, we see that we must consider and judge carefully what we are taught. We must compare the teaching we receive with the teaching of God's Word. Men may err, or provide false doctrine. God's Word alone is infallible, inerrant, and unchanging.

## PETER'S CONFESSION OF FAITH

***Matthew 16:13-20***

### MATTHEW 16:13

(Mark 8:27-29; Luke 9:18-20)

Jesus and his disciples moved on to the region of Caesarea Philippi (known formerly as Dan, Leshem, Panium, or Paneas). Situated at the foot of Mount Lebanon, this city had been named after the Roman

emperor, Tiberius Caesar. However, under the reign of Philip the tetrarch, the city had been enlarged and improved considerably. Hence, to distinguish this city from the other Caesarea, this one was named Caesarea Philippi.

Turning to his disciples, the Lord asked them: *"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"*

Of course, the Lord Jesus was well aware of what the people said concerning him. He did not need his disciples to tell him. However, by positing this question, he was causing his disciples to think carefully about this matter.

## MATTHEW 16:14

Soon, the disciples began to reply. John the Baptist was one suggestion, adhered to by those who believed that John had been raised from the dead by the power of God (Matt. 14:2). Another suggestion was the prophet Elijah, held to by the many Jews who believed that Elijah would appear again in person before the Day of the Lord (but not realising that the prophecy concerned one who would come 'in the spirit and power of Elijah' –viz., John the Baptist) (Matt. 11:14). Yet others suggested a re-appearing of Jeremiah or another of the prophets. Some would hold to the view that this would fulfil the prophecy of Deuteronomy where the LORD declares that he would raise up a Prophet in the latter days (again, not realising that this prophecy was fulfilled in Christ) (Deut. 18:15,18; John 6:14).

## MATTHEW 16:15-16

Having caught his disciples' rapt attention, the Lord now asks them: *"But who do you say that I am?"*

This is an emphatic sentence. The Lord is declaring, "You have given me the opinions of others. Now, tell me, 'Who say *you* that I am?'"

Before any other disciple can respond, Peter replies immediately: *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*

Peter is not content to accept the varied opinions of others. In his own mind, this apostle is convinced of Jesus' true identity. Firstly, Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ: i.e., Jesus is the Anointed One or Messiah whom God had promised to send into the world. Secondly, but no less importantly, Jesus is the Son of the living God.

Thus, Peter demonstrates the extent of his faith in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus. He is utterly convinced that Jesus is the Messiah, whom God has sent into the word in accordance with the words of the prophets of old. Thus, Peter is accepting that the Lord Jesus has come to deliver his people from their sins. (At this stage, Peter did not appreciate that such salvation would involve the suffering and death of the Saviour, and his subsequent resurrection.)

Furthermore, Peter was accepting wholeheartedly that Jesus is the Son of the living God. For someone with a Jewish background, this is a remarkable confession. The Jews believed only in God (Yahweh) and denied that God had a Son. However, Peter is confessing his faith in the Lord Jesus as the Son of the living God; and, by doing so, he is professing his belief in the divine origin and nature of the Lord Jesus. Indeed, he is doing what so many others had failed to do: believe the testimony of the Father regarding his Son –*"This is my beloved Son, listen to him."* (Matt. 3:17; 17:5)

Peter's expression of faith was outstanding. Yet, although he accepted these truths concerning the Person of the Lord Jesus, this disciple had much to learn about the work of the Saviour and the true cost of Redemption. Nevertheless, Peter's present acknowledgement of the Messiahship and divine Sonship of the Lord Jesus prompts this reply:

## MATTHEW 16:17

Indeed, Peter, the son of Jonah, was greatly blessed, favoured or honoured. No one could have made such a confession using human reasoning or any other human faculty alone. Thus, the Lord Jesus said to him, *"Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you..."* Not even the most learned or the most highly intelligent person in the world could have come to this conclusion or made this profession. Human reasoning and intellect alone is incapable of comprehending such truths—for they are spiritual truths and require spiritual comprehension. Not only so, understanding of spiritual truths requires the presence and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit together with spiritual regeneration. Without the Spirit of God, human beings are quite incapable of comprehending and believing such matters; simply because fallen mankind is dead (spiritually) in their trespasses and sins. (Cf. 1 Cor. 2:12-16; Eph. 2:1,5: Col. 2:13)

This was why the Lord said to Peter that he was blessed. The Father in heaven, working through his Holy Spirit, had enabled Peter to understand and believe the truth concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. On the basis of this divine and spiritually-revealed comprehension, this apostle is able to confess from his heart (or with all his heart and soul) that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Still addressing Peter, the Lord adds:

## MATTHEW 16:18

In beginning his statement, the Lord Jesus makes express mention of Peter's name (Gk., Πέτρος, *petros*). When, in the same sentence, the Lord states, *"and on this rock I will build my church..."* the word Jesus uses for 'rock' is the Greek word πέτρᾳ, petra—the word on which Peter's name is based.

Clearly, we cannot ignore or explain away what the Lord Jesus is saying here. He is addressing Peter. (On a later occasion, the Lord would address his other disciples with very similar words and grant to them a similar authority.) He is alluding to the meaning of Peter's name ('a rock' or 'stone'). With a play-on-words, the Lord Jesus is asserting that on this rock—i.e., on Peter (as an apostle)—he will build his church.

Over the centuries, this statement has caused all kinds of misunderstandings and erroneous beliefs, and it is impossible that these can be corrected here. However, we must be careful to observe what the Lord said, and what he did not say, in his address to Peter. Following his outstanding confession in the Messiahship and Sonship of the Lord Jesus, the Lord was saying to Peter that he would be the means through which the church would be built (i.e., built up, expanded, or enlarged).

Jesus did not say that the church was being founded on Peter; for, manifestly, it was not founded on Peter but on the Lord Jesus himself. Christ is the foundation stone or Rock on which his church is founded. He is the headstone or cornerstone which holds it together. (Cf. Rom. 9:33; 1 Cor. 10:4; Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet. 2:6-8) No other person can occupy the place of Christ as the Founder or Foundation of the

church. (1 Cor. 3:11) However, the Lord was not saying that Peter would found the church, but that he (the Lord Jesus) would build his church on Peter, or by means of Peter's preaching and ministry.

At the time Jesus spoke these words, Peter was still a very impetuous character—as later events would demonstrate. However, the same Peter who shortly would deny his Lord and Master later would become one of the most fearless preachers and leaders in the early church, and also a pillar of that church together with James and John. (Gal. 2:9) Thus, the formerly vacillating disciple would become as strong spiritually as this recent confession of faith implied and as the Lord prophesied of him when he alluded to his name, Peter (a rock).

From Pentecost, therefore, and working through his Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus would build his church on Peter (and on the other apostles, as the Scriptures elsewhere make plain). Through the preaching and ministry of the apostle Peter and the other apostles (including Paul), the Lord would build his church: i.e., he would call out from among all nationalities a people for himself. These would be his church; his called out ones; his assembly; and he would build them up as living stones in his holy temple, which is his Body. (1 Pet. 2:5) Of that Body, the exalted and glorified Lord Jesus alone is Head. (Eph. 1:22; 5:23; Col. 1:18)

Thus, although Peter was a recognised as one of the principal leaders in the early church, the Lord Jesus would not build his church on or through Peter exclusively. Furthermore, the authority that the Lord Jesus granted to Peter (in the next verse) would not be granted to this apostle alone. With the exception of Judas Iscariot, all the apostles would receive this authority, and all would become involved in building the church of the Lord Jesus Christ—or of being those on whom Christ built his church (cf. Eph. 2:20).

There is a sense in which it may be said that the twelve apostles formed the foundation of the church (but not Peter alone). This is when the word 'foundation' is used metaphorically to refer to the teaching or doctrine of the Lord Jesus and his apostles. Thus, the Lord's teaching or doctrine is the unchangeable foundation on which his church is built. Similarly, in respect of the Lord's disciples, since they continued to provide and proclaim this same teaching and doctrine, it may be said that the church was "*built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone"* (Eph. 2:20; see also 1 Cor. 3:11).

The following extract is taken from the Introduction and Background to the author's Expository Notes on 1 Peter:

> The Lord Jesus would build his church on the foundation of the prophets and apostles; i.e., on the preaching and teaching of the apostles and prophets. (Eph. 2:20)
> The church is founded on the teaching of the Lord Jesus (the Rock, the Head and the Cornerstone) and on the teaching of the prophets and apostles as inspired by the Holy Spirit. (Ps. 118:22; Matt. 21:42; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:6) The church is founded on Christ—not on any apostle as an individual person, or on any group of apostles. (1 Cor. 3:11)

Together with the other apostles, including Paul, Peter then would build on the foundation already laid—the Lord Jesus Christ. However, as a builder, Peter was a master-craftsman. He was one of the twelve apostles; the one who acted as spokesman for the others; and later a leader in the church at Jerusalem.

There is no record in the Word of God, and no mention in Peter's own epistles, of his apostolic power or authority ever extending beyond that of the other apostles. (1 Pet. 1:1; 5:1; 2 Pet. 1:1) Nor is there any record in the Word of God of the apostle Peter possessing or exercising any power or authority over the other apostles or over the church worldwide. Together with James and John, Peter was an overseer (or 'bishop') in the church at Jerusalem. Had Peter possessed superior authority, the apostle Paul would not have been able to withstand Peter to his face and to rebuke Peter for acting hypocritically on one occasion (Gal. 2:11).

Again, there is no record of Peter ever having acted as a bishop or primate of the church at Rome. Peter had been called and appointed as an apostle to the Jews—not to the Gentiles, who formed the greatest majority of the population in Rome and its environs.

Furthermore, there is no declaration or even the slightest hint in Scripture of an 'apostolic succession' (so-called) where Peter was to transmit his (supposed) supreme office to another holding the same supreme office. Peter makes no reference to such an office in his own epistles; he makes no assertions of supremacy over any other bishops or church leaders; and—in his own epistles—he treats the other apostles as his equals.

It may be argued that— although these matters are not mentioned explicitly in the Word of God—nevertheless they form part of the Church's oral teaching and tradition. However, as those who accept the Bible alone as the inspired Word of God, and the complete and final authority for all matters pertaining to faith and godliness, we are obliged to reject outright all those oral teachings and traditions which cannot be found in God's written Word, or which cannot be deduced from these Scriptures by an unmistakably clear principle of that Word.

The Lord asserts now: *"…the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."*

The reference here is to the attacks of fallen mankind and of Satan and his emissaries against the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord is giving to Peter the solemn and inviolable assurance that not even the powers of evil and Satan himself (represented by 'the gates of hell') will ever be able to overcome or defeat the Church of Christ. No matter how vile or ferocious the attacks against the church collectively or against individual members of the church, that church will not only stand, it will prevail or overcome. However, the church will prevail against all the assaults of the evil one and of a fallen and sinful world because it is being sustained by an Almighty and Sovereign God. The Father has given a people to his Son; and the Son in turn has committed into his Father's hands all his elect people, and therefore every member of his church worldwide. (John 13:3; 17:1-26)

Thus, Peter and all the apostles were to build on the foundation already laid, knowing that their preaching would be blessed and used by the Lord to expand his church, and knowing also, that—despite the most intense persecution against the church and against her faithful servants—the church would stand and would prevail until the coming of the Lord in his power and glory.

The word translated 'hell' in this verse is actually based on the word for 'Hades' (Gk., ᾅδης, *hades*) rather than 'hell'. Hades represented the god of the underworld, then the place of the dead. Possibly, the allusion is to the fact that Eve (and later Adam) yielded to the temptations of the devil. Consequently, they fell from their position of original righteousness and entered a state of death. Thus, death came into the world on account of Adam and Eve's sin, and so death passed upon all men. Hades represents the realm of the dead, or the place or condition into which Satan has succeeded in bringing fallen and impenitent

mankind. (Ultimately, Satan and his minions, together with fallen and unrepentant mankind, will be consigned to hell (For the ferocity of its unending torments, the Lord Jesus likens hell to a 'lake of fire'.)

The point is that no power in heaven, in earth, or 'under' the earth will ever be able to prevail over the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Church—which is the Body of which Christ is Head—cannot fail and it cannot fall. This Church, or Body of truly regenerate believers worldwide, is not founded on the ideas, opinions or philosophies of men, but on the living, risen, glorified and coming Lord Jesus Christ—the Son of the eternal and ever living God.

## MATTHEW 16:19

We come now to the passage that speaks of the keys of the kingdom. When used metaphorically in the Bible, as here, the word 'key' or 'keys' refers to the granting of authority (contrast Luke 11:52; cf. Rev. 1:18). Without this 'key', or authoritative commissioning, Peter would not be in a position either to exercise leadership within the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, or to preach the Gospel authoritatively to other people. The 'keys'—or that authority bestowed by divine commissioning—enabled the apostle to speak, preach and act in the name and by the authority of the Lord Jesus himself. Thus, when Peter proclaimed the Gospel, or provided instruction to others, he was doing so as a fully Spirit-inspired plenipotentiary or ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who despised and rejected Peter's authoritative teaching or preaching were in fact despising and rejecting the very Words of God.

However, the granting of this authority was not unique to the apostle Peter. Elsewhere, the Lord Jesus gives to the other apostles the same 'keys' or authority to proclaim the Gospel and by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, since all the apostles had been commissioned and authorised by the Lord Jesus, then all would preach and teach with the full inspiration and power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, in their preaching and teaching, their words were infallible or inerrant, since they were the very words of God. Similarly, those who refused to accept the words of the apostles were refusing to accept the words given to them by God.

Even this, however, does not exhaust the authority represented by the 'keys' as given to selected servants of the Lord. Exactly the same kind of power and authority was bestowed upon the Old Testament prophets when God called and appointed them to preach and teach in his name. Like the apostles of the New Testament, these OT prophets were the Spirit-inspired servants of the LORD; and everything they preached or prophesied was the infallible Word of God.

The LORD gave specific messages and instructions to his prophets and commanded them to make known his words to the people, without fear or favour. Similarly, the Lord Jesus gave a specific message and instructions to his disciples—the Gospel of the kingdom—and commanded them to make this Gospel known to the people, again fearing no one and favouring no one.

The 'keys' then, that the Lord Jesus imparted on this occasion to the apostle Peter was the authority and commission to proclaim the Gospel and to teach the church, as guided and directed by the Holy Spirit whom the apostles would experience in fullness of power at Pentecost. (Acts 2:1ff) Ultimately, all of the apostles would receive and exercise the authority represented by the 'keys', and all would proclaim the Gospel of the kingdom in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

*"...and whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."*

The next part of this verse speaks of 'binding and loosing'. This was an expression in common use among the rabbis and in the rabbinical schools, and therefore would be readily understood by Peter and the apostles. In relation to things, matters, doctrine, or teaching, etc. (but not persons), the expression 'to bind' means 'to prohibit' or 'to forbid', and the expression 'to loose' means 'to permit' or 'to allow'.

Thus, whatever matters, doctrine, or teaching that Peter or the other apostles permitted in the church on earth were those matters, doctrine, or teaching, etc. that God in heaven had already permitted or approved. Similarly, those matters, etc. that the apostles forbade in the church on earth were those matters which God in heaven had already forbidden or proscribed.

For example, in the church, Peter and the apostles were empowered to declare with all authority that a believer's sins had been forgiven—on earth, because already forgiven by God in heaven. Similarly, the apostles were empowered to declare with all authority that those who remained impenitent and unbelieving were abiding under the wrath and curse of God, and would experience God's judgment. In both cases, the apostles were simply declaring the Word of the Lord by the power of the Holy Spirit: a word, truth, doctrine or principle that had been ratified in heaven before being proclaimed by the apostles to the people.

From this, we see that the authority given to Peter and later to the other apostles was a delegated and limited authority. It derived from God through his Son. It could not alter in any way what God had already authorised. It could not change in any way what God in heaven had already forbidden or permitted ('bound' or 'loosed'). However, 'the keys of the kingdom' granted to Peter empowered him to declare authoritatively, and in the name of the Lord Jesus, what God permitted in his church on earth and what he forbade.

We must, of course, remember that—in the early days of the church—the New Testament had not yet been committed to writing. Therefore, the members of the church learned orally what God required through the apostles' doctrine, which was given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Later, the church would learn of the Lord's requirements through the individual letters written by the apostles and others, which also were given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Since the completion of the canon of Scripture, there has been no further need for plenarily-empowered and Spirit-inspired apostles, who are infallible in teaching. This gift was withdrawn when the Bible (Old and New Testaments alone) became the sole source of teaching and plenary inspiration for the people of God or the church.

## MATTHEW 16:20

The Lord now forbids his disciples from declaring openly that he was the Christ or Messiah. Part of the reason for this would be the current expectations and misapprehensions of the people in respect of the promised Messiah and the work he should accomplish. Another reason might have been to disassociate himself from those individuals who claimed (falsely) that God had sent them as his Messiah. Again, the Lord Jesus would not wish to be associated in any way with the words or actions of these false messiahs or false prophets.

Most importantly, however, the Lord forbade his disciples from proclaiming his Messiahship publicly at this time because Jesus himself would determine when and under what circumstances this disclosure should be made to the people. The Lord had come to fulfil all Scripture concerning him. He must accom-

plish this fulfilment in the order ordained by his Father in heaven. At the right time, he would proclaim himself publicly as Christ and Lord of all, and his disciples would carry this message well beyond the borders of Israel. Now, however, the fact that Jesus was the Messiah or Christ of God was to be revealed only to a small number of individuals, including his disciples.

The Lord's actions ensured that no one and nothing would intervene to prevent him fulfilling his Father's will in going to the cross, and suffering to make atonement for sin—before he was raised to enter into his glory. Following these events, however, Jesus would be proclaimed as Christ or Messiah—and therefore the Saviour of all who would believe on him. Until that time, those only knew Jesus as the Christ were those who—like Peter—had experienced a revelation of this profound truth from the Father in heaven, and who believed it with all his heart.

## JESUS SPEAKS OF HIS SUFFERINGS, DEATH AND RESURRECTION

***Matthew 16:21-23***

### MATTHEW 16:21

(Mark 8:31; 10:33; Luke 9:22)

Following Peter's confession that the Lord Jesus was the Christ and Son of the living God, the Lord then begins to instruct his disciples more fully concerning all that lay before him. Since (with the exception of Judas Iscariot) all the disciples would have concurred with Peter's confession of faith—it is probable that they now expected the Lord Jesus to set up his Messianic kingdom. This, of course, would have implied the overturning of the present Roman rule. Yet, Jesus had not come to set aside or overturn the present form of government. Furthermore, his kingdom was not of this world. Rather, it was a spiritual kingdom. (John 18:36) Thus, to dispel any notions of an imminent worldly kingdom of righteousness, and to reveal to his disciples the truth concerning his Messianic office, the Lord Jesus tells them of the sufferings that he must endure at the hands of sinful men.

Firstly, the Lord tells his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem—i.e., it was essential for him to leave his present ministry in Galilee and return to Judea and Jerusalem. Of course, the disciples were well aware of what this could mean, both for the Lord Jesus and perhaps for themselves. They knew that the religious leaders at Jerusalem were intent on killing the Lord Jesus. Thus, in their minds, to return there at this time would be foolish. Nevertheless, it was according to the will and purposes of God that his Son should go to Jerusalem at his appointed time, and there fulfil everything that had been written or prophesied of him in the Old Testament Scriptures. (Luke 24:44-47)

Secondly, therefore, the Lord Jesus begins to indicate to his disciples something of the source or cause of these sufferings. From a human standpoint, the Lord would suffer at the hands of sinful men. The most eminent religious authorities in the land would abuse him and cause the holy one of God to be sorely tormented, afflicted, beaten and spat upon. Although carried out under Pontius Pilate, this Roman governor was acting in response to the demands of the elders, chief priests, Pharisees and scribes for the Lord Jesus to be executed. Therefore—although Pilate remained responsible for acting against a righteous and completely innocent Man (Matt. 27:24)—yet the Jewish religious leaders shared in the guilt and responsibility for the Lord's death. Thus, as their chief priest foolishly but prophetically proclaimed, *"Let his blood be on us and on our children."* (Matt. 27:25)

Following his sufferings at the hands of evil men, the Lord Jesus would endure the wrath of God against sin while he hung on the cross to atone for the sins of all his elect people worldwide. Following his death and burial—as he now told his disciples—he would be raised from death on the third day.

This revelation proved both incomprehensible and completely unbelievable to the Lord's disciples. How could the Messiah of God be so abused by men and put to death? What would happen then to the Messianic kingdom spoken of in the Scriptures? Surely, Jesus could not allow himself to be taken by wicked men—even if they were 'respectable' religious leaders. Surely, he must not countenance any idea of returning to Jerusalem if such a fate awaited him there.

The disciples must also have wondered how the Lord Jesus could possibly be taken by men in the first place. On numerous occasions, they had witnessed the Lord's sovereign and almighty power over people and over nature as he performed a wide variety of miraculous acts. Since, without doubt, the Lord Jesus possessed power and authority that no ordinary human being possessed, how could ordinary human beings overcome the Son of God?

Clearly, the disciples still had much to learn about their own Old Testament Scriptures, where they spoke so powerfully and plainly about the sufferings of the Lord Jesus and the glory that should follow. (Isa. 52:13—53:12; 1 Pet. 1:11) Thus, barely aware of what he was saying or doing, the apostle Peter responded in astonishment:

## MATTHEW 16:22

Taking the Lord to one side, and away from the other disciples, Peter began to address his Lord very sternly. Rebuking Jesus, Peter declared, *"Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you."*

The thought of losing the Lord Jesus was too much for Peter to endure. However, the thought of losing him at the hands of evil men, and to such a violent end, must have shocked this disciple beyond measure. Therefore, in plain language, Peter rebukes his Master—little knowing that he is not only acting contrary to the will of the Father, but also exactly in line with what Satan desires him to say to the Lord Jesus. If anyone can succeed in side-tracking the Son of God from his appointed mission, then surely it must be one of his closest disciples, such as Peter—the very one who has just confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Of course, the holy Son of God knew exactly who was behind Peter's words. He knew that the evil one himself had given this disciple the idea to rebuke the Lord, and to attempt to turn him aside from his God-appointed work. For, without the cross and all it entailed, there could have been no atonement for sin, no resurrection from death, and therefore no salvation for anyone anywhere.

Thus, Peter's remarks bring a very forceful response from the Lord Jesus.

## MATTHEW 16:23

Using the same kind of terminology as he would have used to cast out evil spirits, the Lord thunders at Peter: *"Get behind me, Satan!..."*

knowing that Satan had used Peter as his agent for evil purposes, and that the words uttered by Peter were actually from thoughts or ideas engendered in his mind by the evil one, the Lord addresses Peter as

though he himself were that evil one, or that the evil one had taken control of his mind; albeit momentarily. The Lord commands Satan (not Peter) to get behind him: i.e., to cease immediately from his attack on him through Peter and to depart from him out of sight and out of mind.

Now, the Lord continues his address by speaking to Peter himself: *"You are a hindrance to me..."*

The word translated '*hindrance'* in the ESV is translated '*offence'* in the KJV, from the Greek word skandalon (skandalon). The one whom the Lord Jesus had addressed as a rock, Jesus addresses now as an offence or scandal to him. Just moments earlier, Peter had confessed Jesus as the Christ and the Son of the living God. Now, this same Peter would seek to hinder the Lord Jesus in his work of redemption.

Peter had not intended to say the wrong thing. Rather, he had acted impetuously without due regard for his words and without a due appreciation either for earlier teaching from the Lord Jesus or for the Old Testament prophesies concerning the Lord Jesus. Thus, instead of helping and encouraging the Lord by his words, Peter actually hindered the Lord—or would have done so, had the Lord not set his face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51) Thus, we must consider our words as well as our actions, lest we be found hindering the Lord or the Lord's work instead of promoting and encouraging it.

Then, the Lord Jesus explains to Peter what he had done amiss: *"...For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."*

Peter's mind was earth-bound. At this stage, the apostle could not see beyond an earthly Messiah, an earthly king and a physical and earthly kingdom. Like so many other Jews, this disciple thought only of a present-day messianic reign centred on Jerusalem and extending worldwide. Had Peter been considering things from a more spiritual point of view, he would have understood many of the Lord's previous remarks concerning his office and work—especially its spiritual and heavenly nature. And had the apostle had been setting his mind on things above and not on things of this earth, he would not have fallen headlong into the snare of the devil. (Cf. Col. 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:26)

## THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

***Matthew 16:24-28***

### MATTHEW 16:24

Peter had realised that Jesus was indeed the Saviour and that the Father had sent his Son into the world. In this confession, the other disciples had concurred, as later events make evident. However, following the Lord Jesus did not come without consequences. The cost of discipleship could be very high; and no one should profess himself a follower of the Lord if he or she was not prepared to pay that cost. (Luke 14:27-30)

To this end, the Lord Jesus begins to teach his disciples what it will mean for them to follow him as their Lord and Master. Unlike those pupils or followers of the Jewish rabbinical schools, those who followed the Lord Jesus would endure much trial and persecution. Perhaps, even death itself would result from their profession of faith in Christ, their living Redeemer.

Thus, in verse 24, the Lord declares: *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."*

This may be expressed as follows:

- Consider the choice of following Jesus wholeheartedly ("*If anyone would come after me*…").
- Realise that self-denial is essential and determine to deny all that is near and dear ("…*let him deny himself*…").
- Realise that following the Lord involves trial, persecutions, sorrows, and perhaps even death ("…*take up the cross*…").
- Having counted the cost, determine resolutely to commit one's life unreservedly to Christ as Lord and Master ("…*and follow me*.").

From the very outset, anyone who confessed Jesus as the Christ and Son of God must realise that this confession comes at a price—so far as the world is concerned. Those who openly confess Christ as Lord, and live as a follower of the Lord Jesus, invite the scorn and contempt of unregenerate men and women. This is simply because their sinful lifestyles are being challenged and exposed by the lives of those who belong to the Lord Jesus. Thus, they will attempt at every turn to discredit and persecute the followers of the Lord Jesus—provided those followers are living a righteous and God-glorifying life.

With this in view, the Lord warns his disciples of what they must expect at the hands of others, including both their own families and other relatives, and of mankind more generally. Thus, the Lord declares to his disciples:

*"If…let…take…follow."*

- *"If anyone would come after me…"*
- *"let him deny himself and…"*
- *"take up his cross and…"*
- *"follow me."*

In verse 25, the Lord continues by saying:

## MATTHEW 16:25

(Matt. 10:39; Mark 8:35; Luke 17:33; John 12:25)

*"For whosoever would save his life will lose it…"*

Many who come to Christ, or who desire to follow Christ, hope to do so at minimum cost to themselves. They seek the assurance of sins forgiven and peace with God. However, having received the mercy of the Lord, they then expect to be able to live an untroubled life, with minimal commitment to their professed faith or with a shallow and superficial show of religion.

This, however, was never the way of discipleship. It was never the way trod by any of the Lord's faithful servants, from the days of Abraham and Moses to the days of the Lord Jesus and beyond. The Lord's

salvation is free to all who call upon his name. However, the way of the Lord is costly for those who would honour him with all their hearts and souls.

Jesus calls men and women to follow him unreservedly, having counted the cost and determined wholeheartedly to follow the Lord wherever he leads. Those who are not willing to pay the price of discipleship can be of no useful service to the Master or to his church. Therefore, the Lord warns that those who are intent in preserving their present everyday comforts or material excesses will lose what they might have gained. They will lose their usefulness to Christ. They will lose their usefulness in the church. Ultimately, however, they will lose whatever degree of spiritual life they thought that they possessed.

This is not to suggest for one moment that a truly regenerate child of God can lose their salvation or fall away ultimately from their profession of faith. The Lord is not speaking of those who are his true followers, but of those who make a profession of discipleship without being prepared to pay the cost of discipleship: in other words, false professors or hypocrites within the church. It is they who—in an attempt to preserve their lives and present lifestyles contrary to the will and purposes of God—will lose that life.

This is confirmed by the next part of verse 25:

*"...but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."*

Those who lose their lives are those who are prepared to pay the cost of following the Lord Jesus to the utmost degree; even if that involves persecution or death. These are the true disciples of the Lord and the true children of God. By their wholehearted and unreserved commitment to the Lord Jesus and to his cause, they are showing where there hearts really lie. If necessary, they are prepared to pay the utmost price for being a follower of the Lord. Thus, it is those true followers of Jesus who find life: they experience abundant life in this present world—with persecutions, and they are absolutely assured of eternal life and happiness in the age to come. (Mark 10:28-31)

To show further the stark contrast between the false professor and the true believer, the Lord asks in verse 26:

## MATTHEW 16:26

(Cf. Luke 12:16-21)

*"For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul...?"*

This indicates the true cost of discipleship. It is not only a matter of life and death in this present world but also a matter of eternal life or eternal death in the world or age to come. Those who choose the pleasures of this world over and above a right relationship with God and with his Son stand to lose everything that they have gained throughout their lives. Even if they have accumulated abundant wealth and a great name for themselves, yet whatever they have profited in this world will not avail them in the next. On the Day of Judgment, they will forfeit their souls: i.e., the One in whose hands is the life of every living thing will Judge them as their deeds deserve and commit them to the lake of fire which endures throughout the eternal ages.

*"What then,"* Jesus asks, "...*will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul...?"*

To this question, the Lord adds another:

*"...Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"*

Having observed that the souls of all mankind are in the hands of Almighty God, what can a man offer to God on the Day of Judgment for sparing his soul from eternal hell? On that day, it will be too late. These individuals refused to seek the Lord while they lived in pleasure and ease in this world, or they despised and rejected the name of the Lord. How, then, can they now seek to offer something to God in return for their souls: a soul that God will now judge and condemn for all eternity?

This, then, represents both the cost of discipleship and also the cost of ignoring, despising or rejecting the Son of God while in this world. It is the great dividing line separating those who belong to the Lord from those who do not; or those who have become his true and faithful followers and those who have not.

That the Lord's words here are intended to comprehend all mankind, and not just his would-be disciples, can be seen in the next verse:

## MATTHEW 16:27

(Matt. 13:40-43,49-50; 24:30-31; 25:31ff; Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26; 21:27; 2 Thess. 1:7-10)

Following on from his remarks about losing one's soul, the Lord Jesus now speaks briefly of his coming in glory. Using his usual self-designation 'Son of Man', Jesus tells his hearers that a day will come when the he—the Sovereign Lord—will come, together with the holy angels, in the glory of his Father.

This statement implies several things:

1. The fact that the Son of Man is 'going to come' implies that he must be arriving from another and distant location.

2. The fact that he is going to come 'with his angels' implies that:

    a. holy angels are under his command; and that:

    b. the Son of Man will be coming from that place inhabited by these angels.

3. That fact that the Son of Man is going to come with the angels 'in the glory of his Father' implies that:

    a. the Lord Jesus has first returned to the presence of his Father in heaven; and that:

    b. the Son of Man will be coming from heaven itself when he comes with his angels to judge the world.

(This last statement is affirmed by the expression, *"...and then he will repay each person according to what he has done."*)

The phrase, *"in the glory of his Father..."* can be taken to mean 'in that ineffable glory (attributes, etc.) that pertain to the Father in heaven'; or, 'in that same ineffable glory that the Father in heaven has bestowed upon his one and only Son following his completed work on earth, resurrection, ascension and exaltation.'

Therefore, we see the folly of those who ignore or reject the rightful claims of Christ on their lives. Their standing, learning, or material acquisitions in this world, will not avail them in the least on that day when the Lord Jesus comes with his holy angels to separate the righteous from the unrighteous and to judge them according to their deeds.

## MATTHEW 16:28

These words cannot refer to the Lord's second coming, as those present with the Lord Jesus on this occasion would not be alive at that momentous event. Some commentators believe that the Lord was speaking of the manifestation of his glory on the Mount of Transfiguration—an event witnessed first hand by Peter, James and John.

To this end, Mark writes:

> Mark 9:1-3 ESV
>
> 1 And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power."
>
> 2 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3 and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them... (see also vv.4-8)

And Luke writes:

> Luke 9:27-29 ESV
>
> 27 But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God."
>
> 28 Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white... (see also vv.30-36)

Undoubtedly, this provided a foretaste of the glory of the Lord and of his everlasting kingdom of righteousness and peace. However, it seems that the Lord was implying more than this by his words.

(We must remember, of course, that the Gospel writers did not necessarily collate their material chronologically. Matthew in particular arranges his material topically, which means that unconnected but similar themes may appear in close proximity. Thus, although it is essential to keep passages within their proper context, we must not allow the immediate context to force a meaning on a particular passage that the Lord did not intend—if, for example, it is evident that material has not been arranged in chronological order.)

Therefore, although it is possible that the Lord was referring to his manifestation of glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, it is also possible that he meant much more than this—namely, the visible expansion of his kingdom through the church. Thus, following his resurrection, ascension and return to glory, the Lord Jesus would continue to reign in and through his church by means of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the kingdom of God, which began as a mustard seed, would expand worldwide. Christ would rule in his church wherever his redeemed people met together in his name. Thus, by degrees and over succeeding centuries, the kingdom of Christ would grow until the coming of the Lord in his glory.

Those, of course, who would not see (i.e., experience) death before they saw the Son of Man coming in his kingdom were all those who remained alive until after the resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, and who witnessed at first hand the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing sinners to repentance and faith in the Son of God.

This is made clearer by the words of the apostle Paul:

> Rom 1:3-6 ESV
>
> 3 concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh 4 and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, 5 through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, 6 including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ…

And before departing from his disciples into heaven, Luke wrote in Acts:

> Act 1:6-8 ESV
>
> 6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"
>
> 7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Then, following the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, the apostle Peter declared concerning the exalted and glorified Lord Jesus:

> Act 2:33-36 ESV
>
> 33 Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.
>
> 34 For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, 35 until I make your enemies your footstool.'
>
> 36 Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

The Lord Jesus had come into the world to establish the kingdom of heaven (a spiritual kingdom). Concerning this kingdom, we may say the following:

- The disciples were present with the Lord Jesus at the inception of this kingdom, and therefore saw or experienced its beginnings ‘as a mustard seed’.
- Again, three of the Lord’s disciples were present with him on the Mount of Transfiguration. There, they saw or experienced something of the glory of the King and of the kingdom over which he reigned. The transfiguration implied that the Lord Jesus was not only the fulfilment of the Law and the prophets (represented by the presence of Moses and Elijah on the mount), but that the Lord was superior by far to Moses who delivered the Law and to the prophets who proclaimed the Word of the LORD. This was demonstrated on the mount when God declared Jesus

to be his one and only Son, and he alone was seen in his majestic glory by Peter, James and John.

- Furthermore, a number of the Lord's disciples would live to see or experience the expansion of the kingdom through the church, following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Included in this concept is the abolishing forever of the Jewish priesthood and the subsequent destruction of the temple. Now, the only way into the kingdom of heaven would be through the Great High Priest—Jesus, the Son of God who, by his own blood, had atoned for sin once-for-all.

There was only one aspect of the kingdom that the disciples then present with the Lord Jesus would *not* live to see, and this was the coming again in glory of the King of kings together with his holy angels. Of course, the bodies of all those that belonged to him would be raised from the dead and reunited with him. Then, they would live and reign with him in the new age.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 17

## JESUS ON THE MOUNT OF TRANSFIGURATION

***Matthew 17:1-9***

### MATTHEW 17:1

(Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36)

We come now to the actual event where the Lord Jesus was transfigured on the mount. This occurred approximately six days after the conversation recorded in the previous chapter. Mark agrees with the six days, but Luke says that these events occurred eight days later. Probably, however, Matthew and Mark count only the days intermediate between the events recorded above, whereas Luke counts the day on which the above account ended and the day on which the events leading up to the transfiguration began, as well as the intermediate days.

Jesus took three of his disciples with him up this mountain. We note that these were Peter, James and John. Ultimately, these three apostles would become the leaders of the early church, centred in Jerusalem. (Gal. 2:9) In advance of their great responsibilities in the church, the Lord Jesus is about to reveal to these three men something of his majestic power and glory. Therefore, taking them apart from the other disciples, Jesus leads only Peter, James and John (the brother of James) with him up the mountain.

Some have conjectured that the mountain in question was Mount Tabor or Mount Hermon. However, Mount Tabor, in the south of Galilee, lay possibly 10 miles distant from the Lord's present location. Mount Hermon lay even further afield, north-east of Galilee, and well outside its borders. However, when he spoke to his disciples, the Lord Jesus had been enroute to Caesarea Philippi; and, following the events on the Mount of Transfiguration, the Lord was found at Capernaum. A journey to Mount Tabor before returning to Capernaum seems unlikely, as does an even further journey to Mount Hermon. The mountain concerned may simply have been a local mountain of notable elevation.

### MATTHEW 17:2

When they had ascended the mountain, Peter, James and John must have been astonished to witness the change that took place in the Lord Jesus' appearance. The disciples had climbed up the mountain with their Lord and Master; but as one who appeared to them as any other man. Now, however, as they stood in his presence, the Lord's very appearance was being transformed or 'metamorphosed' (Gk., μετεμορφώθη, metemorphōthē). Now, Jesus' face shone like the sun in all its brilliance and glory. At the same time, the Lord's clothing radiated a pure white light that the disciples had never witnessed before. (Cf. Dan. 7:9; Rev. 1:14)

Understandably, Peter, James and John must have trembled in reverent fear and awe—and so they should have done, because they were standing on holy ground and in the very presence of the Most High and Holy One of God. Now, for the very first time, these three disciples were witnessing something of the intrinsic and effulgent glory of the Lord—something akin to the glory of the LORD witnessed by Moses so many centuries earlier, and which appeared in the form of the Shekinah glory during the days of the tab-

ernacle in the wilderness. (Exod. 3:1-14; 40:34-35) Clearly, however, although resplendent in glory, the Lord Jesus was not revealing to his disciples the fullness of his divine glory: for no one could look upon that glory and live. (Exod. 33:18-20)

Yet, somehow or another, the disciples realised that the transfigured Lord Jesus who stood before them in his glory was still their Lord and Master whom they loved, and who they knew loved them. Whatever was happening to them, or to him, must only be for his glory and for their benefit. And so it was to be. The Lord Jesus was seen in his glory. And this foretaste of the Lord's majestic glory should have been sufficient to prepare and arm the disciples for all that lay ahead. However, as we shall see, the disciples did not yet understand that their Lord and Master needed to pass through suffering and death, and then enter into his glory—to rule from the heights of heaven and to exercise universal dominion for ever and ever.

## MATTHEW 17:3

As they stood amazed in the glorious presence of the Lord Jesus, Peter, James and John suddenly noticed two other figures appear beside the Lord Jesus. One was Moses and the other was Elijah, and both began conversing with the Lord. Now, the three disciples were witnessing the very culmination of the Word of God. Moses had delivered the Law to Israel at Mount Sinai. Now, as he stood beside the Lord Jesus, Moses represented the Word of God spoken in, through or by the Law. Elijah had come from the schools of the prophets. Now, as he stood in the presence of the Lord Jesus, Elijah represented the Word of God spoken in, through, or by the prophets. However, as we shall see, the Lord Jesus was and is the Word of God spoken in, through and by his Son. (John 1:1-3; Heb. 1:1-3)

We note here, that although Moses and Elijah appeared in glory beside the Lord Jesus, these two servants of the Lord could not and did not assume anything like the Lord's glorious appearance. In this respect, Jesus stood alone. Thus, we see that Jesus was infinitely superior to Moses and Elijah. The latter two were sinful but redeemed servants of God. Jesus, however, was and is the sinless Son of God. Furthermore, Moses and Elijah represented temporary ministries and temporary economies—the Law and the Prophets, whereas Jesus the Son of God represents a permanent and perpetual ministry or economy, for he had come to fulfil the Law and the Prophets.

## MATTHEW 17:4

As they stood there, Peter at last spoke up, *"Lord, it is good that we are here..."* It is good, beneficial or fortuitous that you brought us up with to this holy place; because now we can be of some assistance. *"...If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah."*

As happened so often with Peter, this apostle spoke before he had considered carefully the implications of his words. Together with James and John, Peter offered to construct tents or shelters (KJV/NASB, 'tabernacles') for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Clearly, however, Peter was greatly in error when (unwittingly) he placed the Lord Jesus on the same level with Moses and Elijah. These men had been illustrious servants of the LORD in their day. However, they were sinful men—albeit redeemed and forgiven. Jesus, however, was the eternal and sinless Son of God. There could be no meaningful comparison. Furthermore, Moses and Elijah had served the LORD in their day and generation, and then had been taken into the presence of the LORD. By contrast, the Lord Jesus had been in the presence of his Father from all eternity; equal with the Father in power and glory. The Lord Jesus had come from heaven's glory, and soon to that glory

he would return. Thus, Peter's offer to create shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah was greatly misplaced. The Son of God stood alone above all other men; for, unlike all other men, he was the Holy and Righteous One of God.

Peter's error, however, is soon corrected:

## MATTHEW 17:5

While Peter was still speaking these words to the Lord Jesus, suddenly a brilliant cloud overshadowed them. Now, Peter and the others found themselves with the majestic glory of the Lord Jesus in front of them and the glory of the Majesty on High above them. The glory of the Lord now surrounded them; and, from that cloud of glory, a voice thundered, *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."* (Cf. Exod. 16:10; 40:34-35; Ezek. 10:4; Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; 9:7; Luke 3:22; 9:35)

Now, once again, the Father in heaven was testifying to the fact that Jesus was his one and only Son (cf. Matt 3:17; 2 Pet. 1:17-18). This implied that Jesus had been sent by the Father and had come from the Father's presence in glory. It implied also that Jesus was the promised Sent One or Anointed of God, or the Messiah (Gk., χριστὸς, *christos* (Christ)) spoken of in the Scriptures. Furthermore, it implied that God had sent his Son to pay the price of sin by means of a complete and final atonement, to establish his kingdom in righteousness and to pour out his Holy Spirit on those who would enter that kingdom—constituted on earth by the church universal, or the body of all true believers on the Lord Jesus Christ worldwide.

Again, this affirmation from the Father in heaven confirmed to the disciples once more that Jesus was who he claimed to be—the Son of Man, the Son of God, and the Saviour of the world. Thus, having heard this voice uttered from the Father himself, the disciples should have realised that everything that the Lord did, and everything that happened to him, was in complete accord with the Father's will and purposes for his beloved Son.

## MATTHEW 17:6

However, on hearing the awesome and majestic voice from heaven, the disciples' first reaction was one of terror. As they heard the voice of God utter these solemn words, they fell with their faces to the ground. They knew that they were hearing the voice of the Lord, just as Moses had heard that voice on Mount Sinai so many centuries earlier. They knew that the Most High God was speaking concerning his Son, and they were terrified because they were in the very presence of the majesty on high. Therefore, in fear and trembling, they kept their faces toward the ground lest the glory of the Lord should overwhelm them.

## MATTHEW 17:7-8

Seeing their great distress and fear, the Lord Jesus approached them. As the Lord stood above them, he reached down with love and compassion to comfort and reassure Peter, James and John. Then, the Lord commanded them to rise. For the first time, they raised their eyes from the ground and began to stand up—only to realise that no one else was present with the Lord Jesus. Moses and Elijah whom they had seen moments earlier had now gone. This must have perplexed them, as we shall see shortly from their questions.

### MATTHEW 17:9

As they descended the mountain, the Lord Jesus commanded these three disciples not to mention to anyone the vision they had seen. This was not the time to be speaking publicly of Jesus' power and glory. That day would come, after the Lord's ascension and exaltation to the Father's right hand. Then, the glory of the Lord could be proclaimed to all the nations, as the Gospel was carried worldwide in the fullness and power of the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of truth, of grace, and of glory.

## DISCIPLES QUESTION JESUS ABOUT ELIJAH

***Matthew 17:10-13***

### MATTHEW 17:10

(Mark 9:11)

The Lord Jesus had just told Peter, James and John not to make known what they had seen until after his resurrection. Although, at this stage, the disciples did not understand the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection, they believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. However, it puzzled them greatly that they were now standing in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, but that (apparently) God's Messiah had appeared in a manner contrary to the expectations and teachings of the scribes. The scribes, of course, were the official interpreters and teachers of the Old Testament Scriptures. They had taught that the Messiah would not come before the prophet Elijah re-appeared on the scene. To this end, the prophet Malachi had declared:

> Malachi 4:5-6 ESV
>
> 5 "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. 6 And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."

With this in mind, the disciples approached the Lord Jesus with a question: *"…Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?"*

The disciples were puzzled because they could not reconcile the presence of the Christ with the fact that he had not been preceded by Elijah the prophet—or so they thought. However, both the scribes and the disciples of the Lord Jesus had misunderstood Malachi's prophecy. Malachi had not meant that Elijah would appear literally, or in person, but rather that a prophet of Elijah's calibre would appear before the coming of the Messiah. Thus—inspired by the Holy Spirit—Luke interprets Malachi's prophecy as follows:

> Luke 1:16-17 ESV
>
> 16 … And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 17 and he will go before him *in the spirit and power* of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." (Emphasis added; see also Luke 1:5-15)

Of course, Luke was not speaking of Elijah in person, but of one who would come *in the spirit and power* of Elijah—viz., John the Baptist. (See Matt. 11:10-14 (quoted below))

## MATTHEW 17:11-12

The Lord answers the disciples' question. He assures them that the prophecy has been fulfilled. 'Elijah' had come: i.e., the prophet of the LORD who came in the spirit and power of Elijah had appeared already—and the people had failed to recognise him as the LORD's appointed servant and the herald of his Christ. Indeed, they had despised and rejected his words; and, in effect, they had rejected the Word of the Lord God. They refused to believe that John the Baptist was preparing the way of the LORD, or that the Son of God was about to appear in their midst—in fulfilment of the prophets. Ultimately, John was abused and put to death for his faithfulness to God and to his Word. But none of the people realised that this John the Baptist was the very one prophesied by Malachi four centuries earlier as the 'Elijah' who was to come; or he who would come *in the spirit and power* of Elijah.

Thus, Jesus tells his disciples that just as his herald or forerunner suffered and was put to death, so also he too must suffer and die at the hands of sinful men. As yet, though, the disciples could not comprehend why Jesus should be put to death, and they refused to let this thought dwell in their minds.

(Of course, Elijah had just appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. However, the disciples had been anticipating an appearance of this prophet prior to the coming of the Christ into the world. At the time, however, they had not seen John the Baptist as fulfilling that role.)

## MATTHEW 17:13

Jesus did not tell them explicitly that John the Baptist was he who had come in the spirit and power of Elijah, and therefore had fulfilled the prophecy concerning Elijah. However, now they understood. As the Lord explained how this servant had appeared already, and had been abused and put to death, they knew the Lord must be speaking of John the Baptist.

> Matthew 11:10-14 ESV
>
> 10 This is he of whom it is written, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'
>
> 11 Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.
>
> 12 From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.
>
> 13 For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, 14 and if you are willing to accept it, *he is Elijah who is to come.*" (Emphasis added; see also Matt. 11:1-9)

Perhaps, now, the disciples remembered these words and understood their significance.

## JESUS CASTS OUT A DEMON

***Matthew 17:14-21***

### MATTHEW 17:14-15

(Luke 9:37-43)

Later, the Lord Jesus and his disciples found themselves surrounded once again by a large crowd. Many of the people had come to hear Jesus teach, or to watch him perform wonderful signs. Others had come to seek help or healing in one form or another.

One such man in the crowd came up to Jesus and knelt down before him in homage and worship. Then, the man appealed to the Lord Jesus to help his young son. This man had a measure of faith; although, as we shall see, it was defective in some respects. To some extent, he believed that the Lord Jesus would be able to heal his son, despite the severity of his condition.

Thus, in his anguish, the man cries out to Jesus, *"Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic*[45] *and he suffers terribly...."*

The man went on to explain that these sudden and uncontrollable convulsions often put his son in a potentially hazardous or dangerous situation. For example, he would suffer a seizure near the fire and would fall into the flames—presumably, to be rescued by those nearby. Again, seizures might occur near water, where the boy was in danger of falling in and drowning.

Then, the man adds:

### MATTHEW 17:16

Some time earlier, the distraught father had brought his afflicted son to the Lord's disciples. However, they had been unable to heal him. The Lord had given his disciples the power and authority to heal and to cast out demons in his name. Perhaps, initially, the disciples had failed to recognise the true nature of the boy's condition, and had attempted to heal him in the wrong way. Or it may simply and only have been due to their lack of faith (v.20).

### MATTHEW 17:17

Jesus knew the hearts of all men. Looking upon the crowd, the Son of God knew what they were thinking when this man had appealed to him to heal his son. The Lord knew too what was going through the minds of the scribes who stood waiting to accuse him. They expected him to do something to or with the boy that would give them reason to criticise and condemn his actions.

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[45] *epileptic*: This is the correct translation of the word. However, the AV (KJV) and some other versions translate the word as 'lunatic' (Gk., σεληνιάζεται, selēniazetai) from a term meaning to be 'moonstruck'—supposedly, by the influence of specific phases of the moon on that individual. The translation 'lunatic' (or its modern equivalent), however, is confusing since the boy was not suffering from a mental, psychological, or psychotic disorder but from a neurological condition, which—in this case—had been brought on or was being exacerbated by demon possession.

Thus, to these hypocrites, and to those who doubted his power to act, the Lord declares: *"O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me."*

This is a plain rebuke for the unbelief of the people. Throughout their generations, they had proved faithless to the LORD. Now, they were demonstrating that same intractableness and unbelief toward the Son of God. In spite of all the miracles that he had performed previously, they still did not believe on him or accept that these signs proved that he was the Christ of God. Thus, although in part this rebuke was aimed at the father's hesitant faith and the disciples' 'little' faith, the Lord's words may have been aimed primarily at the crowd standing around him, including the scribes and other religious leaders.

## MATTHEW 17:18

We note from this verse that the boy was not suffering simply or chiefly from epilepsy. Epilepsy in its various forms is a relatively common neurological condition. However, in this case, the boy was suffering from a much more serious underlying condition; and it was this condition which was causing his seizures. Possibly, then, the boy was not suffering from true epilepsy at all, but only from seizures resulting from his real problem.

The boy was demon-possessed. An evil spirit had taken control of his mind and of the neurological processes of his brain. Fundamentally, then this was a spiritual problem or condition, which resulted in physical (and perhaps psychological) manifestations. These manifestations either were mistaken for epilepsy or the epilepsy may have resulted from his underlying spiritual condition.[46]

Of course, whether the boy had been suffering merely from epilepsy or from the more serious demon possession made no difference to the Lord Jesus. He could heal in one case and deliver in the other. However, if the disciples had not realised initially that this boy was suffering from something more serious than epilepsy (then known as 'the falling sickness'), they may have been attempting to heal him instead of casting out the demon. This might have explained why they had failed in their attempts. However, as we shall see shortly (v.20), there was another and more significant reason for their failure.

Instantly, the Lord Jesus rebuked the demon—expelling its evil presence from the boy's body. Immediately, the boy was delivered. Never again would he be afflicted and tormented by demonic powers within him. Never again, for this cause, would he suffer seizures that put his health or life at risk. In his mercy, the Lord had set him free.

## MATTHEW 17:19-20

Now, the disciples query the Lord Jesus about their inability to help this boy. Realising that the boy had been demon-possessed, the disciples asked, *"Why could we not cast it out?"*

[46] As was mentioned in a previous footnote, the word translated 'epilepsy' in modern versions of the Bible was misleadingly translated 'lunatic' in older version—the world 'lunatic' deriving from 'lunar', moon. In earlier centuries, it was assumed that that the cycles of the moon affected a change in a person's mind analogous to that effected by the moon's influence over the tides.

The disciples had been given the power and authority to cast out demons. However, the Lord makes it plain to them that this power and authority is of no avail without faith—faith not in their own human ability or resources, but in the power and ability of the Lord in whose name they acted. The disciples lacked faith: i.e., they lacked the faith necessary to heal or deliver in the name of the Lord. Interestingly, they had healed and delivered people on previous occasions. However, for some reason, their faith failed them on this occasion.

From this we see that it is not enough to be appointed to office in the church, and to be equipped with gifts to serve the Lord, if one does not have sufficient faith to exercise these gifts in the manner God intended. Similarly, it is not enough to assume that the faith that served us yesterday will continue to serve us today—if we do not continue to feed, exercise or renew that faith daily. True faith in the Lord Jesus is living, vital, and prayerful faith. It is an ongoing faith that, once exercised in love, should continue to be exercised daily in various forms of prayer, worship, praise and active and obedient service for the Lord.

The Lord explains to his disciples that their faith need only be the size of a mustard seed to be effective and powerful. In other words, the least amount of faith, proceeding from a humble, contrite, believing and prayerful heart, is more than sufficient faith to move a mountain from one location to another. And, with faith of this kind, nothing would be impossible to them.

Of course, although faith can achieve the impossible in human terms, the Lord was not implying that faith could or should be exercised contrary to the will and purposes of God. The Lord was using an illustration or analogy from common life. He was not suggesting that the disciples should attempt literally to move mountains—since such actions were reserved to the providence and power of God acting through his own laws of nature or by overriding these laws at his own good pleasure. Rather, the Lord Jesus was demonstrating to his disciples that—if it was possible to move mountains by faith—then nothing could present to the believing disciples an insurmountable problem: That is, no legitimate action that conformed to the will and purposes of God. This, of course, included the ability to heal and to cast out demons by faith. Both of these actions were legitimate for the disciples to perform since the Lord had invested them already with the necessary power and authority.

### MATTHEW 17:21

Verse 21 is not included in the original manuscripts and is omitted by several versions including the ESV. It was probably transcribed from the parallel passage in Mark's Gospel, where it appears as genuine (Mark 9:29).

## JESUS SPEAKS OF HIS SUFFERINGS

***Matthew 17:22-23***

### MATTHEW 17:22

(Luke 9:43-45)

The expression, *"As they were gathering in Galilee..."* (ESV, NASB, NRSV) has been variously rendered. The KJV and others understand it as *'while they abode in Galilee'*. Other translations render it as *'[while] they were walking in Galilee'* (LITV), or *'while they were staying in Galilee'* (NKJV).

The phrase translated ‘were gathering’, etc. is derived from a Greek verb (Συστρεφομένων, sustrephomenōn, *sustrephon*) meaning ‘to twist together’; hence, ‘to gather’, ‘to bring together’, to assemble’, or ‘to cause to come together.’ The point being that the Lord Jesus and his disciples had decided now to stop and remain at one particular part of Lower Galilee before moving back to Capernaum.

During this period when Jesus was walking in isolation from the crowds, he began to speak to his disciples again about his coming sufferings. The Lord reveals to them that he would be delivered into the hands of sinful men. This, of course, was completely contrary to the disciples’ cherished hopes and ambitions. At this stage, they believed (mistakenly) that since Jesus was the Christ, then he had come into the world to set up his Messianic reign on earth. To them, this meant establishing the kingdom of God on earth and overthrowing all the enemies of the Jewish people. The thought that the Messiah could or should suffer at the hands of sinful men never entered the heads of Jesus’ disciples. The thought that the Lord Jesus needed to lay down his life and shed his blood for the sins of the people was completely at odds with the disciples’ understanding of the Saviour’s role.

Of course, with their Jewish backgrounds, the disciples were fully acquainted with the Jewish sacrificial system and of the fact that without the offering of these sacrifices there could be no remission of sins. However, as yet, they did not understand that Jesus the Great High Priest was also the Lamb of God. The thought of a suffering and dying Messiah was completely foreign to their way of thinking and to their understanding of the Scriptures. Clearly, however, the disciples were in error concerning their own Scriptures, for these same Scriptures foretold clearly the sufferings of the LORD’s Servant and of the glory that should follow. (Isa. 52:13—53:12; 1 Pet. 1:11)

After telling his disciples that the Son of Man would be delivered into the hands of men, the Lord adds:

## MATTHEW 17:23

If telling his disciples that he was going to be delivered into the hands of men was difficult for them to accept, the revelation that these same men or their associates would put him to death was completely beyond their comprehension. They would reason that the Christ of God could not die—for he was the Son of the living God. And, if he should die, what would become of his Messianic kingdom? Would not that end with his death?

Therefore, the disciples were at a loss. They could not understand why Jesus was saying these things to them, or why he would allow himself to be taken by sinful men and even killed by them. They had seen his sovereign and almighty power at work on many occasions. Why, then, could he not use that same power to smite his enemies on this occasion?

Furthermore, the Lord Jesus tells his disciples not only that he will be killed, but also that he will be raised again on the third day. This may have seemed incredible to the disciples. However, they should have been aware of the Lord’s sovereign power and authority to raise the dead. In the presence of his disciples, the Lord Jesus would raise individuals such as the widow of Nain’s son and Lazarus from the dead. (Luke 7:11-15; John 11:38-44) Thus, the disciples knew the Lord was able to raise the dead. Again, their own Old Testament Scriptures attested to similar occasions when the LORD raised individuals from the dead. (2 Kings 4:32-37 with 8:1)

Even so, the disciples remained exceedingly perplexed and grieved by these words of the Lord Jesus. To them, the arrest and subsequent death of their Lord and Master would put an end to all their hopes and

expectations concerning him. Clearly, they had much to learn about the Saviour of the world; but, in due course, they would comprehend the truths concerning the Lord Jesus and the need for his sufferings—as the Spirit of God enabled them.

## JESUS PAYS THE TEMPLE TAX

***Matthew 17:24-27***

### MATTHEW 17:24

Jesus and his disciples have returned now to Capernaum. Shortly after entering the town, one of the local tax-collectors approached Peter and asked, *"Does your teacher not pay the tax?"* (Although voluntary, payment was expected—hence, the nature of the question.)

This was not the tax imposed on the people by the Roman government and which was collected at the tax booths by men like Levi (Matthew). Rather, this was a different tax payable to different tax-collectors on behalf of the Jewish religious authorities. This was the two-drachma tax payable for the support of the temple in Jerusalem. It originated with the half-shekel tax payable annually by every male among the Jews for the support of the temple (Ex. 30:11-16).

### MATTHEW 17:25

In response to the tax-collector's question, Peter had replied, "Yes." He had affirmed that the Lord Jesus would pay the temple tax. However, once inside the house where they were staying, Jesus had a few words with Peter. It was not so much that Peter had answered the tax-collector wrongly, but that—as so often with Peter—he had answered without fully thinking about what he was saying or why he was answering in the affirmative.

Thus, the Lord Jesus takes his disciples to task: Addressing him as 'Simon', the Lord asks a question that causes Peter to think about the ramifications of his answer to the tax-collector. Thus, Jesus asks, *"What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?"* That is, in accordance with the then prevailing Eastern customs, payment of tolls and taxes was exacted from the citizens of the realm, not from the rulers of the realm or from their children.

### MATTHEW 17:26

Peter concedes that payment is expected and exacted only from 'others' and not from the 'sons'. Once Peter realises the implication of this concession, he realises that his original answer to the temple tax-collector was made on the spur of the moment and without due consideration. Jesus brings this home to Peter when he declares, *"Then the sons are free."*

The explanation here is that the rulers of this world do not tax their own sons for the maintenance of their kingdom. By the same token, the Supreme Ruler in heaven (God the Father) does not tax his own Son for the maintenance of the temple; for that temple represents the glorious sanctuary and throne of God in heaven.

## MATTHEW 17:27

Nevertheless, although not required to pay the temple tax, the Lord Jesus has no wish to offend the religious authorities unnecessarily. Thus, we see that it may be better to do that which is not required of us, rather than give offence needlessly to others—as long as our voluntary actions do not require us to do anything contrary to God's Word or will.

Jesus commands his disciples to go down to the Sea of Galilee. There, they are to cast a fishing line into the sea and draw in the first fish that catches the hook. Inside the fish's mouth, the disciples would discover a silver Roman stater (Gk., στατῆρα, *statēra*) which was equivalent in value to one Jewish shekel or four Greek drachmas. This amount would enable payment to be made for two people. Peter was then told to use this shekel-equivalent to pay the temple tax both for the Lord himself and for Peter.

The fact that a coin of this particular value should be found in the mouth of this particular fish at this particular time demonstrates once more something of the Lord's divine power and glory. Only God or his Son could have so arranged matters providentially to occur in exactly this manner. Similarly only God or his Son could have performed any miracle necessary to achieve the desired end, and for the Lord's glory. Those who dismiss this miracle or who attempt to explain it away succeed only in revealing their wilful unbelief in the power and glory of God and of his Son.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 18

## THE GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM

### THE CHILD-LIKE BELIEVER

***Matthew 18:1-14***

#### MATTHEW 18:1

(Mark 9:33-37)

By this time, the disciples realised that the Lord Jesus had come into the world as the Messiah or Christ of God, and that he was even then proclaiming the kingdom of heaven. From this, the disciples concluded that the Lord Jesus would soon set up his kingdom locally to reign on earth like King David. They imagined that the temple at Jerusalem would be the centre of the Lord's kingdom on earth, with Jesus himself reigning over the peoples as the Messiah-King or King David's Greater Son. This would be in accord with the Old Testament prophets (or so they thought). Thus, the disciples assumed that each of them would be elevated to a special position in this new Davidic kingdom.

Believing, then, that the Lord Jesus would raise them to positions of honour in his kingdom, but not knowing who would be exalted to the highest or supreme position, the disciples asked the Lord Jesus: *"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"*

From this question, we see that the disciples still were thinking of human power and glory. They thought that being a disciple of the Lord Jesus would guarantee them a special place in the kingdom of heaven, exalted above other men and exercising dominion over all others. However, in the Kingdom of Heaven, there could be no place for such carnal thinking. Thus, instead of answering their question directly, the Lord responds by using an illustration:

#### MATTHEW 18:2-3

The Lord Jesus called to him a child who was standing nearby, probably with other members of his or her family. Placing that child in the midst of the disciples, the Lord Jesus then began to teach them a very important lesson about humility.

Jesus begins by declaring, *"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn…"* (v.3a)

The word translated 'turn' (from Gk., στραφῆτε, straphēte, 'to turn' or 'to change') is the same word that means 'to be converted'. Often, this word is used in connection with regeneration or the new birth, but not always. According to the context, the word 'turn' can mean 'to change', 'to alter one's way of life', or 'to alter one's opinions'. The last is probably the meaning intended here. The Lord is not questioning the disciples' spiritual state or standing, but rather their misunderstanding or misapprehension of the kingdom of heaven.

The Lord continues: *"…unless you turn and become like children…"*

Here, the Lord is not emphasising the naivety of children or their limited education or understanding of the world, but rather their willingness to trust and believe that which they are taught combined with their humble acceptance of such truths and their submission to the authority both of their teachers and of the truths conveyed to them. Although children are still sinners, the emphasis here is on their willingness to submit and follow rather than to seek positions of honour, power or glory.

Thus, the Lord says, *"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*

Of course, the kingdom of heaven is a spiritual kingdom, and those who would enter it must enter it through spiritual regeneration or the new birth. However, entry into that kingdom is not open to those who are proud, conceited, arrogant or otherwise rebellious in heart. It is open only to those who—with the sincerity and simplicity of a child—are prepared to accept it in humble and contrite trust and obedience, and without seeking places of honour or glory within the kingdom. With the exception of Judas Iscariot, the disciples had entered the kingdom spiritually. However, they still had much to learn about child-like sincerity, humility, love, trust, submission and obedience to their Master and King.

To this end, the Lord Jesus adds:

## MATTHEW 18:4

The disciples had asked who (of them) was greatest in the kingdom of heaven. The Lord now answers, *"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*

In this verse, the Lord is emphasising that true greatness is found in those believers who exhibit the most child-like and sincere humility. This, of course, was not what the disciples expected to hear. They had expected the Lord to address them as future leaders in his kingdom: those whom he would exalt to places of honour and glory. Now, to be told that a child—who was not even numbered among the Twelve—was to be their pattern and example of true greatness must have astonished them. This was not the kind of greatness they had been anticipating, and it was the very opposite of the greatness, power, glory, and ostentation displayed by the kings of this world.

While the child remained standing among his disciples, the Lord Jesus proceeds to teach them another very important lesson:

## MATTHEW 18:5

Jesus had just used this child to illustrate true greatness and humility. Now, extending this metaphor, the Lord shows in unmistakable terms just how greatly prized and precious humble and sincere believers (children or adult) are in his sight.

The Lord Jesus stresses the importance of receiving humble, earnest, and sincere believers—irrespective of whether these believers are young in the faith or more spiritually mature—and of making them feel welcome and wanted. Indeed, the Lord declares that anyone receiving such a believer in this manner is in effect receiving him: i.e., those who welcome and minister to the needs of one of his redeemed 'children' or 'little ones' are in effect welcoming and ministering to Christ. (See also below, on the parable of the lost sheep, where the Lord again refers to 'these little ones' (v.14))

The Lord Jesus was not alone in speaking of humble and sincere believers as 'little ones' or 'little children', or of attributing to these believers a child-like spirit. In his First and Second Letters, the apostle John uses almost identical expressions. For example, in the second chapter of his First Epistle, John writes to true believers of any age:

> 1 John 2:1 ESV
>
> 1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.
>
> 1 John 2:28 ESV
>
> 28 And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.

These believers were 'little children' in relation to the aged apostle John. (John's reference to 'little children' in 1 John 2:12 is addressed to 'little children' in the literal sense, as the context there indicates.)

Thus, we see the importance of receiving, welcoming, and ministering to the most sincere and unassuming children of God; for those who exhibit these characteristics are exhibiting true Christ-likeness. However, to say or do anything that causes one of these believing 'little ones' to stumble or to fall into sin incurs the strongest possible words of warning from the Lord Jesus, as verse 6 reveals.

## MATTHEW 18:6

*"But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin…"*

This statement expresses a most solemn warning against causing a believer to sin. The reference to 'little ones' emphasises that the believer concerned is a genuine, sincere and earnest child of God. It is not addressed exclusively or primarily to those who are young or immature in the faith, although certainly these are included.

In this verse, the word 'whoever' refers to anyone who does or says something that results in a humble child of God being led into sin. The 'cause' of such sin may be by setting a wrong and ungodly example—especially by supposedly mature believers or by church leaders. It may be by using unwise or ungodly expressions which—in the case of a spiritually immature or weak believer—he or she overhears and may later repeat. It may be by teaching that which is untrue and which causes a trusting, but perhaps somewhat naïve, child of God to believe that wrongdoing can sometimes be morally justified or that righteousness can be compromised on certain occasions.

Many other examples could be cited, but these few serve to illustrate some of the causes that can lead a cherished child of God into sin. However, for those who cause a sincere and humble believer—child or adult—to fall into sin, the Lord Jesus' language is uncompromising:

*"…it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea"* (v.6b)

To offend a person who believes on the Lord Jesus and cause him or her to sin is to merit the most severe judgment of God—which the offender will certainly face at the Last Day. Indeed, in the Lord's eyes, such a person is not fit to live on this earth. It would be better for him to be cast into the depth of the

sea with a great weight tied around his neck—although even this will not spare him from the judgment yet to come.

These are solemn and disturbing words. One day, we will all stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ to give an account of what we have thought, said or done—and for what we have failed to say or do. (Rom. 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10) Yet, the Lord is unsparing in his words. Rather than be allowed to live, those who cause a child of God to sin would be better drowned with a heavy (upper or 'ass') millstone round their neck.

Therefore, the Lord Jesus makes it abundantly clear that he expects his 'little ones' to be treated with loving respect, dignity and honour. However, to cause one such believer (child or adult) to sin, by our words, by our actions, or by any other means is to bring oneself under the judgment of God—who will by no means clear the guilty.

Still speaking in connection with these 'little ones' or child-like believers, the Lord declares in verse 7:

## MATTHEW 18:7

Here, the Lord Jesus pronounces 'woes' or foretells judgments on the world. Woes—resulting from offences caused by sinful mankind—are the inevitable consequence of a fallen world. Yet, judgment will fall on all those who cause such offences, woes or sufferings. Temptations to sin will prevail because of man's sinful nature and propensity toward evil. However, this does not absolve any man or woman of their responsibility to and accountability before God. Those who cause others to sin by their own sinful words or actions will be judged and condemned accordingly. This includes not only those who offend humble believers with child-like faith in Christ, but also those who offend any believer and cause them to sin. The Lord God will not hold them guiltless who have made others guilty.

In verse 8, the Lord Jesus becomes more specific:

## MATTHEW 18:8

The Lord has used this and similar illustrations elsewhere. (Matt. 5:29-30; Mark 9:43-48) On such occasions, Jesus does not intend his words to be understood literally; for making a literal application would not solve the root problem—which is a sinful heart or mind. The Lord Jesus is using these expressions to emphasise that drastic action must be taken to root out the cause of offences that may result in others committing sin.

In this instance, the Lord speaks of the hand or foot. If a person is likely to do something with any part of his body that might offend one of his 'little ones', or that might lead that child of God into sin, then the potential offender must act swiftly and dramatically to avoid causing sin. He must do the equivalent of cutting off his hand or foot. This may involve the loss of someone or something cherished in that person's heart or mind. However, it is better for him to lose that which is highly likely to offend other believers (justifiably) or to cause them to sin. To refuse to recognise one's likelihood of causing a child of God to sin, or to sin against that redeemed child of God, is like keeping one's limbs or bodily organs intact—e.g., by refusing to renounce evil, dishonourable, or highly dubious words or actions that may lead others into sin. Ultimately, however, since the practice of those deeds proves him to be an ungodly individual, such a

person will be cast into the eternal fire. This can be the only outcome for those who, by their example or actions, cause 'one of the least of these' to fall into sin.

## MATTHEW 18:9

What was true of the hand or foot is true also of the eye. Again, the Lord Jesus is speaking metaphorically—for removing an eye would not solve the sinful root, arising in a person's innermost being or thought-life (the 'heart' or 'mind'). However, if a person knows that there are things that he would look upon, watch, view or read with his eyes which are questionable or offensive to himself or to others, then he should not be using his God-given eyes for this purpose. This is an abuse of one's body and a violation of the temple of the Holy Spirit. (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:18-20)

Furthermore, if one of these 'little ones' should observe what this other supposedly more mature believer is doing, or otherwise learns of it, will he too not be tempted to do likewise? Thus, a sincere, but perhaps spiritually weak, child of God is caused to fall into sin because of what he has seen or heard other Christians were looking at, viewing, or reading. (Cf. 1 Cor. 8:7-13)

This is the 'temptations' of which the Lord had spoken in verse 7 above, and whose instigators he had denounced—for it is by such temptations that inexperienced or immature believers especially may be led into sin. Thus, the Lord commands those whose eye is the cause of such offence to pluck it out and to cast it from them: That is, to deal quickly and radically with the inward cause of this sin (the heart or mind) by repenting of it before God and by renouncing it utterly.

In practice, this means abandoning completely that which causes such offences via the eyes: namely, offensive reading material, objectionable television programs or other media, potentially offensive company (unwholesome or inappropriate friendships) or locations, and anything else that exposes the eyes and mind deliberately to sinful performances or occurrences.

Only by employing such a drastic remedy will we, as believers, experience true forgiveness before God. Only by keeping a very close watch on our thought-life and what we view with our eyes will we avoid causing offence to one of Christ's little ones, possibly resulting in that precious child of God falling into serious sin himself.

In case his point had not registered fully with his hearers, the Lord Jesus adds: *"…It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire."*

Here, the Lord is adding a most solemn warning to anyone who is not prepared to deal radically with his sinful nature—either by seeking repentance and forgiveness before God if he has not previously experienced the Lord's salvation, or by seeking repentance and forgiveness for sinning grievously and inexcusably as a redeemed believer (as did King David). Those, however, who do not repent, who do not experience the Lord's grace and mercy in forgiveness, who continue to indulge their sin and who act as a catalyst of sin to others, face the inevitable consequences: *"…to be thrown into the hell of fire."*

It matters not one iota whether this phrase should be understood literally or metaphorically. If literal, no further explanation is needed than what is expressed here and in many places elsewhere. If metaphorical, the expression simply means that the place of those who will be separated from God for all eternity is a place that can be likened to a continually burning fire: That is, the effects of God's everlasting anger or wrath on the finally impenitent, together with the effects of an ever-accusing conscience and the realisa-

tion that one can never again seek the Lord's mercy and grace but must for all eternity abide under his just and holy wrath is analogous to, and equal with, being cast into *'the hell of fire'*. We must remember, of course, that a person's immortal soul cannot be destroyed or annihilated by the torments of hell but must endure these torments forever.

## THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP

***Matthew 18:10-14***

### MATTHEW 18:10

The Lord Jesus continues his words of warning to his disciples, who had been guilty of seeking personal prestige and honour. The great danger with positions of responsibility and honour is that those elevated to such positions will begin to consider themselves better than or superior to others. This is manifestly untrue; for as the Lord will say later, those raised to positions of power or authority within the church are the servants of God and the servants and shepherds of his people. They are there to minister, not to be ministered unto and not to command or expect that reverence or honour which is due to God and to his Son alone.

Thus, in preparation for their coming role as church leaders and shepherds, the Lord warns his apostles not to look down on or despise the 'little ones' that comprise his flock. They are cherished in his sight, and the Lord expects his disciples to feed them on the Word, to meet their spiritual and physical needs and to pastor them from a loving, caring and compassionate heart—treating each one of God's redeemed children as their equals or betters.

The Lord Jesus then gives one reason for so treating his beloved children: *"For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven."*

The Lord here is referring to one of the offices of the holy and glorious angels of God. Among the angels in the presence of God are those whom the Father sends forth to minister to the heirs of salvation: i.e., the elect people or children of God. In some way not revealed to us, the Lord has charged these holy angels to keep watch over his 'little ones'. (Ps. 91:11; Heb. 1:13-14)

The reference to seeing the face of the Father in heaven is a way of asserting that certain holy angels have direct access to the Father's presence to report on these 'little ones' of whom the Lord is speaking. This does not mean necessarily that each individual believer has been assigned a particular angel as his or her guardian. However, it means that in some way holy angels observe the children of God with a view to their preservation or protection. Ultimately, of course, the Father himself determines his children's destiny through Jesus Christ his Son. The angels *minister* or *serve* on the believers' behalf. However, they do not and cannot *mediate* between believers and God the Father (as per the Colossian heresy). (1 Tim. 2:5)

### MATTHEW 18:11

*"For the Son of Man came to save the lost."*

This verse is not included in several of the ancient Greek manuscripts; in the Greek texts used by Origen, Eusebius or Jerome, or in the Syriac or Coptic translations. Nor is it included in the most accurate revi-

sions of the Greek text. Possibly, it has been transcribed by an early copyist from Luke 19:10, where a similar sentence occurs in a different context (cf. also Matt. 9:13).

## MATTHEW 18:12-13

The Lord Jesus now uses another analogy to illustrate the preciousness of these 'little ones' or unassuming and humble children of God who have been led into sin, or who have otherwise backslidden. (The Lord uses virtually the same parable in Luke 15:4-7, but in a different context. There, it refers to the self-righteous and spiritually lost Pharisees.)

In Jewish society, the keeping of sheep formed a most important part of their economy and religious activities. Sheep were a valuable asset to Eastern shepherds. Indeed, often, the shepherds would give individual names to their sheep and call each one by their names.

Thus, if one of these Jewish shepherds should count his sheep, only to discover that one animal was missing, he would immediately set about searching for the one lost sheep. Leaving the remaining ninety-nine on the relative safety of the pastures, the shepherd would search across the hills, gorges, rivers and valleys looking for his lost sheep. Ultimately, when he finds his lost sheep—perhaps fallen into some ditch or ravine—he saves it from its predicament and recovers it to the safety of the fold or to the pastures. Furthermore, he will examine it thoroughly, cleansing and binding up its wounds and comforting it after its traumatic experience away from the flock and from the shepherd.

Upon recovering his lost sheep to the safety of the fold, the shepherd rejoices exceedingly that his sheep has been saved from harm, danger and the risk of perishing. Indeed, he will rejoice more over that one sheep that was lost than over the remaining ninety-nine that never wandered from the security of the green pastures.

## MATTHEW 18:14

The foregoing parable illustrates the deep concern that the Shepherd of Israel has for his sheep—and especially for those that wander off, or are led astray, and become lost from the flock. This represents those humble believers or children of God who wander from the truth, or who are led into sin, possibly by the bad example of some other supposedly more mature Christians.

Yet, the Lord is not willing that any should perish. Therefore, our Shepherd seeks for the lost sheep on the hills and on the mountains (i.e., in those places or situations to which it has been led astray). Upon finding his lost sheep, the Lord Jesus—working through his servants—recovers the sheep and brings it back to his fold. This illustrate the pastor or other servant of God, acting in Christ's name, who recovers one of these 'little ones' from their sin and who leads them back into communion with God and to the safety and fellowship of the church (illustrated by the green pastures or the fold).

Thus, upon the recovery of this little one or humble child of God the Father rejoices with his people; for it was not the will of the Father in heaven that one of these little ones should perish (cf. John 6:39; 10:27-29; 17:12; 2 Pet. 3:9; see also Zech 13:7 for the use of the phrase 'the little ones').

## THE RECALCITRANT BROTHER

***Matthew 18:15-20***

### MATTHEW 18:15

The Lord Jesus now turns his attention from those who cause offence to his 'little ones', to believers who are offended against. The Lord refers to fellow-believers as 'brothers'; because, in Christ Jesus, no distinction exists: everyone who belongs to him is either a brother or sister in him, and a joint-heir with him in his glory.

If one such brother (or sister) sins against us—wittingly or unwittingly—we are not to overlook the matter or let it rest. This was to ensure that the matter was raised and resolved at the earliest possible opportunity. Only by taking this positive action can we ensure that a fault has been identified, acknowledged and remedied. However, overlooking the matter may create greater problems for both parties, as the offended party may begin to harbour suspicion or resentment in his heart and the offender may incur feelings of guilt and sorrow which he does not know how best to remedy.

Thus, to forestall any such difficulties, the Lord Jesus instructs his people (not just the twelve disciples) to approach our offending brother and to make him aware of his fault. However, this approach must be made privately and discreetly, without any other persons being present; since, at this stage, the matter is between these two parties alone.

If the brother responds favourably, acknowledging his sin and confessing it before God and the offended brother, then the offended brother has achieved not only reconciliation with another believer but also has enabled that other believer to see his fault and to put the matter to rights. Therefore, both parties have been reconciled before God and they have been reunited to one another in the bonds of spiritual and Christian love.

### MATTHEW 18:16

The possibility remains, however, that when this initial approach is made, the offending brother refuses to listen to his offended brother, to recognise any fault or sin, or to see any need for reconciliation either with God or with his brother. In the case of such obduracy, the Lord Jesus instructs believers to make a second approach to this recalcitrant brother. On this occasion, however, the offended believer is to take with him one or more witnesses to establish the words and actions of the offender—in case this record should be needed on a future occasion.

Again, if the offender acknowledges his fault in the presence of these witnesses, then he has been reconciled with the offended brother and no further action is necessary. However, if he still refuses obstinately to acknowledge any fault on his part, or to be reconciled with God and with his brother, then further steps must be taken to resolve this issue. The Lord addresses these steps in verse 17:

## MATTHEW 18:17

The third step in this process is to bring the matter before the church. This refers not only to the church leadership, but to the entire congregation—for, now, it is against the entire body of Christ that this man is sinning; and, now, the entire church must be involved in hearing his case.

If, on being brought before the church, the offender then confesses his sin and seeks to remedy his fault, then the church must forgive him and continue to allow him to fellowship in their midst. However, if he refuses categorically to acknowledge his sin, to listen to the church, or to be reconciled to his brother, then—and this is the fourth step—the church must take the initiative in expelling him from their fellowship.

While he remains in this obdurate, rebellious and unforgiven state, this person cannot be permitted to share communion with the Lord's redeemed and holy people or to fellowship with them in any way. Therefore, he is to be treated as 'a Gentile and a tax collector': i.e., as a stranger or alien from the grace of God, from his redemptive mercy, and from the fellowship of his people.

If he is truly a child of God, this exposure to the world (or 'handing over to Satan' the god of this world (cf. 1 Tim. 1:20) ought to bring him to his senses and result ultimately in his repentance and return to God (as with the lost son). However, if being excommunicated results in his taking increasing pleasure in the things of the world and hardening his heart increasingly against the things of God, then this demonstrates that this person was a believer in name only, and not therefore a true child of God.

## MATTHEW 18:18

The Lord Jesus now expands on his instructions concerning church discipline by using terminology that would have been familiar to almost all Jews. The terms, 'binding' and 'loosing' were in regular use among the rabbis. When a rabbi declared that something was 'bound' he meant that God's Law proscribed or forbade that matter. When he declared that something was 'loosed', the rabbi meant that God's Law permitted that matter. Thus, a rabbi could not declare something permissible if that matter had been 'bound' (i.e., forbidden) by God in heaven. Similarly, a rabbi could not declare something forbidden if that matter had been 'loosed' (i.e., declared permissible) by God in heaven.

Therefore, in addressing his disciples (not just Peter), the Lord Jesus declares to them that they must observe this principle: Any matter that they forbade on earth must be a matter that God in heaven had forbidden previously in his Word. Likewise, any matter that the apostles permitted on earth must be a matter that God in heaven had permitted previously in his Word.

We should remember of course that—on this occasion—these instructions were being given in connection with church discipline or correction. They related to the action that the apostles were—or were not—permitted to take when disciplining an offender, such as the recalcitrant brother being considered in this passage.

The Lord continues with his instructions in the following verse:

### MATTHEW 18:19

Here, the Lord Jesus is instructing the apostles how to respond when confronted with such a situation in the church. Before any action is taken against an offender, the apostles or church leaders ought to consider the matter most carefully among themselves, and with the most earnest prayers to God for wisdom and guidance in the matter. Having reached a consensus before God, the apostles are to seek God's approval on the action they are about to take against the offending and impenitent brother. Having followed these procedures, the apostles were to be assured that they would be acting in the name of God the Father, and with the authority of the Lord Jesus, when they made known their judgment and took the necessary action against the impenitent offender.

This principle was not restricted to the matter immediately at hand. The same rules would apply to other similar situations within the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

### MATTHEW 18:20

Now, the Lord Jesus affirms his presence among the apostles or church leaders whenever they assemble to consider such cases and to pass judgment in the name of the Lord. Where two or three of the apostles are present to consider such a case, the Lord Jesus would be present also. Therefore, their prayerful deliberations and judgments would not reflect the opinions or judgments of men merely, but the judgment of the Lord as he guided these men by his Holy Spirit to reach a right, fair and just decision; and, in the case of the original apostles only, an infallible or inerrant decision.

This verse is used frequently to claim the presence of the Lord Jesus in a worshipping church meeting. The sentiment is true—for the Lord is indeed present among his people on such occasions especially. However, to apply that meaning from this verse is to wrest the verse from its immediate context—which is dealing with church discipline, as the preceding and following verses indicate.

## PETER QUESTIONS LIMITS OF FORGIVENESS

## THE UNGRATEFUL SERVANT

***Matthew 18:21-35***

### MATTHEW 18:21-22

At this point, Peter approached the Lord Jesus with a question: The apostle wanted to know how many times a brother might sin against him and still receive forgiveness. Clearly, Peter believed that a line should be drawn at some point when it would be no longer appropriate to forgive a persistently offending brother. Therefore, the apostle asks Jesus if seven times would suffice before subsequent forgiveness was refused.

Jesus' answer must have astonished Peter. In verse 16, the Lord declares categorically that no such limit had been set by him ("*I do not say to you seven times...*"). While such limits might sound reasonable to men, they were not so with God. Therefore, the Lord Jesus declared to Peter and to the other disciples that they must be prepared to forgive a brother up to seventy times seven. This expression is not to be understood as setting a much higher limit merely, but rather as intimating that forgiveness must be ex-

tended any number of times (or without limit) to a brother expressing repentance. God alone knew that brother's heart and whether his expression of repentance was genuine or not; and God alone would judge him justly at the Last Day. However, no man—not even an apostle—could determine the true state of a person's heart, nor could he know with unfailing certainty whether that person's desire for forgiveness was genuine or not. Therefore, the Lord required that the disciples forgave those who sought forgiveness—no matter how great their debt and no matter how many times they had sought forgiveness previously.

In order to make abundantly clear the significance of this teaching, Jesus now proceeds to explain matters further with the aid of a parable.

## MATTHEW 18:23

The Lord compares the kingdom of heaven to a king who called his servants to give account of their service for him. The analogy here is God acting as Sovereign Ruler over his kingdom and those who belong to that kingdom. One day, the King will call them to account for how they have lived their lives and for how they have acted toward others—including others who have been indebted to them.

## MATTHEW 18:24-25

During the course of his settlement or assessment and judgment of these servants, one was brought before the king who owed him a vast amount—expressed in monetary terms as 'ten thousand talents'. However, the servant was completely unable to pay this amount, therefore his debt to his master remained outstanding. Consequently, the king demanded reparations in some other form: the servant's wife, children and entire property were to be sold and the money raised from their sale was to be used to clear the outstanding debt.

This, however, was more than the bankrupt servant could endure.

## MATTHEW 18:26-27

Falling down on his knees, the impoverished servant pleaded with the king for mercy. "…*Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything*."

The thought of losing his beloved wife and children, and also his remaining property, was too much for this man. He had pleaded with his lord for mercy and patience. He had promised to pay back all he owed if only his lord would give him more time.

What was the master's reaction? He had pity on that servant (v.27). In his mercy, the master released the man. However, instead of holding the man to his promise to repay everything later, the master forgave the servant entirely and discharged this servant of his immense debt.

This illustrates the love and mercy of God toward those who are greatly indebted to him. In spite of their overwhelming debt of sin, which bankrupts them spiritually and which they cannot by any means repay, the Lord God forgives them of their sin and discharges them of the debt owed to him; ultimately, because that debt has been paid by Another.

## MATTHEW 18:28-29

With the burden of his debt lifted from his shoulders, and judgment against him cancelled, the servant went out from the presence of the king.

After a while, however, the same man encountered one of his fellow-servants. This fellow-servant owed the previously forgiven man a comparatively meagre sum of money—a hundred denarii. Seizing his unfortunate debtor by the throat, however, the forgiven servant began to throttle him, demanding payment from him immediately.

The violently accosted servant soon collapsed, choking, on the ground, imploring his accuser for mercy. He pleaded with him earnestly to have patience, and then he would pay back everything that he owed. This, of course, was the very same approach that the merciless accuser had used previously when pleading on his knees to the king for mercy.

## MATTHEW 18:30

However, instead of following the example of his lord and king and showing mercy, this man took his indebted fellow-servant to court for recovery of the hundred denarii. This resulted in his fellow-servant being imprisoned as a debtor, since he had no means of clearing his debt. Furthermore, the debtor would remain in prison until he had paid off his debt. However, due to his incarceration, this would now be impossible. Therefore, this poor debtor would remain in prison indefinitely.

## MATTHEW 18:31

Nevertheless, the imprisoned servant was not without some friends and sympathisers. Some other fellow servants had seen all that had taken place. In great distress, they made their way to their master's residence and told him all that had occurred to the unfortunate servant, and how he had been imprisoned because he could not repay the servant that the master had forgiven previously.

## MATTHEW 18:32-33

Without delay, the master summoned the servant into his presence. As soon as the ungrateful wretch appeared, the master declared to him, *"'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. (33) And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servants, as I had mercy on you?'"*

This man had despised the grace and mercy of his master by his actions against his fellow servant. Therefore, the master now deals with this wicked individual as his actions deserved. The master addresses him as a 'wicked'—i.e., morally evil or worthless—servant. He reminds him of the great mercy and forgiveness that he had received when he deserved only to be punished for his maladministration. He reminds the servant of how his pleas for mercy had been heard. Then, he is reminded of his duty toward his fellow servants. However, this unworthy servant had grasped at the hand of mercy for himself while withdrawing the hand of mercy from his fellow servant.

## MATTHEW 18:34

Now, in righteous indignation, the master pronounces sentence against this ungrateful and unmerciful servant. The king revokes his previous bill of cancellation and once again holds the servant responsible for his outstanding and immense debt.

Since, however, the servant is still unable to pay this debt, the master hands him over to the jailers. Now, he must remain in bonds until he has paid his debt in full—which, under the circumstances, means that he can never discharge his debt toward his master. He will remain confined forever.

## MATTHEW 18:35

Now, the Lord Jesus brings home the point of this parable. Peter had asked how often it was necessary for him to forgive his brother. Jesus has just illustrated the magnitude of the debt that his servants (his redeemed people) owe to God and the extent of the forgiveness that, in his love and mercy, God has granted to them. From this, it follows that those who have been forgiven such an immense debt toward God ought and must be willing to forgive those who owe comparatively minor debts toward them.

Of course, this principle is not confined to pecuniary or fiscal matters. In Christ Jesus, God has forgiven his people of all kinds and degrees of offences against him. Therefore, all those who are in Christ Jesus are morally obliged to forgive all kinds and degrees of offences that are committed against them or their families by a brother or sister in Christ.

Nor is this forgiveness to be limited to a certain number of times. The point of the Lord's reply to Peter and his teaching in this parable is that heartfelt forgiveness is to be extended to a person as often as that person seeks forgiveness. If that person is seeking forgiveness from an insincere heart and with impure motives, then we cannot withhold forgiveness on that account. God alone knows the truth. He alone is fit to judge, and one day he will judge each one of us as our thoughts, words and deeds deserve.

Therefore, in summary, the Lord Jesus announces these solemn words to his disciples: *"So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."*

Thus, we see that forgiveness must be sincere, genuine or heartfelt. We cannot say we will forgive but we will not forget. God cannot forget. However, when he forgives his people, he promises not to recall their previous sins and iniquities. He cast them, as it were, into the depth of the sea. (Micah 7:19) Therefore, his people must not recall their brother or sisters' offences against them, but forgive them from a sincere heart and be reunited with them in the bonds of Christian love and fellowship.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 19

## JESUS RETURNS TO JUDEA

***Matthew 19:1-2***

### MATTHEW 19:1-2

At this stage, the Lord Jesus and his disciples moved from Galilee into Judea, on the far side of the River Jordan. This part of Judea (Transjordan) lay on the route normally used by Jews, including Jewish pilgrims heading for Jerusalem, from lands to the north. By travelling this way, these Jews could avoid passing through Samaria. Although shorter in many cases, most Jews did not wish to come into contact with the Samaritan people so they chose the longer route by Transjordan.

It is possible, although not certain, that some of those whom Jesus now met near the Jordan were pilgrims on their way to the temple at Jerusalem. Others, however, would have been local people who had come to hear Jesus preach, or to be healed by him. Ultimately, a large crowd gathered around the Lord Jesus and he healed all those who sought his help.

## PHARISEES QUESTION JESUS ABOUT DIVORCE

***Matthew 19:3-9***

### MATTHEW 19:3

As the Lord was teaching and healing these people, a delegation of Pharisees approached him with a question: *"Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"*

This was a test question, designed to ensnare the Lord Jesus. There was considerable disagreement between the two main rabbinical schools over the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1, which reads:

> Deut. 24:1 ESV
>
> 1 "When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house..."

The school of Shammai insisted on the strict view on divorce, whereby divorce was permitted on the grounds of marital unchastity or unfaithfulness (adultery) alone. The more liberal school of Hillel, however, taught that divorce was permitted on numerous grounds ('easy divorce'), including the husband's preference for another woman, some minor offence committed by his wife, or simply taking a dislike to his wife.

Thus, the Pharisees were convinced that they could entrap the Lord Jesus in his words—no matter which side he took on the matter.

## MATTHEW 19:4-5

The Lord Jesus, however, knew the intentions of the Pharisees and he was not about to fall into their trap. Therefore, instead of answering them, he replies with a question of his own: *"Have you not read..."*

The Pharisees had made reference indirectly to the law given by Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 24. However, the Lord now refers to an earlier passage of God's Word concerning marriage, and one which reflected God's original intentions for this sacred institution:

> *(4) ..."Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, (5) and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?"*

Together with the scribes, the Pharisees were the 'doctors' of the law and the interpreters of God's Word. Above all people, they should have known the Scriptures, and especially the origin of the law concerning marriage. However, now, the Pharisees were stumbling over a temporary ordinance given by God through Moses on account of his people's obstinacy. Instead, the Pharisees should have been considering God's original ordinance respecting the sanctity and permanence of marriage.

In the passage to which the Lord Jesus refers, certain matters become unquestionably clear:

- God created mankind.
- God created mankind as male and female.
- The purpose of this sexual distinction was so that male and female (alone) could be united with each other as one.
- Thus (v.5) the Lord declares that a man shall leave his parents and hold fast to (or become united with) his wife.
- Consequently, these two shall become one flesh.

In the family and sexual realm, God recognises no other human partnership or union. In God's eyes, marriage between male and female is the only normal and natural union, the only one which receives his blessing and the only one on which his favour rests. However, as we see from the passage, this union is intended to be permanent. It can be annulled only by the death of one of the partners or otherwise as God's Word (not the opinions, dictates, or laws of men) expressly decrees.

Lest there should be any doubt about the significance of the Lord's words in this passage, Jesus then adds:

## MATTHEW 19:6

> *"So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."*

Here, the Lord Jesus clarifies unmistakably God's intention for the marriage relationship. Those whom he has united as husband and wife are no longer two separate people. In certain respects, they remain

separate. However, by virtue of the marriage vows and of their conjugal union, they have been united inseparably as one—a single sacred entity in the sight of God.

Since these two have been united by God, and remain so in his sight, then God alone has the power and authority to separate them. No man may take this power or authority unto himself; for, to do so, is to violate God's ordinance and to desecrate his sacred institution regarding a husband and his wife.

Of course, just as in the days of Moses, the Lord recognises his people's obstinacy or hardness of heart. Thus, as the Lord Jesus declares elsewhere, he has made provision for those whose marriage has been destroyed by wilful and persistent adultery—much in line with Shammai's teaching. However, unlike Hillel and his followers, the Lord never permits divorce among his people on lesser grounds, but only on the grounds expressly and unequivocally set down in his Word.

## MATTHEW 19:7

Now, the Pharisees refer back to Deuteronomy chapter 24. If, as the Lord had just stated, marriage was permanent then why did Moses say that divorce was lawful? Moses was God's spokesman. It was he whom God had called and chosen to receive and transmit his Commandments to the people of Israel. Why, then, did this same Moses permit a certificate of divorce to be issued if God had intended the marriage union to be indissoluble?

## MATTHEW 19:8

Here, the Lord Jesus reveals that Moses was granting a concession because of the people's stubbornness relating to God's law and—in this case—to the inviolability of the marriage relationship. Sin interposed. Fallen human nature resulted in irreparably broken and destroyed marriage relationships. The single union between a husband and his wife alone was being violated wilfully and persistently. Thereby, the marriage union and covenant was being effectively annulled. Thus, to limit the damage being caused between the parties or within the families, Moses permitted a man to issue a certificate of divorce and to dismiss the offending partner.

Nevertheless, as Jesus adds, this was not God's intention originally. The Lord had not contemplated divorce or dissolution of the marriage union when he created Adam and Eve; for, had they and their descendants not sinned, irreconcilable marriage difficulties would never have arisen. Divorce would never have occurred. Rather, a man and his wife would have remained united in love for their natural lives on this earth. However, because sin entered the world through the fall of Adam and Eve, it became necessary for Moses to make concessions, in line with God's law, that dealt with the situation as it had become in a fallen world. However, these concessions were limited—as the Lord is about to explain. Divorce was not permitted except on specific grounds; and where the offending party or parties refused consistently to seek reconciliation and forgiveness.

## MATTHEW 19:9

The Lord Jesus now states the one principal reason for which divorce may be permitted. However, in this verse, the Lord also makes it abundantly clear that if a man divorces his wife for any reason other than the one he is about to mention, that man becomes guilty of adultery if he then marries another woman. This is because God does not recognise divorce on any grounds other than that stated in his Word.

Therefore, in God's eyes, a man who is divorced on any of these other grounds is in fact still united in marriage to his original wife. Thus, if he marries another woman, he commits adultery.

The Lord Jesus now mentions the exception to the rule concerning divorce: Divorce is permitted in the case of sexual immorality. The Lord does not elaborate on the exact nature of this immorality. However, it was probably common adultery. Adultery, or marital unfaithfulness, involved a flagrant violation of the marriage vows and covenant, of the bonds of love and fidelity, and of the exclusive sexual union between a husband and his wife. Thus, any person who committed adultery had severed their union with their wife.

So serious does God consider marital unfaithfulness to be, that he no longer sees the husband and his wife as being inseparably united. This union has been violated already. Nevertheless, in keeping with the teaching of God's Word elsewhere, the offending party ought to seek forgiveness and reconciliation. Wherever possible, marital relations between the original partners should be restored and resumed.

Yet, the Lord recognises that reconciliation may not be possible or even desirable under the circumstances. Thus, in these exceptional cases, he makes allowance for divorce. The fact that subsequent remarriage is permitted is clear from the verse. The Lord Jesus states unequivocally that a man divorcing his wife and then remarrying will be guilty of adultery—implying clearly that this is not the case in the situation that he is about to mention (sexual immorality). Therefore, the Lord is implying that remarriage *in this particular case* is permissible. Indeed, in most cases, it would be contrary to the will and purposes of God for a man not to be permitted to remarry, unless God were to grant to him the gift of chastity or self-control.

## THE DISCIPLES' RESPONSE TO JESUS' TEACHING

***Matthew 19:10-12***

### MATTHEW 19:10

This restriction on divorce surprised the disciples. They had been accustomed to following the common Jewish line regarding divorce, whereby a man enjoyed the liberty to dissolve the marriage union for many reasons—and even if he found his wife displeasing to him. Now, however, that Jesus had restricted divorce to sexual immorality (adultery), this meant that the vast majority of reasons given as grounds for divorce were not valid. Thus, the disciples felt that—with such restrictions placed on the marriage bond—it would be better not to marry at all.

Of course, this showed something of the disciples' low view of the marriage relationship. In common with many other people of their day, they believed that marriage need not be considered as a permanent institution, but could be dissolved for a variety of reasons. These men had yet much to learn about God's original intentions for a man and his wife and about the life-long commitment to one another in the marriage relationship. As in our day, the disciples were living in a world where marital unfaithfulness abounded. Yet, this no more met with God's approval then than it does now. God hates divorce; and he detests the reasons that lead to divorce and results in the dissolution of the family unit. (Cf. Mal. 2:10-16)

## MATTHEW 19:11-12

The disciples had just remarked to the Lord Jesus that it would be better for a man not to marry (v.10). The Lord now addresses this remark directly, as this statement had raised separate important issues. Thus, the Lord declares, *"Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given…"*

Here, Jesus is cautioning his disciples in respect of the remark they had just made. They had said that it would be better for a man not to marry. However, God had said that it was not good for a man to be alone. (Gen. 2:18) For this reason, he had created mankind male and female. Again, for this reason, he had created the woman for the man, that they might find love, companionship and intimacy with one another. (Gen. 2:21-25) With few exceptions, a man could not fulfil God's purposes for his life apart from union and communion with his wife. Therefore, concerning the single state, the Lord declares to his disciples that *"Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given…"* In other words, the single state was not to be considered desirable or preferable. Nevertheless, the Lord recognised a few exceptions to this rule:

1. There were people who had been castrated at birth (intentionally or accidentally), and therefore would never be able to produce children. Nothing prevented these people from seeking marriage. However, if they chose not to marry because of their physical defect, then they were not to be hindered or discouraged in their choice. These people could still fulfil the Lord's purposes for their lives in a unique and committed way.

2. Some people had been castrated by other men; perhaps for service in the royal households or for some other situations where the possibility of sexual relations was forcibly prevented. Under the circumstances, these men might choose to remain single. Yet, even as eunuchs, they could serve the Lord and fulfil his purposes for their lives.

3. Some men had 'made themselves eunuchs'. This does not mean necessarily that these men had sought physical castration. Rather, the expression may be understood metaphorically to mean that certain individuals were prepared to deny themselves normal and natural sexual relations in marriage in order to serve the Lord without the distractions of family life and to further the work of God's kingdom in an undivided manner. Clearly, some of the Lord's people—male and female—did commit themselves to a single life, and did live to serve God in this way. However, as the apostle Paul tells us, no one should consider remaining unmarried unless God has given to that person the necessary gift of sexual self-control. (1 Cor. 7:1-11)

Therefore, the Lord Jesus summarises his remarks by adding, *"Let the one who is able to receive this receive it."*

In other words, the disciples' remarks about remaining single must not be applied universally. Apart from the incongruity of such an action, the single state is permitted *only to those with the gift of self-control*. If, however, this gift should be removed at any time in the future, then that person is under obligation to seek marriage. (1 Cor. 7:9)

## JESUS WELCOMES LITTLE CHILDREN

***Matthew 19:13-15***

### MATTHEW 19:13

While Jesus was teaching, some mothers approached them with their little children. These mothers sought the blessing of the Lord Jesus on their children, and they requested Jesus to lay his hands on them and pray for them. In Jewish religious circles, the laying on of hands was used to impart God's blessing to the recipient. Thus, these mothers were asking the Lord Jesus to do this for their children.

However, the Lord's disciples were displeased by this interruption. Indeed, they went so far as to rebuke the mothers who were bringing their children to Jesus. Perhaps the disciples thought that this was not the time or place for the Lord to concern himself with mothers and their children. Perhaps, they even thought that the Lord had more important matters to attend to than with blessing little children.

Jesus, however, showed to his disciples their great mistake:

### MATTHEW 19:14

The Lord Jesus commands that the little children should be brought to him. They were not to be hindered in any way, and no one was to place a stumbling block before them or to attempt to discourage them from coming or from being brought into his presence. Thus, Jesus shows how important to him are little children. Society may consider children inferior in status. They may consider that they should not be heard or that they are somehow less significant or important to God than adults. Jesus, however, makes it abundantly clear that a person's age or status in society is irrelevant to him. All who come will be received by him. And all these children whom the mothers bring to Jesus will receive his divine blessing and will benefit from his prayers on their behalf.

From this, we learn how important it is to involve even the youngest infants and children in the fellowship of the church. None is ever too young to be in the house of the Lord or among the people of God. And the benefits of such spiritual fellowship are conveyed to some extent to these children as well as to their parents.

The Lord Jesus continues by saying, *"…for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."*

On a previous occasion, the Lord had likened a humble and sincere believer to a little child. Using a young child as an example of humility, the Lord had declared that no one could enter the kingdom of heaven unless he became like that child (in humility and sincerity). There, the Lord was speaking of humble and sincere believers of any age. Now, however, the Lord Jesus is referring specifically to children and young people. Any and all of these who came to Jesus in humble and sincere faith would be received by him and would inherit a place in the kingdom of heaven. This is just another way of saying that no one is too young to be accepted by the Lord Jesus or received into his kingdom. All who come in simple faith will be received—and none must hinder them.

### MATTHEW 19:15

At this point, the Lord Jesus laid his hands on each of the little children and imparted his blessing to them and to their parents. Then, they left the presence of the Lord Jesus, greatly encouraged that he should have taken time to speak to them and to have bestowed his blessing upon their children.

Each one of these children experienced the blessing of the Lord. Now, it was the responsibility of the respective parents to ensure that their children benefited to the full from that divine blessing. From that point onwards, the parents were under obligation before God for instructing their little one in the ways of the Lord and for guiding their feet in the paths of righteousness. (Deut. 6:7,11; Prov. 22:6; Eph. 6:4)

So it is will all those parents whom the Lord has blessed with children. These young ones have been entrusted to their parents by the Lord, to be brought up in the knowledge of his ways and to see in their parents a living example of Christ-likeness.

## THE RICH YOUNG RULER

***Matthew 19:16-26***

### MATTHEW 19:16

(Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30)

As we see here, Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of heaven included the message of eternal life or of salvation through repentance and faith in him. This much was understood by many of the people.

Among those who had heard the message was the man mentioned in these verses. We refer to him as 'the rich young ruler'. Verse 22 tells us that he was young and that he had great possessions. Luke tells us that he was a ruler (Luke 18:18). Some commentators believe him to have been a synagogue ruler (Barnes, etc.), while others believe that he was a civil magistrate (Gill, Henry, etc.).

Mark tells us that, as Jesus was setting out on his journey, this young man ran up to him and knelt down before him, highlighting the marked urgency of his plea (Mark 10:17). Having stopped the Lord Jesus in his tracks, the young man then cried out earnestly, *"Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?"*

This man demonstrated great eagerness to know and do whatever was necessary to inherit eternal life. However, he had misunderstood the message of salvation in several particulars, as the Lord will show.

### MATTHEW 19:17

To begin with, this man had not appreciated who Jesus really was—the divine Son of God. He had addressed Jesus as *'Good Teacher'* (Mark 10:17; Luke 18:18). From the context, we see that this man was placing the Son of God on a level greater than any previous teachers, including Moses and the prophets. Nevertheless, the young ruler did not consider the Lord or his teaching as originating from God.

The rich young ruler should not have addressed any religious leader as 'Good' in the sense in which he was using this word. Although, by itself, the word itself means 'generous', 'beneficent', 'kind', or 'good',

the Lord Jesus knew that this man was implying more: By calling Jesus 'Good Teacher', he was elevating the Lord above other human teachers—without appreciating that the Lord Jesus was in fact worthy of such elevation, or acknowledging that Jesus was in fact the Messiah and Son of God.

This explains the nature of Jesus' response to the ruler's form of address. To call Jesus 'Good Teacher' in the sense that this man employed the phrase was to imply honours that belonged only to a divine person, or to God alone. However, this man had not realised that Jesus was truly a divine Person, and worthy of such a title. Therefore, he should not have addressed Jesus with these words since he was not doing so by faith in him as the Messiah, but only as a great teacher of God's Word, similar to or greater than Moses. To this end, Jesus reminds the man that one Person alone is 'good' (in the sense of being perfectly righteous, holy, beneficent, and kind). By implication, this Person is God in heaven.

The man had asked Jesus what good deed he must perform to gain eternal life. In this too he was mistaken, for eternal life cannot be merited by the performance of good deeds. Perhaps, this man had been overwhelmed by the mountain of rules, regulations and traditions that the scribes and Pharisees had set down as being essential for winning favour with God. Now, he was appealing to Jesus to tell him what God really required so that he might achieve eternal life. Thus, Jesus reminds him of God's requirements for life: he must keep the commandments that God had given to Moses. (Exod. 20:1-17; Deut. 5:6-21; Rom. 13:8-10)

## MATTHEW 19:18-19

Not satisfied with this, the man asks Jesus to state specifically which of the commandments he must keep. In listing several, the Lord was implying that every one of the Ten Commandments must be kept flawlessly if one was to inherit eternal life by this means.

Although not stated here, this meant that—in order to be justified or declared righteous by the Law—a person must keep the Law of God from the very beginning of his or her life to the very end, without failing in even one point. Those who failed to keep the Commandments in even as little as a single point of the Law had become guilty of breaking the entire Law: for even the least transgression was sin, and sin incurred death. (Jas. 2:10-11; Rom. 6:23) Furthermore, the very fact that a person was born with an inherently sinful nature precluded any possibility of his being justified or saved by the Law—for the Law condemns transgressors or law-breakers as sinners. And the same Law that condemns sinners cannot also justify them.

Clearly, the Law sets forth God's standard of righteousness. However, no fallen sinful human being is capable of reaching this standard. All stand condemned by God's Law. (Rom. 3:19-23) Therefore, all must seek salvation by some means other than by observance of, or obedience to, the legal code. (Rom. 3:21-26) Nevertheless, the principles of the Law apply to everyday life—although not to salvation or eternal life.

Thus, the Lord Jesus was showing to this young man that no matter how hard he tried, he could never gain eternal life by means of the Law. (Rom. 3:20)

## MATTHEW 19:20

Undeterred, and clearly unaware of the implications of his remarks, the young man asserted, *"All these I have kept. What do I still lack?"*

Like so many people, this young man believed that God's standards of righteousness were relative rather than absolute. Instead of requiring *absolute* perfection, this man thought that God would be satisfied with his most sincere endeavours at keeping the Law of Moses—even if his best endeavours could not reach to perfection. Thus, he claimed to have fulfilled the Law, and asked Jesus what else he must do.

This young ruler must have been a highly educated and intelligent man. However, his understanding of God's Law and of God's standards of righteousness was seriously flawed. He did not appreciate that God required absolute perfection throughout his entire life in order to obtain eternal life by means of the Law. Furthermore, God had not given his Law so that—by keeping it—a person could merit eternal life. Rather, God imparted his Law to the people in order to set forth unambiguously his most holy standard of righteousness and to demonstrate to Israel, and to all mankind, that no fallen sinful human being could ever keep that Law in its entirety, as God demanded. Therefore, sinful mankind's salvation could not come by the Law but by the grace of God alone.

Jesus, however, knew the true intents of this young man's heart. Therefore, the Lord challenges him:

## MATTHEW 19:21

*..."If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."*

This man professed to have kept God's Law perfectly (*'all these I have kept'* v.20). Now, Jesus shows him that in this he is mistaken. By telling him to go home, sell his possessions and give to the poor, the Lord would demonstrate the true motives and state of this man's heart—and would show to him his true position relative to God's Law.

The Lord Jesus knew that he was a wealthy individual. However, he assures him of a treasure beyond all comparison, laid up in heaven for the people of God. Thus, he challenges this young man to lay aside his earthly riches, to use it for the benefit of the poor, and to come back to the Lord Jesus and follow him.

## MATTHEW 19:22

The young man was utterly dismayed. He had not expected the Lord Jesus to make such severe demands of him, or to require him to forsake his wealth. He had asked what good deeds he must perform to inherit eternal life, but he had not anticipated such a sweeping response from the Lord Jesus.

The Lord Jesus, however, was more intent in showing this young man the true state of his heart than of requiring him to perform good deeds—necessary as these were in their place. By telling the young ruler to sell his possessions, Jesus was testing this man's professed faultless allegiance to God and to his Law. If he had truly kept the Law of God, then he would observe the Commandment to love the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength; to observe no other god before or besides him, and not to covet any other person or object. However, by choosing to hold fast to his wealth, this man showed that he had broken these very Commandments. In and of itself, his wealth was not his sin. Rather, his sin lay

in placing his love of wealth above his love for God. Therefore, Jesus had just demonstrated to this man that he was indeed guilty of breaking the Law he had professed to have kept from his youth; and to have done so in a most important point—worshipping false gods. (Exod. 20:3-6; Mark 12:28-34)

Without doubt, this young man could now see his error. Now, he must have appreciated that worldly gain had become more important to him than inheriting the kingdom of heaven or eternal life. In spite of his professed piety, he had set his heart on the things of this world, and there he had chosen to remain. Thus, as Matthew tells us, he went away sorrowful. He knew now that he could not find favour or fellowship with God while he worshipped other gods in his heart. However, as he was unwilling to forsake these other gods, he departed from the Lord Jesus in sorrow, without God and without hope. He had come so near to the kingdom—to the very threshold and into the presence of the living Christ himself—and yet he was lost. Unless, at some future time, he repented and turned to God with all his heart, he would remain lost forever. (Cf. Luke 12:15-21)

Thus we see that it is entirely possible to live a 'pious' life; to appear to keep God's Law, to appear religious or godly in the sight of other people, and yet to worship false gods in our heart. Such people can be found within the church, as well as in wider society. Yet, although they profess obedience to God or faith in his Word, the Lord knows their hearts. If, like the rich young ruler, their profession of faith in God is not a genuine profession linked to heartfelt love and obedience to God and to his Word, then—ultimately—they will leave the presence of the Lord Jesus sorrowful, without God and without hope.

## MATTHEW 19:23

Turning now to his disciples, the Lord Jesus tells them how much of a barrier riches or other material goods can prove to be to the kingdom of heaven. The Lord was not saying that no wealthy person could ever enter God's kingdom or find a place in heaven, for manifestly this would not be true. A number of God's true and faithful people had been rich in their lifetimes, including Abraham and the other patriarchs, and men like Job and King Solomon. However, these men had not placed their riches over and above their God—as had the rich young ruler. On the contrary, Abraham and many others had worshipped God with all their hearts and had held their wealth consistently as a trust or stewardship from God. Furthermore, they acknowledged that even vast amounts of material wealth could never benefit them spiritually, nor could they take it with them when they died. Thus, in worshipping God above all others, and by remaining faithful and obedient to his Word, these men were storing up for themselves treasures in heaven that could never fade or pass away. (Matt. 6:19-21)

However, many people in the world prefer their material wealth, riches, gains and the fulfilment of their cherished ambitions over and above unconditional commitment to God. Therefore, they have made material gain their false gods or idols. And those who worship idols cannot also worship, or be accepted by, the true and living God who requires wholehearted or undivided loyalty and devotion.

Hence, Jesus declares how difficult it is for people with such wealth or material gain to experience God's salvation. This is not because this salvation is being withheld from the rich, but because the rich are not willing to be parted from their idols of materialism or their 'creature-comforts'. Only by the grace of God and the effectual calling of the Holy Spirit will such people be induced to forsake their idols and turn to the true and living God. Therefore, as the Lord Jesus asserts, it is difficult (but not impossible) for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

## MATTHEW 19:24

The Lord Jesus further emphasises this difficulty by use of a common metaphor. In many parts of the Middle East, camels were a familiar sight as caravan traders transported their merchandise across sprawling tracts of land. From time to time, these camel caravans would pass through Israel, possibly travelling to or from Egypt. Thus, the disciples knew that a camel was a large animal, greater in size than any animal commonly used in Israel or Judea. Therefore, when the Lord said that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God's kingdom, this produced an immediate response from the disciples.

## MATTHEW 19:25

In utter astonishment, the disciples exclaimed, *"Who then can be saved?"*

The disciples had understood Jesus' metaphor without difficulty. Large beasts like camels could not possibly pass through a tiny needle's eye. (There is no need to suppose that this was anything other than a literal sowing needle.) However, since it was impossible for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, then it must also be impossible for any person to enter into life.

The Lord had not been speaking of 'any person' but of the rich person. However, in their reply, the disciples had removed this limitation by asking, "*Who then can be saved?"*

## MATTHEW 19:26

Jesus replies to his disciples' incredulous query. Indeed, if it depended on human means or resources, then entry into God's kingdom would be impossible—for anyone. It would be not only the rich who would find entry into the kingdom difficult if not impossible, but any person, rich or poor, and whatever their state or standing in the world, would find it equally impossible—from a human perspective. Therefore, Jesus is making it clear to his disciples that entry into the kingdom of God, and therefore salvation and eternal life, cannot be achieved by human means or effort. A person cannot enter God's kingdom by keeping the Law, by the performance of good deeds, by religious exercises or by any other means.

Realising the implications of Jesus' words, the disciples' astonishment must have increased all the more.

However, the Lord Jesus had stated, *"With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."*

Nothing that a fallen sinful human being can do can ever earn him a place in heaven when he dies. It is just as impossible for a man or woman to work their own way into God's favour and kingdom as it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.

However, salvation does not depend on what sinners can or cannot do, but on what God can do, has done, and will do. Left to their own devices, no sinner on earth would ever come to a saving knowledge of Christ or of the Father in heaven. He is quite incapable of seeking God wholeheartedly while he remains dead in trespasses and sins (spiritually dead and alienated from God by wicked works). If he is to be saved, forgiven and brought into fellowship with God, God himself must take the initiative and reach out to the lost sinner. This he does through his Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God achieves the impossible: For, by his power, he calls or draws the sinner to Christ; he grants to him new spiritual life (regeneration or the new birth), and he makes it possible for the now repentant sinner to exercise faith in the Lord Jesus

Christ and thus experience forgiveness of sin and eternal life. Therefore, what is impossible for man is possible with God.

## RULING WITH CHRIST

***Matthew 19:27-30***

### MATTHEW 19:27

The disciples had listened in amazement as the Lord Jesus had explained how difficult it was for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. They had watched the rich young ruler depart, choosing his worldly possessions over submission to Christ and his kingdom. Now, they were beginning to think that they themselves had been following the Lord Jesus without any prospect of future reward.

Of course, at this stage, and in accordance with the mistaken Jewish messianic expectations of the time, the disciples were thinking of a worldly reward, into which they would enter with Christ when he set up his earthly kingdom. They still did not realise that the Lord's kingdom was not of this world, but rather was a spiritual and heavenly kingdom. Therefore, almost in despair, Peter cried out to the Lord, *"See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"*

### MATTHEW 19:28

(Luke 22:28-30)

The Lord Jesus soon corrects his disciples' misapprehension. Jesus begins his reply by emphasising first the importance of the statement that he is about to make, *"Truly, I say to you…",* and then the place or location where this would occur, "…*in the new world*…"

The first part of the sentence stresses the importance of what the Lord Jesus is about to say. Thus, the disciples were to give the greatest possible heed to the Lord's words and to consider diligently what these words meant.

The Lord then speaks of a future occasion: *"…in the new world…"* Literally, "*in the regeneration…."* The reference here is to the new creation or the new heaven and the new earth. The timing is when this present world is brought to an end and destroyed by fire (the great conflagration spoken of by Peter (2 Pet. 7-13)), and when God will create a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. This is called 'regeneration', 'restitution', or 'renewal' of the earth because it involves a total destruction of the present world system and a complete rejuvenation of the existing planet.

(In some ancient writings, the Mega Flood or Deluge of the Old Testament is also referred to as a 'regeneration' (of the earth) because the existing system of human and animal life (sea creatures excepted, and apart from those in the ark with Noah) was destroyed, and the world completely renewed by the waters of the flood.)

When this new world of righteousness, peace and glory is brought about, the Lord Jesus Christ will then sit on his glorious throne. (At present, the Lord Jesus is enthroned in heaven's glory, at the right hand of his Father (the 'right hand' symbolizing Jesus' full equality, power and glory with his Father). However,

the Lord's present reign is not visible to anyone outside of heaven. In the new creation, the Lord will reign *visibly* from his glorious throne.

The Lord then assures his disciples that each one of them would find a place in that new creation. They also would sit on twelve subordinate thrones; that is, as the apostles of the Lamb, they would occupy places of authority within the new world order (or new age). The Lord says that they will judge "*the twelve tribes of Israel*."

The verb, 'to judge', can be understood in the forensic sense of 'to exercise judgment upon'. This meaning is common in courts of law, etc. However, 'to judge' can also bear the meaning, 'to rule over' or 'to exercise dominion over'. The latter is probably the primary meaning here. The apostles were not being told that they would become judges or assessors of Israel but that they would rule, preside or govern with Christ over Israel.

The 'twelve tribes of Israel' speaks of the people that God had set apart for himself. Originally, this was the literal twelve tribes of Israel. Now, Jesus uses this same familiar term figuratively to denote the people of God not only called and chosen from among the literal twelve tribes, but also called and chosen from among all tribes and nations of the earth and now present in the new creation. This is illustrated by James, when he refers to believers generally as 'the twelve tribes in the Dispersion'—an expression that included many Jewish Christians, but that was not confined to Jewish Christians alone. (Jas. 1:1)

Thus, the Lord Jesus assures Peter and the other apostles of their future reward—but of a reward in the new creation, not in this present world. This 'reward' would take the form of honoured duties and responsibilities, and would be in addition to the rewards that they would receive on the Day of Judgment.

## MATTHEW 19:29

The disciples had said that they had forsaken all to follow the Lord Jesus. In this verse, Jesus now takes up this point.

Following the Lord Jesus may cost a person everything. In those days, and often subsequently, it could involve the loss of those dearest to one's heart—a person's own family; their flesh and blood brothers and sisters; their fathers and mothers; their beloved spouse, and even separation from their own children. Additionally, they may lose their lands, property or any other form of material wealth or gain.

However, the Lord Jesus assures anyone who finds himself in this position that he will not lose thereby. Painful as the loss of loved one may be, the Lord has prepared great blessings for those who are called to follow him. Those who serve the Lord Christ in the furtherance of his kingdom, as the apostles and evangelists were called to do, would receive immense reward at the Last Day. What they had left behind would be multiplied a hundredfold: i.e., a hundred times representing an incalculable order of magnitude. Additionally, they would inherit the gift of eternal life, together with all the blessings and benefits contingent on this gift.

Of course, when the Lord Jesus was speaking of forsaking family, homes and property for the sake of his kingdom, he was speaking of those and to those who would be called to make this sacrifice. All commitments to Christ involve some degree of sacrifice—of self and of self-interests. However, those like the apostles whom God has called and chosen for special service in connection with his church must expect to make greater sacrifices for the sake of God's kingdom and for the preaching of the Gospel. Neverthe-

less, every one of these true and faithful servants of Christ will receive a correspondingly greater reward in heaven.

## MATTHEW 19:20

Now, the Lord Jesus deals with the matter of status or priority among his servants by declaring, *"But many who are first will be last, and the last first."*

The Lord had used this expression on other occasions to illustrate the same point: viz., that reward, benefits or blessings of the kingdom are not afforded to a person on the basis of imagined or real seniority, rank, status or any other similar criterion. For example, although the first to be called to the Lord's service, the disciples could not on that account expect higher privileges or greater rewards than those called much later to serve the Lord. On the contrary, equal or greater blessings and rewards might be apportioned to those servants of Christ who had been last called and had served the Lord Jesus toward the end of the present age.

Thus, the Lord's people ought to serve him faithfully, bearing in mind that they serve a faithful Master. They ought to make Christ and his kingdom known among the peoples of the world, proclaiming the Gospel to all who will hear. However, no servant of God must consider himself superior to any other faithful servant; nor must the Lord's servants consider that because they have laboured for a much longer time than some others, therefore they are entitled to greater blessings or higher rewards. These blessings and rewards are not bestowed for *length* of service but for *faithfulness* in that service—whether for short period or long. Therefore, the Lord's words hold true, *"...many who are first will be last, and the last first."*

This interpretation is confirmed in the chapter that follows.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 20

## THE LABOURERS IN THE VINEYARD

***Matthew 20:1-16***

The Lord Jesus had just spoken of the first being last and the last first. Now, in this parable, Jesus will illustrate this principle further.

The kingdom of heaven did not resemble the kingdoms of this world nor did it employ this world's methods in apportioning rewards. The kingdom of heaven is a spiritual kingdom which is commensurate with spiritual rewards. However, this stands markedly opposed to the kingdoms and methods of this world that are materially based and that offer monetary or material reward based on status, experience, or length of service, etc.

The vineyard of which the Lord speaks in this parable is sometimes considered to relate to the nation of Israel—as is the case in the Old Testament and elsewhere in the New Testament. However, it is more likely to be simply an analogy of a work situation that would be familiar to the Lord's disciples and to other listeners.

### MATTHEW 20:1-2

The Lord likens the kingdom of heaven to a vineyard where a master hires labourers to work among the vines. The vineyard is the kingdom of heaven; the labourers are the Lord's servants working to further that kingdom, and the master is the Lord Jesus himself.

At daybreak, the master of the house went out to the marketplace to hire labourers for his vineyard. This was the usual place for workers to gather each day, awaiting someone to employ them.

Following discussions, some of the labourers in the marketplace agreed to accept a denarius[47] for a day's work in the vineyard. Clearly, the labourers had considered this a fair and reasonable offer for their services; for, by accepting these terms, they were accepting the terms and conditions set forth in advance by the master. Now, they had committed themselves to honouring the master by completing the agreed number of hours and by fulfilling the work assigned to them during these hours. Having concluded this contract with them, the master then sent these labourers to work in his vineyard.

### MATTHEW 20:3-4

Some time later, about the third hour (9am), the master visited the marketplace again. He discovered a number of labourers sitting or standing there, still waiting for someone to hire them. Thus, the master offered to hire some of those remaining, advising them that they would receive whatever payment was due to them for their work in his vineyard.

Once again, by accepting the master's word, these men entered into an agreement with the master. They had consented to work for the stated number of hours in the vineyard, and this consent indicated their

[47] *denarius*: This equalled a full day's wage for a labourer.

willingness to accept the master's terms and to receive as their due payment whatever sum he deemed to give them.

## MATTHEW 20:5-7

At the sixth hour (midday) and at the ninth hour (3pm) the master repeated this exercise and engaged more labourers to work in his vineyard. Then, at the eleventh hour (5pm)—almost at the close of the working day (sunset)—the master went out once more to the marketplace. On questioning those still standing there, the master found that no one had hired them throughout that day. Thus, the master offered these men the opportunity of working in his vineyard.

No doubt delighted that they would receive some payment—however modest—at this late hour, the labourers readily consented to the master's proposal. Thereby, they were agreeing to accept that payment which the master considered appropriate for their time in his fields.

## MATTHEW 20:8-10

At sunset, the close of the working day, the master instructed his foreman to assemble the labourers and pay them their wages. However, the master told the foreman to begin with the last employed and to end with the first.

Thus, when the men hired most recently—at the eleventh hour—came forward for their wages, each one of them received a denarius. This was equivalent to a full day's wage. The master was being generous toward them, knowing that they required a minimum of a full day's wage in order to meet their needs and those of their families.

Eventually, the foreman called those whom the master had hired first—at the earliest part of the day. Naturally, being aware that those who had worked shorter hours had received payment of one denarius, these labourers supposed that the master would pay them more. After all, was not this what justice or equity required? Yes, they had accepted a mutually binding contract to work for a denarius; but surely the master could not hold them to this contract since he had paid this amount to the men who had worked for a considerable shorter period?

We must note, of course, that—at no time—did the master break his agreement with any of these men. He had stated the payment of one denarius to those hired first, and he had promised to pay whatever was due to those hired subsequently—without specifying what that amount would be. Thus, if he decided to pay the others the same as the men hired first, then the master was not breaking his contract with these labourers. He was fulfilling it as promised.

## MATTHEW 20:11

Nevertheless, those hired first fully expected to receive correspondingly greater wages. Thus, when they were paid their due (one denarius or a full day's wage), they began to complain vehemently against their master; conveniently forgetting, that—if the master had not chosen to hire them—they might have languished in the square all day with no wages at all.

Nevertheless, these men felt they had every right to voice their complaint publicly. Thus, in verse 12, they declare:

## MATTHEW 20:12

Matt. 20:12 ESV

12 ...'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'

Notice how these ungrateful labourers distort the truth:

- They begin by pointing out that these other labourers had worked only for a single hour, thereby implying that the master was being most unjust to treat them on the same terms as those employed from the break of day.
- They objected to the fact that the master had treated everyone on an equal basis, thereby inferring that the master should have shown preference to some; or, at least, that he should have distinguished between those who had been in service for a longer time than others.
- Then, the labourers complained that although they had endured the heaviest work and the hottest period of the sun, yet no consideration was being shown to them over and above what these other men were receiving.

Clearly, this was an attack on the master's integrity and on his right to do as he pleased with those who consented to enter his employment—so long as he treated them in accordance with the agreement that he had made with them before their employment. Yet, although the master had kept the terms and conditions of his employment, and had paid them the agreed wages, these labourers remained discontented. Therefore, the master addresses one of them directly:

## MATTHEW 20:13

Taking a conciliatory approach, the master pointed out to one of these men that he has done nothing unfair or unjust toward him. He has paid him exactly what he promised to pay him. This was the labourer's entitlement, and this was what he received. He was not entitled to more and therefore should not have expected more. From the outset, this labourer had agreed to work for a denarius; and he had been paid a denarius—a full day's wages.

## MATTHEW 20:14

Then, the master tells these complaining workmen to take that to which they were entitled, and to which they had agreed from the outset, and to go their way. Before leaving, however, the master states to these men, *"I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you*" (v.14b).

The master had fulfilled his obligation to those hired first by paying them in full—*as was their due*. However, the master had chosen to pay a full day's wages to the man hired at the eleventh hour—*as was the master's right*. This was not a matter of justice or equity alone, but more importantly a matter of compassion and concern. The master knew that all of these men—whenever hired—needed to earn sufficient

wages to support themselves and their families. In his compassion, he granted a full reward to those engaged at the last hour, showing that the master's rewards are bestowed not according to a person's works or to his length of service but according to the master's grace.

## MATTHEW 20:15

Here, the master questions the validity of the complainers' objections. The master had entered into an agreement with these workmen to pay them a denarius for a full day's labour, and he had fulfilled that agreement. The master had been under obligation to pay to the labourers the agreed amount. However, there was no contractual obligation that prevented the master from paying others the same rate for shorter hours—if he so chose.

This is what the master did. Those men engaged at the third, sixth, ninth and eleventh hours worked shorter hours than those hired for the twelve hour day. However, although he was under no obligation to do so, the master chose to pay all labourers the same amount, thus ensuring that all received a full day's wages.

To object to this course of action, as did the ungrateful labourers, is to imply or to assert indirectly that the master has no rights over his own property, to withhold it or to dispose of it as he thinks fit. This, however, would be an intolerable situation. The master is answerable to God for the stewardship of his property, not to other men. To dispute this, is to dispute the master's rights and to hold a grudge against him for exercising these rights in a way that he considers fair, just and equitable—under the prevailing circumstances.

This is an example of where the principles of God's kingdom differ radically from the principles of this world. Where they have been God-ordained, the principles of the world have their place in society, and the Lord was not disparaging these principles. Rather, he was showing that ordinary principles or methods of this world were not applicable to the kingdom of heaven. In connection with wages or rewards, world principles are based on a person's work and length of service. However, wages or rewards for service in the kingdom of heaven are not based on a person's work or length of service but on his faithfulness in the Master's service and on his Master's grace and compassion toward him—regardless of how long or how short a time a person has toiled in that service.

## MATTHEW 20:16

Now, the Lord Jesus brings home the point of his parable by repeating the words he had used in the previous chapter, *"So the last will be first, and the first last"* (cf. Matt. 19:30).

Remembering that the Lord had told this parable in response to Peter's statement, *"See we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"* (Matt. 19:27; see also vv.28-30)

The Lord Jesus had told Peter and the other disciples about their place in the new age, sitting on twelve thrones and judging (or ruling over) the twelve tribes of Israel. The Lord had added that those who had left much behind to follow him would inherit considerably more in heaven. Nevertheless, the Lord had added, *"But many who are first will be last, and the last first"* (Matt. 19:30). It was the significance of this phrase that the Lord had just explained to Peter and the other disciples in the parable above.

In respect of faith, service and rewards, we may say that this phrase illustrates two truths:

(1) Those first called *to believe on* Christ (predominantly, Jewish believers, like Peter and the other disciples) will not necessarily precede, and may even come far behind, those called later (the Gentile believers).

(2) Those first called *to serve* Christ, (whether Jewish or Gentile Christians) will not necessarily precede, and may even come far behind, those called to faith and service later.

As far as their status in Christ is concerned, all Christians (Jewish and Gentile) will be treated alike. As far as their rewards for faithful service are concerned, these rewards will not be apportioned according to length of service but according to faithfulness in the Lord's service—regardless of whether the believer has been engaged in that service for a long period or perhaps for only a comparatively short period of time.

Although omitted by the ESV, NASB and other versions, some, but not all manuscripts, add the phrase found elsewhere, "*for many are called but few are chosen"* (v.16 KJV; cf. Matt. 22:14). Although not part of this particular passage, the phrase means simply that many hear the outward call of the Gospel (the call to repentance and faith). However, that call remains external. It finds no true place in their hearts or lives. On the other hand, and speaking comparatively, a few[48] hear the outward call of the Gospel and respond to that call—as the Spirit enables them. This call has affected them internally, and its truths have taken root in their hearts and lives—thus ensuring their eternal salvation.

## JESUS FORETELLS HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION

***Matthew 20:17-19***

### MATTHEW 20:17-18

The Lord Jesus and his disciples now began the journey up to Jerusalem. As they were travelling, the Lord took the Twelve aside and told them of his coming sufferings. Referring to himself as 'the Son of Man', Jesus explains that he will be delivered over to the religious authorities—the chief priest and scribes.

The reference here is to the fact that the Lord knew that he would be arrested by these 'guardians' of the religious establishment and arraigned before their court or council. The Pharisees among them had many (false) charges that they wanted to bring against the Lord Jesus, and the high priest wanted to conduct a thorough examination into the activities of the Lord Jesus and his teaching.

We must remember, of course, that the present high priest did not belong to the priestly house or lineage appointed by God, nor was he of the Hasmonean dynasty that had occupied the priesthood until some years before. Rather, the present high priest had been a political appointment, put in place by Herod the Great to suit his own purposes. Thus, the present high priest was merely a religious figurehead, invested externally with priestly authority but without the necessary authority from God to serve in this capacity.

[48] *few*: relatively speaking; actually, a vast multitude.

Nevertheless, at this time, the high priesthood was considered as a very important and influential office, and the opinions and judgments of the high priest carried a not insignificant weight with the civil authorities under Herod the Great's successor.

In addition to his examination by the high priests (Annas and Caiaphas—former and current high priests respectively), the Lord knew that his words and works would be scrutinised most closely by the scribes or teachers of the law. These men had already objected most strenuously to the Lord's teaching, and to his interpretation of God's Law. Once they were able to examine the Lord in their council at Jerusalem, they would subject the holy Son of God to a more rigorous interrogation. Such is the way of evil men when they attempt to extinguish the light of God's Word and to overturn the truth of that Word with error and false teaching.

Yet, the Lord Jesus knew that not only would he be delivered over to these religious representatives, but also that—under the officiating high priest (Caiaphas)—these same religious authorities would judge him in their court and condemn him to death.

In passing, it is important for us to note that, although he speaks of his being 'delivered over' to the chief priest and scribes, the Lord Jesus was not implying that he was powerless to prevent this. It was essential in order to complete the work of salvation and to fulfil the will of his Father in heaven. Nevertheless, the Lord Jesus was never at any time at the mercy of fallen and sinful men, nor could his destiny be affected in the least by the intentions of these evil individuals or authorities. (John 10:17-18) The Lord could have called twelve legions of angels to deliver him from the hands of men. Yet, he could not do so if he was to secure the salvation of sinners by his atoning death on the cross and by his subsequent burial and resurrection. (Matt. 26:53-54)

## MATTHEW 19:19

Yet, although they would condemn him to death, it was not possible for the religious authorities to carry out the death penalty themselves. This was a reserved power, which could be implemented only by the ruling civil authority: i.e., by the civil governor appointed by Rome; in this case, Pontius Pilate.

Thus, Jesus now tells his disciples that he will be handed over to the Gentiles: i.e., the Roman civil authorities and their agents, the Roman soldiers. The Lord continues by saying that these Gentiles would mock him, flog him and then crucify him. Thus, so that his disciples will be prepared, Jesus is explaining in clear language exactly what will happen to him when they arrive at Jerusalem. However, the Lord also tells his disciples that—after these evil men have put him to death and laid him in the tomb—he will arise from there on the third day. So, the disciples know that—when this happens according to the Lord's words—they will have seen the ultimate and irrefutable proof of the Lord's divine Person and work. Of course, the resurrection and ascension was essential to the whole plan of salvation. Here, Jesus is foretelling his resurrection; and, in due course, the disciples would gather with the Lord Jesus again after his resurrection.

## A MOTHER'S REQUEST

***Matthew 20:20-23***

### MATTHEW 20:20-21

(Mark 10:35-40)

We have here a rather amazing request on the part of the mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee. Approaching Jesus with her two sons beside her, this mother kneels down in worship (Gk., προσκυνοῦσα, *proskunousa*, worshipping) before the Lord Jesus. There was something that she wished to ask the Lord Jesus.

As she knelt before him, the Lord asked her, *"What do you want?"* (v.21). The mother's reply is more than just an over-ambitious mother's request for her two sons, it amounts almost to an unacceptable attempt at persuasion together with a disregard for God's order of things in her life, in the lives or her sons, and in the lives of the other disciples.

The mother begins by saying, *"Say..."* In other words, "bid", "command", or "state categorically"...

The mother of James and John was asking that the Lord Jesus to 'command' or 'bid' in accordance with her request for her two sons.[49] But what was the nature of her request?

*"Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom"* (v.21b; cf. Matt. 19:28)

Here, we see the audacity of this mother's request. She is not content that her sons have been called and chosen to enter the kingdom of heaven, but she earnestly implores the Lord Jesus to appoint them to positions of the highest honour in that kingdom. This was in total disregard of the Lord's will and purposes for her sons, and for the other disciples. Furthermore, it showed a complete misapprehension in regard to the nature of Christ's kingdom. Evidently, this mother thought that the kingdom would be an earthly kingdom—like that of the kings of Israel or Judah. She did not comprehend that the Lord had been speaking of a spiritual kingdom, which—although comprehending the church on earth—was essentially a kingdom in the heavenly realms. From these realms, the risen and exalted Lord Jesus was to reign in glory—at the right hand of his Father.

### MATTHEW 20:22

Here, the Lord points out this mother's error (and, at this point, the Lord's action may indicate that the two sons were the instigators of their mother's request). Instead of replying directly to the mother, the

[49] It is possible, however, that the mother may have made this request because prompted to do so by her two sons. In fact, according to Mark's version of this event, James and John made this request themselves. (Mark 10:35) It would seem therefore from Matthew's fuller account that the mother was responding to her sons' request to act on their behalf. In his abbreviated version, however, Mark does not mention the mother's intervention.

Lord Jesus turns to James and John and says to them, *"You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?"* (Cf. John 18:11)

Exaltation to the place of highest honour in the kingdom was not a matter of merely being appointed to that place or position in glory. Anyone who would occupy such a position must first be fully qualified for this honour. However, the qualification necessary involved intense suffering, sorrow and grief before entering into this heavenly glory. Therefore, the Lord Jesus asks these two disciples, *"...Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?"* That is, 'Are you able to enter into and endure the sufferings that I am about to endure? For, otherwise, you cannot be exalted to my right hand in glory.'

Of course, James and John misunderstood the significance of Jesus' question. Therefore, not fully aware of what they were saying, they replied, *"We are able."*

At this stage, the disciples still did not appreciate that 'drinking the cup' was a metaphor for unspeakable agony and suffering, involving death on the cross. Probably, they assumed that the metaphor meant that they would be required to share in some way in the ordinary hardships of discipleship and of being associated with the Lord Jesus. Thus, they replied naively, *"We are able."*

## MATTHEW 20:23

The Lord Jesus does not dismiss their response out of hand. He accepts it in the spirit intended by the two disciples: i.e., a sincere, if misplaced, desire to share with Jesus in all his earthly sorrows and difficulties—not realising that these would lead ultimately to the cross. As subsequent events would demonstrate, the same disciples who now were expressing a willingness to drink of the cup with the Lord Jesus would later forsake him and flee for their lives. (Matt. 26:56; Mark 14:50)

The Lord Jesus then explains to James and John that appointment to his right or left hand is not in his power (as the incarnate Son of Man) to grant. This authority was reserved by the Father, who had determined already who should occupy the places or positions of honour and glory in his kingdom. Granted, the Lord Jesus had told his disciples earlier that they would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. However, the Father in heaven had determined beforehand which of the Lord's disciples was to occupy any particular 'throne'—or delegated sphere of influence or rule in the new age under the exalted and glorified Lord Jesus.

## MATTHEW 20:24

Until, now the remaining ten disciples had been listening in silence as Jesus spoke to James and John and to their mother. Now, however, the ten spoke up, expressing great indignation that their two-fellow disciples should attempt to have themselves elevated above the others. Yet, although understandable, the attitude of the ten toward James and John was not without fault, as their indignation inclined toward sinful pride rather than justified anger. Therefore, before matters can develop any further, the Lord Jesus intervenes:

## MATTHEW 20:25

The Lord calls his disciples together to teach them a lesson in humility. Jesus takes two examples of power or authority from everyday life. Among the Gentiles, the kings or other rulers exercised dominion

over the people in the sense that the people were subject, if not subjugated, to their king or emperor. In a similar way, the local civil governors exercised dominion over their respective populations, and their citizens were required to submit themselves to these rulers, and to obey their decrees. Thus, whether kings or governors, these rulers were exalted above the common people and exercised authority over the people.

## MATTHEW 20:26-27

However, the Lord Jesus makes it abundantly plain that what was true among the nations of the world would not be true among the people of God—including the disciples. On the contrary, among the disciples, anyone seeking to be truly great must become the lowliest servant of all. He must not be one who seeks to rule over others, but one who seeks to serve or minister to the needs of others—with true humility.

Those who would seek to be great amongst the Lord's people must become truly humble as they sought to serve Christ and to help other. Indeed, they were to become not merely a domestic servant to others but a bond slave to the Lord and to others for his sake.

This, of course, was in complete opposition to the ways of the world. Yet, it was the way of true greatness. It was the way of humility, which—when combined with love—ruled supreme over all other virtues. Those who lived in this manner would be greater than any ruler or authority on earth—for they would be the children of the kingdom and of the King of kings.

There is no suggestion here of subjecting oneself to abject slavery or to live passively or weakly in a hostile world. Humility and meekness is not the same as moral weakness. Rather, humility and meekness requires great spiritual and moral courage. It requires the determination to stand one's ground and to persevere in the face of the most intense difficulties or persecution. Above all others, the Lord Jesus was meek and lowly or humble. Yet, above all others, the same Lord Jesus demonstrated the greatest fortitude, courage, perseverance and moral strength in the face of his enemies—and he endured the hostility of the world to death on the cross. Thus, setting himself as the supreme example, the Lord declares to his disciples:

## MATTHEW 20:28

*"Even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

Referring to himself as the Son of Man—the One who had taken upon himself the form of man—the Lord Jesus states to his disciples the true purpose of his coming into the world. Although he was the One through whom God had created the universe, and by whom he now exercised sovereign dominion over the universe, yet Jesus had not come into the world to be served, but to serve. Granted, all mankind owed obeisance, worship and praise to him; and, as the Sovereign Ruler over all mankind, the Lord Jesus could have required such obedient worship. Yet, this was not his reason for coming into the world of sinful mankind at this time. Rather, the Son of Man—the only true and perfect Man—had come to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

There are many ways in which the Lord Jesus may have been said to serve. Above all, however, the Son came to serve his Father. He came into the world as the Suffering Servant or the Servant of the LORD.

He came to obey the will of his Father for fallen men and women, and to fulfil the Father's purposes for the redemption of sinners. Thus, the holy Son of God would serve to the uttermost his Father in heaven; and, in so doing, he would serve lost men and women by suffering on their behalf, by being afflicted on their behalf, by being condemned and punished on their behalf, and by being put to death on their behalf. Yet, although he suffered vicariously for his people, he himself remained utterly sinless and blameless.

Thus, the Lord said to his disciples, (27) *"..and whoever would be first among you must be your slave* (28) *even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

This was their supreme example of self- and selfless-sacrifice. Of course, they could not emulate the Lord Jesus in this respect. Nevertheless, these followers of Jesus were being called upon to emulate their Lord and Master in respect of serving others for their benefit, of sacrificing for the sake of others, and—above all—of seeking the lowest or least esteemed place among their own number. This, of course, was contrary to the ways of the world and of the kingdoms of this world. However, this was the way of the kingdom of heaven, and of the citizens of that heavenly kingdom.

## BLIND MEN HEALED

***Matthew 20:29-34***

### MATTHEW 20:29-30

(Mark 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-43)

The Lord Jesus and his disciples now made their way out of Jericho, followed by a crowd eager to hear more from the lips of the Saviour. As they made their way along the dusty roads, they came across two blind men sitting by the side to the road. These men would sit at this location daily, waiting for passersby and hoping to receive something from their hands. (Mark, who mentions only one blind beggar, tells us that his name was Bartimaeus: i.e., the son of Timaeus).

However, when they learned that the passersby on this occasion included the Lord Jesus, the two blind beggars cried out earnestly, *"Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David."* (v.30)

Here, it becomes evident that these men had heard about the Lord Jesus on some previous occasion. From their lips, the expression, 'Lord' may not have signified more than a formal address to a superior, similar to 'master' or 'sir'. However, by addressing Jesus as 'Son of David' these two blind men were indicating that they believed the Lord Jesus to be the Messiah of Israel, or King David's greater Son. Therefore, unlike many of the Jewish people, it would seem that these two men had believed that the Christ of whom they had heard previously was indeed the promised Sent One of God.

However, this was the first time they had actually come into contact with the Saviour. Although, at this stage, they could not behold him with their eyes, they believed on him. Furthermore, these men believed with all their heart that the Lord Jesus had the power and ability to extend mercy to them, in the sense of restoring their sight to them. Otherwise, their appeal for mercy would have been pointless, as later events will reveal.

## MATTHEW 20:31

However, the crowd following the Lord Jesus was greatly offended by the interruption from these two men. What right did two obscure and shabbily-clothed beggars have to call upon the name of the Lord? These beggars were among the lowest of society; a scourge on the respectable part of society and a reproach among the people of Israel. They were an embarrassment to a nation that took great pride in its work ethic and its accumulation of wealth or riches. In many cases, those who were poor or outcasts were little esteemed or even despised by the people.

Such was the case here. Turning indignantly upon the two blind beggars, the crowd rebuked them for their impious outburst and told them in no uncertain language to remain silent. Nevertheless, the two men were not to be silenced so easily. The Lord Jesus was passing by. If they did not appeal to him now for mercy they may never be able to appeal to him again. Thus, undeterred by their vociferous critics, the two men cried out all the more vehemently for the Lord's mercy.

## MATTHEW 20:32-33

At this point, the Lord Jesus stopped. Calling out to them, Jesus asked what they wanted him to do for them. Their reply was immediate: *"Lord, let our eyes be opened."* (v.23)

Mark tells us that when Jesus stopped, he instructed someone to call the blind man to him. Immediately, he cast aside his outer cloak, sprang to his feet, and headed toward the Lord Jesus—perhaps guided by one of the disciples. (Mark 10:49-50) Then, when he (or they) stood before the Lord Jesus, the Lord asked, *"What do you want me to do for you?"* to which they replied, *"Lord, let our eyes be opened."*

It may be objected that the blind men's first request should have been for spiritual sight. However, in his grace, the Lord often addresses the immediate requests made to him: For he had come into the world both to deliver from sin and also from sickness, disease and other afflictions of body or soul. Furthermore, these men had indicated a measure of faith in the Lord by addressing him as the 'Son of David'. Yet, again, we see from the next verse that they were not seeking physical healing alone.

## MATTHEW 20:34

Here, we notice immediately that the holy Son of God did not suffer from the same inhibitions or prejudices as many in the crowd. Far from distancing himself from these two forlorn individuals, he had called them to him. Now, as they stood before him expectantly, he exhibits utmost compassion and pity on them by reaching out and touching their eyes. Apart from the healing element signified by the touch of his and on the affected part, this touch was one of contact with another human being; contact which had probably been denied these men in their pitiable but despised condition. After all, some would say, 'Who sinned, that they became blind?' –implying that either they or their parents had brought about their own misfortune. (Cf. John 9:1-3) Yet, the Lord Jesus shows to his disciples and to the accompanying crowd that no kind, class or condition of people must be considered beyond the reach of his mercy.

Matthew tells us that the men received their sight as soon as the Lord touched their eyes. Now, for the first time, they were able to look upon the one whom they had confessed as the Son of David. Now, they could see the LORD's Christ—the Saviour of the world.

Significantly, however, these men did not walk away from the Lord after benefiting from his love, grace and mercy. On the contrary, when they had recovered their sight they followed him in the way. Thus, their gratitude is displayed by their willingness to follow the one who had called them to himself, who had reached out to them, and who had healed them. Thus, those to whom the Lord shows mercy ought to show their heartfelt love and gratitude to the One who has not passed them by.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 21

## JESUS THE KING COMES TO JERUSALEM

***Matthew 21:1-11***

*(Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:29-44; John 12:12-19)*

### MATTHEW 21:1-3

Now, the Lord Jesus and his followers drew near to the city of Jerusalem. The Lord Jesus knew that by returning to this city, he would be facing arrest and trial. However, this was all part of God's plan and purposes for his Son. Now was the appointed time. Now was the time that the holy Son of God had to make his way to the cross of suffering and shame.

However, the proceedings began on a very different note. First of all, the Scriptures had to be fulfilled that spoke of the coming King. Therefore, as the group came to the village of Bethphage *('House of Figs')* on the outskirts of Jerusalem and close to the Mount of Olives, the Lord called aside two of his disciples. He instructed them to enter Bethphage where they would find a donkey (or ass) and her colt tied. They were to untie the pair and lead them to the Lord Jesus.

We need not assume anything unusual or irregular here. It was quite likely that the donkey and her colt were available either for public hire or that they belonged to someone known personally to the Lord Jesus. The Lord may even have arranged beforehand with the owners to borrow or hire these animals on a specific date; hence, the reason for their being so easily found tethered in the town. The Lord, of course, would have known exactly on what date he would requires these animals, and therefore could have made the necessary arrangements well in advance.

The fact that the owners may have questioned the disciples' actions in taking the donkey would be to confirm that they (the disciples) were acting on the Lord's behalf. As soon as mention was made of the Lord's name, the questioners would realise that the disciples' actions were completely in order and would not detain them further.

The choice of a donkey was of particular significance to Israel. This was the beast selected by the kings as their personal mounts. In antiquity, this royal donkey was reserved for the king's household alone, and was used by no other individuals. Hence, the significance of the Messiah-King entering the royal city seated on this animal (cf. 2 Sam. 16:2; 1 Kings 1:33).

### MATTHEW 21:4-6

The Lord Jesus was about to enter the city of Jerusalem for the last time. However, he would do so in the manner predicted by the prophets. Zechariah had announced the coming of the King. Thus, Matthew writes:

Matt. 21:4-5 ESV

4 This took place to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet, saying,

> 5 "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"

Or, as it is written by the prophet Zechariah himself:

> Zech. 9:9 ESV
>
> 9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Thus, the Lord Jesus was not only about to enter Jerusalem as the Servant of the LORD, but also as the Servant-King. This was the King long prophesied who would come to Jerusalem as the LORD's Anointed and as the Messiah of Israel. However, the nature of the Lord's kingdom and kingship was completely misunderstood by the people. They anticipated the Lord's Anointed about to enter the holy city to set up his kingdom visibly and to sit on his throne in Jerusalem. That this was neither the Lord's intention nor part of the Father's plan was completely alien to their understanding of the prophetic Scriptures.

However, the Scriptures had to be fulfilled—in the manner ordained by God the Father. Thus, the disciples secured this donkey and her colt or foal and return with them to the Lord Jesus.

## MATTHEW 21:7-8

After the disciples had laid their cloaks on one of the beasts, the Lord Jesus sat on it to enter Jerusalem. Here was the King of kings, seated upon a colt, coming in great humility to serve and to save his people! Here indeed was the Servant-King!

As they journeyed up to the holy city, many of those standing in the crowd cast their cloaks on the ground in front of the Lord Jesus. By this means, they were signifying their recognition of Christ as the Sent One of God, the Son of David and King of Israel, and the promised Messiah. Others among the crowd cut down palm branches from nearby trees and laid them on the ground or waved them as the Lord passed by. Thus, these people too were acknowledging publicly the Lordship, Kingship and Messiahship of Christ.

## MATTHEW 21:9

Then, the crowds leading and following the procession began to sing the praises of the Lord's Messiah, as they made their way up the slopes to the temple on Mount Zion. As they travelled along, the crowd cried out loudly,

*"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"*

"Hosanna..." "Save, we pray..." (or, 'Save now' or 'Save, we beseech...') Here, the people are using the expression common at the Feast of Tabernacles in invoking the salvation of the LORD. It was a prayer of praise and petition to the Lord for the bestowal of his blessings in salvation and mercy.

Here, also, the people address the Lord Jesus explicitly as 'the Son of David'. Thus, they are acknowledging the Lord as the rightful and promised King of Israel and the true descendant of King David. Further-

more, by making this confession, they are acknowledging the Lord Jesus as the Messiah—King David's greater Son.

Then, to add to this, the people thronging around the Lord Jesus cry out blessing him who comes in the name of the Lord. Clearly, these people are acknowledging that the Lord Jesus has come from God and has been appointed by God to act in his name. This much they accept whatever reservations they may entertain about the Lord's eternal equality or existence with God.

So the paean of praise reaches a crescendo with the exclamation, *"Hosanna in the highest"!* The people have exalted the name of the Lord Jesus to the very highest. They have bestowed upon 'their' King the greatest praises and honours that their lips can utter. Yet, in a matter of days, the vast majority of this same crowd of 'faithful subjects and worshippers' will repudiate and revile 'their' King, crying out for his crucifixion. (Mark 15:8-14)

## MATTHEW 21:10

As the loudly-chanting throng entered the precincts of Jerusalem, the citizens began to ask about the Person seated on the colt. Either they did not recognise the Lord Jesus from his previous visits to that city, or he had been so long absent from Jerusalem that they did not know him by sight. Of course, the Lord was well known to the religious leaders, such as the Pharisees (which included the scribes) and the Sadducees (which included the priests).

## MATTHEW 21:11

The crowd accompanying the Lord Jesus answered the question posed by the citizens of Jerusalem: *"This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee."*

Here, we see that the crowd acknowledged the Lord Jesus as a prophet: i.e., as a true prophet sent by God. By implication, this meant that the crowd accepted everything that the Lord Jesus said or taught as being the Word of God. In fact, with the exception of the Lord's true followers, this was far from the truth. In spite of the praise and worship uttered by their tongues, many in the crowd had already rejected the Lord's teaching. They did not want that teaching to take hold of their lives. They wanted only to see Jesus crowned as King in Jerusalem to in order fulfil their material and political ambitions for the overthrow of the Roman government. Hence, their praise and worship was purely superficial and hypocritical, as later events will show.

Nevertheless, some among the crowd had told the citizens of Jerusalem that Jesus was the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee. This, of course, would have raised some interesting questions among the so-called experts in the Jewish law. "*What good thing could come out of Nazareth?*" The town of Nazareth and the region of Galilee were held in contempt by many of the people. The scribes denied (mistakenly) that no prophet had ever arisen from Nazareth or elsewhere in Galilee, conveniently overlooking the prophet Jonah. Thus, they would reason, if Jesus was a prophet from Nazareth, he could not be a prophet from God; for the LORD always raised up his prophets from other towns (so it was claimed). Furthermore, Jesus could not possibly be the King of whom the prophets had spoken, or the promised Messiah of Israel, if he had come from Nazareth: For the Messiah was to come from Bethlehem.

## JESUS THE KING CLEANSES HIS TEMPLE [50]

***Matthew 21:12-13***

### MATTHEW 21:12

(Mark 11:15-19)

Now, the King comes to his temple—the hallowed sanctuary of God on earth; and the only place where he had caused his name to be remembered. The Lord Jesus had entered Jerusalem in triumph the previous day (Mark 11:12-11). Now, he was about to visit the temple on Mount Zion, the worshipping centre for the people of Israel and for those who sought to learn the ways of Israel's God.

However, as Jesus entered the temple precincts, he found that the outer courts had been converted into a trading area or market. Market stalls were sprawled around the paved areas in various parts of the temple courts. In one area, currency exchangers were taking the coinage of the many visiting pilgrims and converting it into temple currency (the shekel)—at a profit. Other stalls were offering suitable animals or birds for temple sacrifice, again selling them at a profit.

As soon as the Lord Jesus witnessed this desecration of the temple courts, he ordered the traders to leave and to take their wares with them. To hasten their departure, the Lord drove them out, overturning the tables used by the money-changers and the seats of the pigeon-sellers.

This was an example of righteous indignation or holy wrath on the part of the Lord Jesus. Yes, God's Law required animals to be sacrificed on the altar to atone for sin; and people were required to bring or buy these animals—but not within the temple precincts. Similarly, people were required to change their foreign currency to the temple shekel—but not within the temple precincts. This was hallowed ground. Even the outer courts were set aside for specific purposes of worship, etc.

### MATTHEW 21:13

> Matt. 21:13 ESV
>
> 13 He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers."

Now, the Lord Jesus reminds the temple authorities in no uncertain terms of the real purpose of the temple sanctuary and courts, and castigates them for their wanton desecration of this hallowed ground. The Lord Jesus cites the words of the LORD speaking through the prophet Isaiah: *'My house shall be called a house of prayer'.*

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[50] *The temple cleansing*: John's Gospel records a similar cleansing of the temple at the beginning (rather than toward the end) of Jesus' ministry. Some commentators believe that the two recorded incidents refer to the same cleansing, but that John placed his account at the beginning of Jesus' ministry for theological or thematic reasons. However, differences in detail seem to suggest that there were in fact two distinct temple cleansings, the one recorded by John near the beginning of the Lord's ministry and the other recorded by the Synoptic writers toward the end of that ministry. It would not be surprising in the least if the temple authorities—who did not recognise the Lord's authority, and who stood to gain from their evil activities—had re-instated the trading areas as soon as the Lord Jesus had left Judea for Galilee.

These words are quoted from Isaiah chapter 56, which reads:

> Isa. 56:6-7 ESV
>
> 6 “And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant—7 these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

From this passage, it is absolutely clear that the outer courts of the temple, where the merchants had been trading, were in fact set aside by the LORD for God-seeking Gentiles. They could not enter the inner area of the temple to seek or worship the Lord; therefore, the Lord had granted to them a special area outside the sanctuary but within the temple precincts where they could worship him. It was this area that the traders had desecrated, and it was this abuse of the Lord’s holy temple that the Lord Jesus was now condemning. What should have been a house of prayer ‘for all people’ had been rendered unfit for purpose by the presence of the markets.

The Lord Jesus adds, *“…but you make it a den of robbers.”*

Not only had the temple authorities allowed the outer courts to be used as a marketplace, thereby depriving the Gentiles of their opportunity to seek the LORD, but they had allowed the traders to place surcharges on all their transactions. Thus, they robbed the people by grossly overcharging them; and no doubt the temple authorities shared in the proceeds with the traders. Perhaps, indeed, the authorities levied high rents on the traders for their ‘privileged’ hire of prestigious temple space.

## MATTHEW 21:14

While the Lord Jesus was present in the temple courts, many who were blind or lame were brought to him for healing. Not one of these disabled people was ever discouraged by the Lord or turned away. He received them all. He welcomed them all. He healed them all. Thus, we see that no disability or incapacity ought to prevent us from making our request known to the Lord. He will hear. He will act. And, in accordance with his infinite love, mercy, wisdom, he will provide whatever is best for our long-term spiritual and physical welfare and for the glory of his name.

## MATTHEW 21:15

Needless to say, the religious authorities were greatly displeased with the Lord Jesus. The chief priests took offence because the Lord was administering healing ceremonies and making people well. However, those who recovered from their ailments or diseases or whom God had made well were expected to show themselves at the temple to praise the LORD, and to give to the priests the necessary offering. In some cases, it was the responsibility of the priests to examine the former patient and to declare him cleansed or healed of his disease.

Now, however, the Lord Jesus was healing people and declaring them clean by his own authority, without reference to the ‘lawfully appointed’ priests. Hence, this constituted just one reason why these men took offence at the Lord Jesus.

(Although not mentioned by Matthew, it is quite possible—if not probable—that the Lord Jesus would have instructed those who needed to do so to show themselves to the priests and to make the necessary offering for their cleansing—as he did on other occasions. (Matt. 8:4; Mark 1:44; Luke 5:14; 17:14) Even so, the priests would still be offended because the people were coming to them only after they had been to the Lord Jesus and had been healed or cleansed by him—whom they refused to acknowledge.)

At the same time, the scribes were offended because the Lord Jesus was teaching the people the true meaning of the Law, and he was teaching it in a way contrary to the traditions of themselves and the elders. Therefore, the scribes complained bitterly against the Lord Jesus because they felt that he was usurping their authority as teachers or interpreters of God's Law, and—in their opinion—even overturning the Law. In fact, of course, the only laws that the Lord Jesus overturned or repudiated were the man-made rules and regulations taught to the people by the Pharisees, scribes or elders.

Then, the religious authorities lodged another complaint against the Lord Jesus. He was receiving praise from children—praise written concerning the Messiah—and he was accepting it without rebuking the children!

In the temple, the children had been singing to Jesus the refrain from the Hallel Psalm—*"Hosanna to the Son of David!"* We must remember that Jewish children would have been brought up with a thorough knowledge of the Torah and Psalms. They would have known that 'Hosanna' meant 'Save, I pray', and was to be addressed to the LORD or to his Messiah. They would have known that the Messiah would be called 'the Son of David'. Therefore, when these children sang their praises to Jesus in these words, they were making a simple yet profound confession of faith in him as the Messiah from God.

It was this that infuriated the priests and scribes. They knew that these children had been taught sufficiently to understand the meaning of the phrase, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' Therefore, they were enraged when the children praised the Lord Jesus with these words—especially when the Lord made to attempt to prohibit them from doing so.

## MATTHEW 21:16

The religious leaders complain vehemently to the Lord Jesus, asking if he has not heard the children's cries. The Lord, of course, knew very well what the children were crying out, and he replies to these men, "*Yes; have you never read,*

> *'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise'?"* (cf. Ps. 8:2 (8:3) LXX)

Translated from the Hebrew of Psalm 8:2 (rather than the Greek Septuagint), this verse reads:

> Psa. 8:2a ESV
>
> 2 Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength…

Over the years, and by their ungodly and materialistic lifestyles, many of these religious leaders had denied the name of the Lord, not only in the person of the Lord Jesus but also as the God in heaven whom they professed to praise and worship. Yet, among the people were some whose hearts worshipped the LORD and whose voices praised his holy name. Ironically, it was not so much the learned experts in the Law who served and worshipped the LORD with a sincere and humble heart but the unlearned popula-

tion, and especially the little children. Granted, infants and babes could not understand the full meaning of religious service. Nevertheless, brought up under the pious prayers and instructions of their parents, the LORD had prepared the hearts and minds of children to seek him and to praise his name when they had reached an age of understanding. It was such as these who now stood in the temple praising the name of the Lord Jesus, calling him 'the Son of David'. God had established praise or strength—a firm foundation of simple heartfelt worship—from the mouths of little children.

### MATTHEW 21:17

At this point, the Lord Jesus turns his back on these religious hypocrites. The Lord will always receive the praises of those who acknowledge him and who worship him sincerely and according to the truth. However, the same Lord will always turn away from those whose hearts are insincere and who praises are merely empty words expressed from a corrupt or impure nature—such as these priests and scribes.

Thus, we must consider our own lives, lest anything should enter in that would hinder our fellowship with our Father in heaven. For he who ascends the hill of the LORD must do so with clean hands and a pure heart. (Ps. 24:3-6)

Leaving the city of Jerusalem together with its incorrigible religious hierarchy, the Lord Jesus travelled back to Bethany, his usual lodging place while ministering in the city. Possibly, Jesus remained with Mary, Martha and Lazarus on these occasions, although this cannot be established with certainty.

## JESUS CURSES THE BARREN FIG TREE

***Matthew 21:18-19***

### MATTHEW 21:18-19

(Mark 11:12-14)

The following morning, the Lord Jesus left Bethany with his disciples to return to Jerusalem. As they journeyed, the Lord became hungry. Seeing a fig tree nearby, Jesus approached it looking for fruit. However, this particular fig tree was barren. Nothing useful for feeding the body could be found on it; for it bore nothing but leaves.

Mark tells us that it was not the season for figs. (Mark 11:13b) However, this is not relevant here as the Lord Jesus is merely using the fig tree to teach a lesson about barrenness, not about horticulture or arboriculture. However, although it was not the time for ripe or mature figs, it was the time for green or unripened figs—but even these had not appeared.

Thus, the Lord Jesus placed the fig tree under a curse (or anathema), forbidding it from bearing fruit ever again. At this point, the barren fig tree withered and died. Never again would it be of use or service to mankind, for never again would it have the opportunity of meeting their needs or feeding the bodies.

Now, of course, the Lord Jesus had not carried out this entire episode without an express purpose or reason. He was teaching his disciples a lesson by analogy, using the barren fig tree as an example. The barren or unproductive fig tree represented the barren or unproductive religious leadership in Jerusalem. Just as the Lord had expected the fig tree to produce sound and mature figs, so, in Jerusalem, he had

expected the religious leaders to produce spiritually sound and mature fruit. However, just as the fig tree was found to be barren or void of good fruit, so too the religious leaders had been found to be barren or void of good fruit in their lives. The barren fig free denoted a worthless plant. The spiritually barren religious leaders denoted a worthless profession. Then, just as the Lord cursed the fig tree so that it could never again yield fruit of any kind, so the Lord would curse the hypocritical religious leadership so that they could never again profess to belong to God or to represent his name.

What was true of the religious leadership was true also of the common people who professed to follow the Lord. If, in spite of their profession, their lives were barren or void of healthy spiritual fruit, or if they produced bad fruit consistently, then they too would come under the Lord's judgment and curse: For they too had proved themselves to be hypocritical and insincere professors of the faith. (Cf. Jas. 2:14-26)

Thus we see how dangerous it is to profess the name of the Lord, to attend his place of worship, to participate in the services, and yet to do so from a hypocritical and insincere heart and a corrupt live. Those who produce no useful fruit, and whose lives are spiritually barren, fall under the Lord's curse. Here too we learn that the same Lord Jesus who came to save the world will also be the one who condemns the world of unbelieving and hypocritical mankind.

## THE PRAYER OF FAITH

***Matthew 21:20-22***

### MATTHEW 21:20

Astonished at the immediate demise of the fig tree, the disciples asked, *"How did the fig tree wither at once?"*

The disciples should not have been amazed. On many occasions, they had witnessed the Lord Jesus issuing a word of command, such as in his healing miracles, and they had seen the people being healed immediately. Therefore, it should not have surprised them that the Lord was able to pass judgment and for that judgment to become effective immediately.

Nevertheless, the Lord Jesus takes the opportunity to teach his disciples about the prayer of faith.

### MATTHEW 21:21

Here, the Lord Jesus does not emphasise the *quantity* of a person's faith but the *quality* of that faith. Elsewhere, the Lord had asserted that faith as minute as a grain of mustard seed could accomplish great things. (Matt. 17:20; Luke 17:6) Here, in this passage, Jesus assets that if a person has unwavering faith (faith without doubts, questions or conditions), then he will be able to accomplish much more than was done to the barren fig tree. Indeed, such faith can uplift a mountain (such as the nearby Mount of Olives) and cast it into the sea.

Now, of course, the Lord Jesus was using a metaphor to illustrate a very important principle. If not effected by providential and natural causes, then nothing useful would be achieved by removing mountains into the sea. Rather, such an action was likely to produce more harm than good. However, the Lord was emphasising the degree of power and action that was available to those who prayed about some matter with unwavering faith. Where it was in line with the express will and purposes of God, such total faith

and confidence in God's power to act (God's omnipotence) would meet with a positive response from the Almighty—to whom nothing is impossible. (Luke 1:37)

### MATTHEW 21:22

The Lord Jesus assures his disciples that they will receive whatever they ask, if they have faith. (Cf. Jas. 1:6) However, the Lord does not intend this statement to be understood absolutely or without limitations. Such would be contrary to his teaching about prayer elsewhere. Thus, although the prayer of faith can achieve things humanly impossible, we must not seek these things if they are contrary to the will and purposes of God. Rather, when we pray with the utmost assurance that the Lord will hear and answer our prayers, we must pray with the understanding that God's sovereign will must prevail. In everything, the Lord knows what is best. Therefore, in all our prayers—however earnest and sincere—we must learn to add, *'Your will be done.'* Accepting God's will, then whatever we ask in prayer, we will receive, if we have faith. (Cf. Matt. 6:10)

## JESUS' AUTHORITY CHALLENGED

***Matthew 21:23-27***

### MATTHEW 21:23

(Mark 11:27-33; Luke 20:1-8)

On arriving at the temple, the Lord Jesus began teaching the people, as was his custom. However, the religious leaders who had been so gravely offended by the children's praise on the previous day decided to challenge the Lord directly. Therefore, as he was teaching, the chief priests and elders demanded an answer from the Lord Jesus: *"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"*

Enraged that the Lord Jesus should not only accept Messianic praise from the lips of children in the temple, but that he should also usurp the position and authority of the priests and scribes by teaching the people, the religious leaders demanded to know by whose authority the Lord Jesus was acting. They knew that the Sanhedrin, of which they were members, had never authorised the Lord Jesus to teach the people. Therefore, anyone acting without the approval and commendation of the Sanhedrin was considered to be an imposter with no rights to teach the ways of God or to expound the Law of God.

However, in this, the religious leaders were gravely mistaken. God's servants were not chosen or appointed by men. Rather, they were chosen and appointed by God—and this divine calling and commissioning should have been recognised by men. Such was the case when the LORD chose and called Moses and all the OT prophets. Such, too, was the case with John the Baptist. Yet, just as the religious leaders would not accept John as a prophet from God so now they would not accept the Lord Jesus as the Sent One of God—with power and authority to teach.

Of course, as the Son of God, Jesus spoke and taught with full authority; for he was speaking and teaching on behalf of the Father. (John 5:19-24; 14:10,24) However, the Lord was not relaying God's words in the manner of the prophets. Rather, he himself was empowered or authorised to declare God's Word for

he was himself the Word or Logos; the living embodiment of God's truth sent into the world in human form. (John 1:1—2; Heb. 1:1-2; Rev. 19:13)

Furthermore, the chief priests and elders are the last people in the world who should have been challenging the Lord's authority, for they themselves lacked authority from God.

## MATTHEW 21:24-26

Knowing their duplicity, the Lord Jesus did not respond to their demand directly. Instead, he asked a question of them—a question that was bound to place them in an impossible situation. *"The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?"* (v.25) (i.e., was the baptism of John—and therefore his prophetic office—appointed and authorised by God, or was it by men's appointment only?)

Now, of course, the chief priests and elders had denied vehemently that John the Baptist had been a prophet of the LORD, or that he had been the forerunner or herald of the Messiah. Therefore, they would not have objected to John's execution at the hands of Herod the Great. For, to the religious establishment, John the Baptist was not a prophet raised up by God—much less the forerunner of God's Messiah—but a self-appointed individual or a (false) prophet sent by other men.

This is what they believed. However, the Lord Jesus had faced them with a dilemma. Although they had convinced themselves that the Baptist had not been sent by God but by men, they were afraid to declare this publicly. They knew that the ordinary people held John in high esteem, and that the people believed him to have been a true prophet of the LORD, and the forerunner of the LORD's Messiah. (Matt. 14:5; Mark 11:32; Luke 20:6) Logically, if John the Baptist was not the forerunner, then the forerunner had not yet come and therefore Jesus could not be the promised Messiah. However, John the Baptist did indeed fulfil the prophecy of Malachi when he appeared, thus proving that he was the LORD's prophet and the forerunner of the Christ. (Mal. 3:1 with Matt. 11:10; cf. Isa. 40:3)

Thus, the religious leaders could find no way out of their quandary. Professing John to be sent by men would have invited the wrath of the people. However, to confess John as being sent from heaven (i.e., by God) would be an admission that John was God's prophet and the forerunner of the Messiah. And to make this confession would require them to answer the Lord's question, *"Why then did you not believe him?"* (v.25)

Thus, we see that these religious leaders were more afraid of the reaction from the crowd than about expressing their own views honestly. Of course, it was not in their interests to believe that John was God's messenger; especially with his emphasis on repentance and change of conduct. The chief priests and elders would see this message as a threat not only to themselves personally, but also to their own form of teaching. Therefore, while John was alive, they had done all in their power to attempt to discredit both John and his message of repentance. This was why they insisted—privately, at least—that John the Baptist had not been sent by God but by men.

## MATTHEW 21:27

At a loss, therefore, as to how to answer the Lord Jesus, they declared, *"We do not know."* Now, of course, this statement was manifestly disingenuous. The chief priests and elders *did* know who sent John. These men knew the Scriptures. They knew that the appearing and preaching of John the Baptist

fulfilled the words of Malachi and other prophets of the OT. They knew that John was the Messiah's forerunner and that the Messiah would appear shortly afterward. They knew all this, but they wilfully rejected all this. They rejected John's call to repentance and baptism, because they were offended to think that they were being classed as sinners. They repudiated the claims and the message of the Lord Jesus when he appeared because they refused to accept that he was the Messiah sent by God. Therefore, now as they stood before the Lord, they considered him as a self-appointed religious teacher—not as the Holy One of God. And, to Jesus, they declared concerning John, *"We do not know."*

Since they refused to acknowledge the truth (under the pretext of ignorance) Jesus declares to them, *"Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."*

In fact, these religious leaders should never have needed to ask their arrogant question in the first place. Apart from the first-hand testimony of John the Baptist, they had witnessed at first hand many outstanding signs or miracles performed by the Lord Jesus, and had heard of very many others from their most reliable sources. Therefore, they were without excuse. Theirs was an example of wanton and wilful unbelief in the face of incontrovertible evidence. (Cf. Rom. 1:18-22; see also Ps. 14:1)

## THE PARABLE OF THE TWO SONS

***Matthew 21:28-32***

The Lord Jesus was not about to excuse these religious leaders for their evasive and dishonest answer. Thus, he sets before them a parable that would rebuke and shame them for their inexcusable unbelief.

### MATTHEW 21:28-30

Here, the Lord Jesus presents two contrasting examples of faith and obedience. A man with two sons instructs the first to go out and work in his vineyard. However, the first son disregards the words of his father, and refuses to work in the vineyard. Afterward, however, the first son regrets his decision, changes his mind, and goes out to work in the vineyard, as his father had instructed.

The father then said the same to his second son, who agreed immediately to work in the vineyard for his father. However, no sooner had he agreed to go than he changed his mind and stayed at home, disobeying his father entirely and without subsequent repentance.

### MATTHEW 21:31

Addressing the religious leaders directly, the Lord Jesus asked, *"Which of the two did the will of his father?"*

Naturally, the priests and elders replied, *"The first"* –not realising where this answer was leading them. Immediately, the Lord Jesus rounds on them with his challenging reply. *"Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you…"*

The Lord begins his reply with the expression, 'Truly', indicating that what he was about to say was of the utmost importance to his hearers. At this point, the religious leaders would give their earnest attention. However, when the Lord Jesus adds in the same sentence that tax collectors and prostitutes were entering God's kingdom before the Jewish priests and elders, this must have shocked these 'pious' men

to the core. Of all people with whom they might have been compared, the tax collectors and the prostitutes were, in their minds, among the lowest of the low—the dregs of society.

These esteemed religious leaders must have been greatly offended and enraged by such a remark. Yet, the Lord knew the true state of their hearts. Jesus knew that their inner corruption kept them far off from God and that their impure hearts made them no better morally than the tax collectors or prostitutes whom they despised. (Matt. 23:27-28) Likewise, the Lord Jesus knew the true state of the tax collectors' and prostitutes' hearts. From among both groups of society, many had repented and had believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, finding forgiveness of sin and life eternal. (Luke 7:37-50; 18:11-14) By contrast, many of the religious leaders had refused to repent or believe. Therefore, in verse 32, Jesus adds:

## MATTHEW 21:32

*"For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him…"*

John the Baptist had come to the people proclaiming the kingdom of God; the kingdom of truth and righteousness. The Baptist announced to the people that One greater than he was about to arise, and did arise during his ministry. This was the Righteous Branch. (Jer. 23:5; 33:15) This was the Messiah promised by God and the Davidic King. Furthermore, by preaching a baptism for repentance, John was asserting the necessity for personal holiness or righteousness of life in preparation for the kingdom of heaven which was then about to be made known more fully by the Lord Jesus Christ. For the most part, however, the religious leadership—Pharisees, scribes, priests and elders—refused to believe John's message, deriding and spurning the way of repentance and faith. Therefore, while many other people—including tax collectors and prostitutes—were responding to the message of repentance and faith, preached both by John and later by Jesus, and were entering into God's kingdom, the religious leadership placed itself outside the kingdom and beyond the pale of life and salvation.

Thus, Jesus rebukes these priests and elders for their impenitence and unbelief. Furthermore, the Lord censures the religious leaders for failing to follow the example of the people, including tax collectors and prostitutes. The priests and elders had seen these people repent and believe in the Gospel (the obedience of faith to the Father's will). However, they themselves had not obeyed the Father's will but had remained wilfully unrepentant and unbelieving.

Thus, Jesus applies to them the teaching of the parable: The first son who rebelled, but who later changed his mind and obeyed his father's will, spoke of the tax collectors and prostitutes who—although originally rebellious against God and his righteous requirements—nevertheless later repented, believed and obeyed the Father's will. On the contrary, the religious leaders—while professing piety, godliness and righteousness of life—did not practise it, nor did these men heed the Father's voice through the prophets or obey his will speaking in his Son. They refused to repent or change their mind, but held fast to their own perverse and ungodly ways.

Even so, while this was true of many among the religious leadership, it was not true of all. Even in the Sanhedrin, certain of its most esteemed members were considering the words of Jesus very seriously. Among these men were Gamaliel, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. Subsequently, they, and many of the priests, would believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

## THE PARABLE OF THE TENANTS

***Matthew 21:33-46***

(Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-18)

The majority of the religious leadership remained unyielding in their opposition to the Lord Jesus Christ and to the message of the kingdom. They did all in their power to prevent the Lord from preaching and to discredit his words and works in the eyes of the people. Nevertheless, the Pharisees, scribes and priests were not wholly successful in this respect, as many of the people continued to listen to and benefit from the ministry of the Saviour.

Yet, the Lord Jesus would not permit these religious leaders to escape their culpability and responsibility before God for their actions. They had proved wholly unfaithful to the God whom they purported to serve. Now, God the Son would show them what became of those who proved unfaithful in the service of the Lord.

### MATTHEW 21:33

The Lord Jesus presents the scribes, Pharisees, priests and elders with another parable. On this occasion, the master of a great house planted a vineyard and secured its boundaries with a stock-proof fence to protect the growing crop from damage by animals and theft by other people. Inside the vineyard, the master dug a winepress for processing the grapes, together with a watchtower.

On completion of this project, the master leased out the vineyard to tenants. These tenants were expected to work in the vineyard on the master's behalf, and present him with the produce of the vineyard. The master then took his leave of the tenants, and set off into another country.

### MATTHEW 21:34-36

After some time, when the season for fruit was approaching, the master sent his servants to the tenants of the vineyard to collect the produce. However, being completely unwilling to give the fruit to its rightful owner and perhaps also because they had failed to gather the fruit, the tenants turned violently on the master's servants. One servant they took and beat severely—expelling him from his master's vineyard. Another servant the tenants murdered. And yet another servant the tenants stoned—presumably, to death.

Even so, the master sent yet more servants to the tenants to collect the fruit due to him. However, the tenants attacked and killed those servants also, adding yet more blood to their already blood-stained hands.

### MATTHEW 21:37-39

Finally, the master determined to send his own son to the tenants, saying, *"They will respect my son."* However, the tenants showed no greater reverence for the master's son than they had done for the master's servants. Realising that this was the master's heir, the tenants immediately plotted together to kill him, saying that the inheritance would then become theirs.

This, then, is what these tenants did. They laid wicked hands upon the son, cast him out of the vineyard and murdered him.

## MATTHEW 21:40

The religious leaders who were listening to these words must have agreed among themselves that the tenants in the parable had exhibited the most heinous behaviour, and were worthy of the most severe punishment. Therefore, Jesus asks them, *"When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"*

The Pharisees and scribes do not hesitate to answer:

## MATTHEW 21:41

> *They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons."*

At this stage, however, the religious leaders did not realise that this parable portrayed them as the wicked and unfaithful tenants. As yet, the scribes and Pharisees did not appreciate that the master in the parable was the LORD God, and that the servants in the parable were the prophets sent by God. These prophets the people of Israel had rejected, beaten and killed. Furthermore, the religious leaders still did not realise that the son in the parable spoke of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, whom God had sent to the people—and who would be killed by the people.

Thus, to clarify these matters and to apply the principles of the parable to religious leaders, Matthew records these words of Jesus:

## MATTHEW 21:42

The scribes and Pharisees were very well acquainted with the Scriptures. However, on many occasions, they failed to understand the Scriptures or they misinterpreted the Scriptures. Yet, there was one passage which they should have understood, for it came from Psalm 118—a Messianic passage. In that Psalm, the passage reads:

> Ps. 118:22-23 ESV
>
> 22 The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. 23 This is the LORD's doing;
> it is marvellous in our eyes.

And, within a few verses of the same Psalm, the writer adds:

> Ps. 118:26 ESV
>
> 26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD.

However, not only were the builders (Israel) rejecting the Stone (Christ), they were rejecting the One who had come in the name of the LORD. They were rejecting the Sent One or Messiah of God.

Nevertheless, that same Stone which the builders had set aside as worthless was to become the Cornerstone—the keystone of the building. Without this locking Stone the structure could not be held together

securely. Thus, although despised and rejected by the builders, and although a Stone of offence to Israel, that same Stone would stand as the Cornerstone for all time: For this was the LORD's doing—i.e., this was according to the LORD's plan and purpose from the eternal ages—and it was marvellous or wondrous to behold. (Isa. 28:16; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:6-7)

Yes, the scribes and Pharisees must have known this Scripture, but they were not willing to interpret it in the manner intended by the LORD. Even so, the Lord Jesus interprets the passage for them and applies it as God intended:

## MATTHEW 21:43

Because it had involved a call to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (whom they refused to acknowledge), the Pharisees, scribes and other religious groups had distanced themselves from the Son of God, from the message of salvation and life, and therefore from the means of entry into the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God. They had cut themselves off from the only way of salvation by refusing to accept the terms of salvation, and by repudiating the Saviour.

However, although these religious leaders rejected the Messiah and the Gospel of the kingdom, they nevertheless continued to assert their adherence to God and to his Law. They claimed vigorously that they alone were the servants and representatives of God Most High; that they alone were authorised to teach God's ways and to offer sacrifices for the sins of the people, and that their high priest alone had the right to approach God's most holy presence once each year on the Day of Atonement. Anyone else—they considered—who purported to serve God, either as a prophet or as a teacher, was an imposter since these individuals had not received the sanction of the Sanhedrin or of any theological school for their professed ministry.

How wrong were these religious groups! It was they who were the false servants and false teachers. It was they who were offering sacrifices to God from an unclean and unforgiven heart. It was they who were the imposters and false professors of faith in God. Granted, this did not apply to every religious leader, since some were genuinely seeking the truth and were prepared to listen and respond to the words of the Lord Jesus. But, for the majority, these religious leaders were devoid of true piety or godliness and stood far off from the true and living God, even while making long prayers clad in 'holy' vestments.

The Lord Jesus, however, was not about to leave these hypocritical religious leaders in any doubt. Thus, he declares: *"Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits."* (v.23)

These were alarming words. This solemn pronouncement was not even being made against the ordinary Jewish people but against the people's religious leaders—including the scribes and Pharisees. The Lord Jesus had just declared that these religious leaders were to forfeit any right to the kingdom of God. This meant that they would forego any hope in the promises that God had made to Israel; any prospect of inclusion in the kingdom of heaven, and any hope of a place in heaven when they died.

These were breathtaking words. Yet, they tell us something about those who profess to serve Christ—but who do not do so from a forgiven and sanctified heart and life. However pious they may appear outwardly, and irrespective of the high office they may hold in the church, these people are still in their sins.

As such, they are imposters, hypocritically offering service to God and ministering to the people, while at the same time concealing an evil, unclean and impious heart.

Yet, the same fate will befall these men and women as befell many of the scribes and Pharisees. They will be excluded from God's kingdom and from his presence for evermore. Ultimately, they will find themselves cast into outer darkness, or the hell prepared for the devil and his angels. (Matt. 25:41)

The Lord Jesus, however, does not finish by pronouncing this solemn woe on the scribes and Pharisees. He adds immediately that the kingdom that they have forfeited will be given instead to people producing its fruits. This would include all those Jewish people, together with some of their religious leaders and many of the priests, who later repented and believed on the Lord Jesus Christ. (Acts 6:7) It would include also all those Gentiles or non-Jewish people who repented and trusted the Lord Jesus—even although previously they had been excluded from God's covenants with Israel (except by becoming Jewish proselytes).

## MATTHEW 21:44

Here, the Lord Jesus extends the metaphor. The one who falls on this Stone are those who stumble or who are offended on account of Christ or of the message of the cross. This applied not only to the unbelieving Jewish leaders and people, but also to anyone of any nation who stumbled or was offended at the preaching of Christ. Those who will not accept the Gospel message, or the message of the cross, will not enter the kingdom of heaven or find acceptance by God in heaven. Thus, they will be 'broken to pieces' or 'crushed'—an expression indicating their total destruction and separation from God for all eternity in that place likened to a 'lake of fire'. (Rev. 19:20; 20:10,14-15; 21:8)

The second part of the sentence is a parallelism, common in Hebrew literature, and simply reinforces the statement made in the first part. The emphasis here is on the destructive or punitive power that will be exercised against those who repudiate Christ and his Gospel, and who remain impenitent until the end. On the Last Day, the Stone that they rejected will become their Judge, and his just sentence of condemnation will fall on them with the full force of his holy law, banishing them to hell forever.

## MATTHEW 21:45-46

Now, at last, the Pharisees and scribes realised that the Lord Jesus had been speaking about them when he uttered this parable. Naturally, this must have enraged and infuriated them even further. Indeed, they were ready to seize the Lord Jesus and place him under arrest—although for what criminal misdemeanour is not stated. Obviously, they had no valid grounds for arresting the Lord, since his teaching did not constitute an offence in criminal or civil law. Any charges that they brought against him would need to be false; but, as later events were to show, the religious leaders were quite adept at framing false charges—and perjuring themselves!

However, although fully intent on apprehending the Lord Jesus, they feared to do so in a public place. Many among the crowds now thronging Jerusalem for the Passover held the Lord Jesus to be a prophet sent by God. To have arrested a prophet commissioned by God would have caused a riot among the people, especially with such large crowds present. Furthermore, a riot or even a local disturbance would have invited the immediate intervention of the Roman authorities and the possible invoking of military

powers. Of course, the religious authorities had no wish for further Roman interference, especially on the eve of Passover, therefore they decided against arresting the Lord Jesus on this occasion.

We must remember, of course, that the timing of these events was not in the hands of the scribes and Pharisees or of anyone else on earth. The entire course of events that would lead to the cross had been predetermined by the Father. No one could alter these events in the least, nor could anyone arrest the Lord Jesus before his appointed time. Nor could anyone put the Lord Jesus to death apart from the determinate plan and purpose of God. The Lord Jesus would not die on the cross until his appointed time, and then he would not die because men had determined it but because he himself had determined to lay down his life voluntarily for the sins of the people whom he had come to redeem. (John 10:15-18)

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 22

## THE PARABLE OF THE WEDDING BANQUET

***Matthew 22:1-14***

*(Luke 14:16-24)*

Once again, the Lord Jesus presents the religious leaders with a parable. This parable illustrates:

a) The great danger of neglecting God's call to repentance and faith, and
b) The great danger of pretending to godliness while still in an unregenerate and unforgiven condition.

### MATTHEW 22:1-3

In speaking of the Kingdom of heaven, the Lord Jesus is speaking of those who will, or will not, be part of God's kingdom, and therefore of the distinction between those who belong to Christ and those who do not. Those who would enter God's presence in glory must first enter God's kingdom through belief in and acceptance of the Gospel.

Therefore, to illustrate this, the Lord speaks of a king who prepared a magnificent wedding banquet for his son. As the banquet was being prepared, the king sent his servants to call all those who had received invitations to the wedding feast. However, when advised that all was now ready and that they should come immediately to the wedding feast, those who had been invited refused to attend.

Here, we see that it is possible to receive an invitation from the 'king' and yet to reject or despise this gracious invitation. This is ingratitude of the highest order.

### MATTHEW 22:4-5

Nevertheless, the king was unwilling to accept these refusals as final. Therefore, he sent more of his servants to those who had been invited. These servants enjoined the invitees to attend immediately, pointing out to them that the dinner had been prepared, the oxen and calves had been slaughtered, and everything was ready to commence.

However, in complete disregard of the king's invitation, those invited not only slighted the king's servants and their message, but turned their backs on them. Some went off to tend their livestock, and others departed to their places of business.

### MATTHEW 22:6

However, some of those invited remained behind with the king's servants. Seizing the opportunity, they turned upon the servants of the king, attacked them violently, shamefully treated them and put the servants to death.

This speaks of the King (God) who sent forth his servants (beginning with the prophets and continuing later with Christ and his apostles) to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast (the external

call to repentance). On this occasion, all those who had been invited to the wedding feast rejected and despised the invitation, and refused to attend: i.e., they refused to come to the King's banquet for his Son by repenting and believing the Gospel, or the message of the kingdom.

This demonstrates that it is perfectly possible to hear God's call to repentance and faith, and yet to refuse that call. However, this concerns only the 'outward' or 'external' call to repentance and faith. This is a general call which can be resisted, and it was this kind of call to repentance and faith that Israel resisted when they refused to heed the preaching of their prophets, when they shamefully treated these prophets of God, and when they murdered these servants of the King. However, unlike this external call, the internal call cannot be resisted. It is always effectual (or effective) and always results in the repentance and faith of the person experiencing it, for the internal call to repentance and faith is a work of the Holy Spirit involving regeneration.

## MATTHEW 22:7

Here, we see the outcome for those who rejected the king's gracious invitation. Everything had been prepared for these individuals, but all of them had refused to attend. Furthermore, they had shown contempt for the king and had abused and killed his servants. This speaks of those who know what God requires, but who are completely unwilling to do what God requires, and are prepared to go to any lengths to silence the Word of God and those who bring that Word to them.

In righteous anger, the king sent his armed forces to destroy every one of these murderers. In addition, the troops burned their city, leaving nothing of value left within it. Therefore, those who had chosen their worldly pursuits, wealth, treasures and pleasures instead of fellowship with God forfeited everything they had owned and cherished on earth, in addition to everything that they might have gained in heaven.

## MATTHEW 22:8-10

By their own foolishness and wilful refusal to respond, all those previously invited forfeited their place at the wedding banquet for the king's son. Therefore, unwilling to leave these places unfilled, the king instructed his servants to give no more attention to the unworthy individuals but to go instead to those who previously had not been invited.

Thus, the servants scoured the main highways, inviting to the king's feast anyone that they found. Every kind of person was included both good and bad. Ultimately, the wedding hall was filled to capacity with those who had accepted the invitation willingly, and had come in haste to the feast.

The fact that both 'good' and 'bad' are mentioned in verse 10 shows us that no category or class of person is ever beyond God's love, grace or mercy. Regardless of their present state or condition before God or men, if they receive and accept the invitation that God offers, then they will never be refused entry into his kingdom. Here, of course, we are speaking of those who respond favourably to the invitation to attend (or believe the Gospel); and they do this because the Holy Spirit has already prepared their hearts and minds by regeneration to accept the message and to repent and believe on the King's Son.

## THE GUEST WITHOUT A WEDDING GARMENT

***Matthew 22:11-14***

### MATTHEW 22:11

Once everyone had been assembled in readiness for the feast, the king entered the banqueting hall to join his guests. However, as he scanned those who had come to the feast, he noticed one man who was not wearing a wedding garment. (Cf. Isa. 61:10) Clearly, this man should not have been present at the feast in that condition: for those without the appropriate garments are not in a suitable condition to attend. Those who still wore their own personal clothing—however fine or expensive—were not wearing acceptable garments and therefore could not sit at the king's table. In fact, metaphorically, such people were still clad in their garments of unrighteousness or their filthy rags. (Isa. 59:6; 64:6; cf. Zech. 3:3-5)

### MATTHEW 22:12

Therefore, as soon as the caught sight of this interloper, the king approached him. Politely, the king said to him, *"Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?"*

Caught out, the intruder remained speechless. He knew that he should not have been present in the banqueting hall. He had not been invited by the king, and therefore had not been provided with the necessary wedding garment. But without this garment (the garment of righteousness and praise (cf. Isa. 61:3)), he was totally unprepared to sit at the king's table or to share with all the invited guests in the feast for the king's son.

Nevertheless, although not properly attired, the man had attempted to enter the banqueting hall and to share in the feast with all the invited guests. The invited guests, however, had all received wedding garments from the king. These 'wedding garments' represented the garments of Christ's righteousness (the King's Son) which every invited guest had received as a gift from the King through their repentance and faith in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom. 4:22-25; Phil. 3:9)

The man without a wedding garment had not been invited to the King's banquet, therefore he had not been provided with the 'garments of Christ's righteousness' essential for entering the King's presence or to sit at the King's table. This man was still in his unregenerate state; still in his sins, at enmity with God, and separated from God by his unregenerate and unclean heart.

### MATTHEW 22:13

There can be only one outcome for those who try to find acceptance with God apart from believing on Christ and receiving his righteousness as a gift of his grace. This man may have considered that his own self-righteousness or upright behaviour would have been acceptable to God. He may have considered that all his good works and charitable deeds would have earned him a place in God's kingdom. He may have considered that God would accept him because of his commendable life, even although he had not believed on God's Son as his Saviour but in some other form of religion to find his way to heaven.

For any or all of these reasons and any others, this man was grievously mistaken—and lost. No one can enter God's kingdom except by believing on God's Son and receiving Christ's righteousness as a gift from

the Saviour. And no one can believe on Christ or receive his righteousness unless invited to do so by the Father (the 'King')—an invitation that is made effective in a person's soul by the work of the Holy Spirit in effectual calling and regeneration. However, this man had not received the necessary invitation. Therefore, because he had never been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, he was still a stranger to God's grace. Under no circumstances, therefore, could he enter the kingdom of heaven or sit at the King's banquet for his Son in that kingdom: That is, he was excluded from heaven, from the presence of God, and from that of his Son. This place was reserved only for those who had been invited and who had received the garments of Christ's righteousness as a gift of the King's unmerited grace.

Thus, turning to his attendants, the king declared:

> Mat 22:13 ESV
>
> 13 ... "'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

At the banquet for the King's Son, no place will be found for uninvited guests—or 'gatecrashers'. Those only will sit at the King's magnificent banquet in heaven who have been regenerated, justified, sanctified and glorified. For all others, such as the man without a wedding garment, their place will be eternal separation from God the Father and from his Son.

To this end, the king in the parable commands his attendants to bind the man hand and foot and to cast him into outer darkness. This metaphor expresses forcefully the finality and remoteness of that place reserved for unforgiven and impenitent mankind. The 'attendants' speaks of God's holy angels. Being bound hand and foot speaks of being shackled as a prisoner in a place of punishment—in this case, eternal punishment. Being cast into outer darkness speaks of being separated from the light of God's Word and Truth, from the one who is the Light of the world, and from fellowship with the Father in that place where he reveals something of his eternal glory and majesty to his redeemed and glorified children.

'Outer darkness' speaks also, however, of that place of utter desolation and dismay, a place of torments where the love, grace and mercy of God are unknown, but where only the righteous and holy wrath of God is displayed against unrepentant sinners throughout the eternal ages. Thus, the Lord adds these solemn words*: "...In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* This expression illustrates to some extent the utter hopelessness of those consigned to the place of outer darkness. Their endless sorrows and miseries will cause them to weep and wail continually. They will express unremitting self-condemnation and remorse for the sins and iniquities—and for their final impenitence—that brought them to this place. This same utter frustration, bitterness and self-pity is expressed in other words by the 'gnashing of their teeth'

## MATTHEW 22:14

*"For many are called...."*

Many people hear the call of the Gospel to repentance and faith. In fact, a vast number of mankind hear this call or message of salvation. However, the majority of those who hear the message do not respond to the message. The message falls on 'deaf ears' or on 'stony ground.' They have been called; but the call they have heard has been an outward or external call only—and this call can be, and often is, resisted or neglected.

Nevertheless, among the many who are called outwardly or externally are a sizeable number who respond to this call—at least for a temporary period. However, their response has not been genuine and has not resulted in an inner change of heart, but only in superficial or external changes. Even so, these external changes may convince others that real internal change has taken place; at least until they are convinced otherwise by events or by the spiritual barrenness of that person's life.

The classic example of a person who was called to the Lord's service, but who did not experience regeneration by the Holy Spirit, was Judas Iscariot. Judas had been chosen by the Lord—but not to eternal life. This disciple had been called to follow Christ—but Judas did not enter Christ's kingdom. Judas had been sent by the Lord to preach the Gospel to others—but not from a renewed or regenerated heart. He proclaimed the message of repentance and faith; but Judas himself had neither repented of his sins nor believed on the Lord Jesus Christ. (John 13:10-11,18)

Of course, all this was known to the Lord Jesus; and therefore it came as no surprise to the Lord when Judas betrayed Jesus, selling him for thirty pieces of silver. However, this event shows very clearly that it is possible to respond to the external call to repentance (but not to the internal call); that it is possible to associate with the Lord's people and to 'worship' with them for a time; that it is possible to engage in church service or ministry (although not from a divine call or a renewed heart), and that it is possible to deceive genuine believers (although not the Lord) into thinking that this person is a child of God. In fact, like Judas, these deceivers belong to Satan's kingdom and will be cast with him into that place prepared for the devil and his angels. (John 17:12; cf. 2 Thess. 2:3 where the same phrase refers to the 'man of sin' or the 'antichrist')

> *"...but few are chosen."*

Many hear the outward or external call to repentance and faith. However, by comparison with the many, only a few hear (or experience) the inward or internal call to repentance and faith. The 'few' who respond do so because the Holy Spirit has been working in their lives, regenerating their soul, convicting them of sin, convincing them of truth and righteousness, and leading them to Christ. Thus, every one of the 'few' who experience this work of the Holy Spirit turns to Christ in genuine repentance and faith; and they do so freely and willingly, embracing the one who loved them and who gave himself for them.

In fact, the few who are chosen constitutes a countless number of individuals from around the world. However, by comparison with those who are called, but not chosen or called by the Holy Spirit, the numbers are 'few'. This is illustrated by the broad gate (entered by the many) that leads to destruction and the narrow gate (entered by the few) that leads to life. (Matt. 7:13-14)

## PAYING TAXES TO CAESAR

***Matthew 22:15-22***

### MATTHEW 22:15

Upon hearing these words, the Pharisees must have been enraged. They knew that the man without a wedding garment was spoken of concerning them (among others). Therefore, they realised all too clearly that the Lord Jesus was stating that religious leaders such as themselves would be not only excluded from God's heavenly kingdom but that they would be bound and cast into outer darkness. As if this were

not bad enough, the Lord Jesus had offended them further by implying that they were among the many who had been called but not chosen to salvation and eternal life.

This was too much for these religious leaders to endure. Immediately, they left the presence of the Lord Jesus and began plotting together how they might entangle the Lord in his words. They would attempt to catch him out in a contradiction or cause him to say something contrary to the civil or religious law. Thereby, they would be able to discredit the Lord Jesus before the people; for the crowds hung on his every word.

## MATTHEW 22:16

Believing that the Lord would become suspicious if they returned to him so soon in person, the Pharisees had arranged to send some of their disciples to the Lord, together with a group from the Herodians—possibly, a Jewish political party.

Having conspired together, this unlikely group made their way to the Lord Jesus. As soon as they had arrived and gained the Lord's attention, these dissemblers began with words of flattery in their attempt to deceive the Lord concerning their true intentions. Thus, from a completely insincere heart, they asserted:

- *Teacher, we know that you are true…*
  (Therefore, they should have known that no-one untruthful, deceptive, or unrighteous could remain undetected by him.)
- *and teach the way of God truthfully…*
  (Therefore, they should have known that the Lord Jesus would not under any circumstances depart from God's truth to favour the whims or interpretations of man.)
- *and you do not care about anyone's opinion*,
  (Therefore, they should have known that the Lord's response would be with unfailing integrity and completely unbiased.)
- *for you are not swayed by appearances*.
  (Therefore, they should have realised that the Lord Jesus could see through their cunning deception, wily question, and hypocritical praise of his character and conduct.)

## MATTHEW 22:17

Having approached the Lord Jesus with the utmost guile and flattery, these scheming individuals then posed their trap question: *"Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"*

Now, of course, the Jewish people deeply resented paying taxes to the Roman Emperor, considering him as a Gentile interloper and occupier of their holy land. Furthermore, they resented the presence of the Gentile Roman guard in their midst. Thus, to help maintain the Roman Empire and its army through taxation was highly objectionable to many Jews.

An even greater objection, however, was inherent in the nature of the Roman Emperor. Like all such Emperors, Augustus Caesar required that his subjects recognise his 'divine' status, and do obeisance to him as though to a (pagan) god. This, however, was an abominable situation to any Jew, since God's Law

expressly forbade them for recognising or worshipping any God (or god so-called) but the LORD. Therefore, to their minds, when they were forced to pay taxes to Caesar, they were being forced to support Caesar's claim to divinity and therefore they were being compelled to break God's Law. (Exod. 20:3-5)

This, therefore, is why these men thought they could trap the Lord Jesus by asking whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not. They reckoned that if Jesus replied that it was lawful, then he would be guilty of breaking the Law of God. However, if Jesus replied that it was unlawful, then he would be guilty of breaking the civil law instituted and enforced by the Roman government. Thus, these evil individuals believed that they had caught the Lord in a trap, out of which he could not escape without either pronouncing against God or against Caesar.

## MATTHEW 22:18

The Lord Jesus saw through their malicious question and into their evil minds immediately. Therefore, he declared, *"Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?"*

The Lord knew the real source of this evil question: Satan—the same one who had put him to the test, or tempted him, in the desert. Now, the evil one was making use of these wicked men to tempt the holy Son of God, and to try to lead him into sin. Of course, this could never happen; for the Lord would never yield to temptation. Thus, although some among them were disciples of the Pharisees, the Lord describes these students of theology and of God's Law as hypocrites. They professed piety and sought to impress others by their study and knowledge of the Scriptures. However, their hearts were not right with God; and—as such—they were not fit to be trained for the Lord's service.

## MATTHEW 22:19-21

The Lord Jesus then tells this group of hypocrites to show him a coin for the tax. Without delay, they fetched a denarius—a coin produced by the Roman Empire, and distinct from local Jewish currency such as the shekel.

Holding up the denarius, the Lord asked, *"Whose likeness and inscription is this?"* On the coin, was an image of the Caesar, together with an inscription in Latin relating to the Roman Emperor.

Unaware of what was to follow, the group replied *"Caesar's."*

To this, the Lord Jesus replied with great discretion and wisdom, *"Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."*

## MATTHEW 22:22

This answer left the questioners amazed and speechless. With a very cunningly-crafted question, they had sought to discredit the Lord Jesus before the people. However, they had failed utterly in their evil design; and, in fact, had found themselves confounded and rebuked by the Lord's discreet reply. Thus, they left the Lord's presence to return to those who had sent them, having failed in their objective.

From this we learn that there are occasions when we must distinguish clearly between the religious realm and the civil realm. Although both are instituted by God and both come under his sovereign and almighty control, it is necessary to distinguish between that which we owe to God as the Supreme Sovereign and

that which we owe to an earthly sovereign or head of state whom God has appointed to rule and to maintain law and order in the civil realm.

Supreme spiritual worship, praise, honour and glory are due to God alone, and never to any person on earth no matter how highly exalted. Similarly, priority of giving, tithing, monetary or material commitment must be yielded to God in the first instance; together with all other commitments, duties or obligations that we owe to God.

However, in the civil realm, God has ordained and appointed rulers of various kinds, in a variety of different offices, and in many locations around the world. We owe to the ruler or rulers in our own localities the respect and honour that is due to these earthly authorities, together with the dues, taxes or revenues that are required of us. Thus, by our contribution, we help uphold what God has ordained (civil government and the judiciary); we help maintain government-appointed services, and we help prevent our country from descending into lawlessness, chaos or anarchy. (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17)

Thus, we see how important it is to render our due obligations to God, and also to render our due obligations to the civil authorities who exist by the will of God to serve his purposes, to maintain law and order among mankind, and to provide relatively stable conditions that are of benefit to their citizens, including those in the church of God. Of course, where a ruler or government does not accord with the will and purposes of God, or where it shows contempt for God and his ways, that ruler or government will be judged by God in the long term, and perhaps deposed by God in the short term. (Dan. 2:21) As Sovereign over all, God—not men—is in control of all events among the kingdoms of men, although men may be used by God to accomplish his intended purposes; as in the election of an alternative ruler and government by democratic or other processes.

## SADDUCEES AND THE RESURRECTION

***Matthew 22:23-33***

### MATTHEW 22:23

(Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-40)

Together with the Pharisees, the Sadducees were members of the authoritative Jewish religious council, the Sanhedrin. Many of the priests were drawn from the ranks of the Sadducees, whereas the scribes came from among the Pharisees. The fact that the Jewish high priests were Sadducees is somewhat surprising, and shows to what level the Jewish faith had descended; although it has to be recognised that many of the appointments among these religious leaders—especially those of the high priests—were of a political nature, and were not related to spiritual fitness for office. At least, this had been true since the end of the Hasmonean dynasty.

Thus, we have the Sadducees, acting as high priests, who did not accept the Scriptural teaching about angels, spirits, the resurrection, or anything else of this nature or of a miraculous nature. The Sadducees were the liberals and materialists, or rationalists, of their day.

Probably aware that the Pharisees had failed to entrap the Lord Jesus, the Sadducees believed that—where their rivals in the Sanhedrin had failed—they could succeed. They would do so by using—what to their benighted minds—was an irrefutably logical, rational and scientific approach. However, as we shall

see, to attempt to apply human reasoning, logic or scientific principles to matters spiritual and eternal is not only futile, it is also unbelievably foolish. The apostle Paul makes it very clear that the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. (Rom. 1:21-22; 1 Cor. 1:18-31) Thus, instead of displaying superior knowledge, wisdom and learning by their question, the Sadducees were about to display their wholesale ignorance of and blindness concerning spiritual matters. Furthermore, the fact that they professed not to believe in spiritual matters but to believe only in those things that they could understand by (fallible and finite) human reasoning alone, or could see with their eyes, would afford them no excuse. Their spiritual blindness was wilful; because—as members of the Sanhedrin—they had been exposed to a considerable amount of (OT) Scriptural teaching. Nevertheless, in spite of this teaching, they had refused wilfully to see or acknowledge the truth that God had revealed in his Word.

However, let us consider how the Sadducees approached this matter.

## MATTHEW 22:24-27

Later, on the same day, the Sadducees came to the Lord Jesus with what they thought was an unanswerable question. The Lord had spoken on several occasions of a resurrection, and of eternal life. Now, argued the Sadducees (and this is where we see unmistakably that they knew the Scriptures, although they did not believe them), what happens if a man dies leaving no children? According to the Levitical law, the dead man's brother must marry the widow and raise up children for his deceased brother. This means, of course, that this widow has now had two husbands successively.

However, continued the Sadducees, let us imagine that the second husband also died, and then the third, and so on until the seventh husband. Then, finally, the woman died.

## MATTHEW 22:28

Believing that their logic had reached a point where it could not be refuted or answered satisfactorily, the Sadducees calmly and confidently asked the Lord Jesus, *"In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her?"*

This shows with crystal clarity how foolish it is to try to comprehend spiritual and eternal truths from an unenlightened and unspiritual point of view. Although they accord fully with common sense and reason, spiritual truths cannot be understood using human methods; for human methods are finite and incapable of grasping the things of the infinite; they are fallible, and incapable of grasping the things that are infallible. Human wisdom is the wisdom of this world, not that wisdom that descends from God above. Unaided by the Spirit of God, human reasoning cannot comprehend by logic, by the exercise of the rational faculties, by the application of scientific principles, or by any other means those things that originate outside the realms of human experience; such as spiritual and eternal life, or anything concerning the nature of God's heavenly kingdom. The Sadducees possessed a working, albeit superficial, knowledge of the Scriptures; but, of the necessary spiritual comprehension of the Scriptures, they knew nothing. In these most essential matters, they remained spiritually blind.

## MATTHEW 22:29

The Lord Jesus now corrects their misapprehension. Here we see that the Lord tells the Sadducees quite unambiguously that they are wrong: wrong in their logic and wrong in their conclusion. So much for

seemingly unanswerably or irrefutable arguments or statements set forth by spiritually unenlightened men. This, however, is no surprise. For, no matter how highly educated or intelligent, every human being is a fallen sinful man or woman, with an essentially sinful nature continually biased toward error and evil. Furthermore, every human being is finite in nature, and capable of understanding only those things that his finite intelligence can comprehend. If he or she is to understand the higher principles of spiritual and eternal truths, that person cannot begin to do so unless, by his Holy Spirit, God reveals these to him and enables him or her to comprehend such truths. This, however, had never happened with the Sadducees. They remained spiritually blind, and therefore completely alienated from God and from his love and truth.

Thus, Jesus adds that these men knew neither the Scriptures (except in an academic and purely intellectual sense), nor did they know the power of God (to reveal the truth of the Scriptures and to convert the soul by the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Truth).

## MATTHEW 22:30

In their studiously-prepared and logical question, the Sadducees erred exceedingly. For all their attention to the principles of science and logic, they had made one catastrophic mistake: They had assumed that the bodies of those in heaven would be like the bodies of those on earth. However, this fails completely to understand God's plan for people on earth and for those in heaven. On earth, God created mankind male and female so that they could reproduce. From the creation of Adam and Eve, man's time on earth was to be limited to a particular lifespan of so many years. In heaven, however, this limitation would not apply. Therefore since the redeemed would live for eternity, there would be no need for human reproduction and therefore no need for the husband-wife relationship reflected in marriage and for which God had instituted marriage.

Thus, the Lord informs the Sadducees that the state of marriage does not exist in heaven. Rather, those who inhabit these holy dwellings will be similar to the angels in this respect: The holy angels are spirit beings whom God created to serve him. These exalted beings had a beginning of life, but they have no end of life; therefore, the ability to marry and to reproduce was unnecessary in the case of the angels. So it is with all those who will be exalted in Christ Jesus to that heavenly dwelling above. At the resurrection of the body, their bodies will be changed or translated and glorified. However, it will differ from the present body in that it will be no longer a mortal and perishable body and no longer a body suited for the marriage state or for reproduction. Rather, it will be a spiritual body: a body specially prepared for eternal existence, together with the holy angels, in the presence of God and in the service of the Lord Jesus.

Of course, because of their unbelief and spiritual ignorance, the learned and highly intelligent Sadducees failed completely to understand these things. For all their undoubted earthly education and worldly knowledge, it could not equip them to understand those truths that really mattered and that concerned a person's immortal soul as well as his mortal body.

## MATTHEW 22:31

The Lord Jesus, however, realised the root cause of the Sadducees problem with these matters: their denial of the resurrection. Thus, the Lord deals now with this issue—and it is an issue which certain religious leaders even today need to come to terms with and to accept. Turning their attention to the truth of the resurrection of the dead, the Lord asks the Sadducees: *"…have you not read what was said to you by God?"*

Now, of course, the Sadducees had read the passage that the Lord Jesus is about to quote; for they knew the Scriptures, even although they denied several of their essential doctrines. But, by asking this question rhetorically, the Lord was emphasising to these men how little they believed the eternal truths of God's Word.

Thus, in verse 32, Jesus declares:

### MATTHEW 22:32

> Mat 22:32 ESV
>
> 32 "'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living."

Is God true, or can he lie? The Sadducees knew, of course, that God cannot lie nor can he prove unfaithful to his Word. If this is so, then the above passage quoted by the Lord Jesus from Exodus 3:15 is an irrefutable answer to those who deny the reality of the resurrection or the power of God to effect this resurrection. When these words were addressed to the people of Israel, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had been long dead. Yet, God—the I AM—speaks of these patriarchs in the present tense; demonstrating that they were alive then and are alive now in the presence of God. For God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.

It may be argued that the bodies of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were still in their graves; not yet having experienced the resurrection of the body. This, however, is immaterial. God is not the God of the soul alone, but of the soul united to the resurrected and glorified body. The fact that God's people enter his presence immediately upon death, and that they dwell now with him in glory, does not negate the fact that their bodies will be raised at the resurrection; that these bodies will be changed and glorified, and that they will be reunited with their immortal souls for all the ages of eternity. Therefore, it remains true that God is not the God of the dead nor of the incomplete person, but of the living and complete person. If this were not so, then Paul would not have spoken of the mortal and perishable body being changed to an immortal and incorruptible or imperishable body (a 'spiritual body') or of that body being caught up to be with the Lord forever. (1 Cor. 15:12-58) Thus, those who have died in the Lord, he will raise to be with him forever—to the glory of his name!

### MATTHEW 22:33

Meanwhile, the ordinary people stood amazed at the words of the Lord Jesus, and at his authoritative and compelling teaching. They saw or heard that the Sadducees had failed to entrap the Lord Jesus, and that the Lord had confounded them with his answer.

## THE GREAT COMMANDMENT

***Matthew 22:34-40***

### MATTHEW 22:34

Now, the other main party of the Sanhedrin—the Pharisees—conspired once more against the Lord Jesus. Observing that the Sadducean party had failed to silence the Lord, but in fact had had their specious

questions refuted by the Lord, the Pharisees resolved to try again to silence the Lord Jesus. These men were determined to stop the Lord from teaching the people. So far, they had failed. However, they were prepared to go to any lengths to prevent the people listening to the Lord Jesus and from hearing the Gospel.

## MATTHEW 22:35-36

Therefore, having conferred with one another, the Pharisees put forward one of their number to ask the Lord Jesus a question. This Pharisee was a lawyer: i.e., an expert in religious law, and especially in the Law of Moses. However, the nature of the question reveals that the Pharisees were attempting once more to entrap the Lord Jesus in his words. Thus, the lawyer asked: *"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"* (v.26)

To the religious leaders, the Law of Commandments (the Ten Commandments) were considered to consist of two basic categories: The first and most important table related to those commandments that concerned the LORD God most directly. The second table related to those commandments that concerned a person's neighbour.

At first sight, it might appear that the lawyer's question was a genuine and harmless request. However, in view of the Pharisees' repeated attempts to ensnare and discredit the Lord Jesus in his words, it is much more likely that this was a specious question. Perhaps, the Pharisees thought that they could induce the Lord Jesus into selecting one particular commandment that was of first importance; but, which by making it so, effectively rendered all other commandments of lesser importance. Of course, if the Lord Jesus selected one commandment in particular, then the Pharisees could accuse him downgrading and minimising the other commandments that the LORD had given to Moses.

The Lord Jesus, however, knew the motives of this man's heart and the true intent of his question. Thus, in verse 37, Matthew writes:

## MATTHEW 22:37-38

> Matt. 22:37 ESV
>
> 37 And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

This is the essence of true worship and of heartfelt devotion: To love God with the whole of one's being, expressed as 'all your heart…soul…mind.' Obedience to this commandment takes precedence over all others. However, far from downgrading all other commandments, obedience to the Greatest Commandment automatically involves obedience to all others. It was not possible to love God with the whole of one's being and not at the same time to love other people. It was not possible to obey this one commandment without at the same time obeying all other commandments of the Law.

Thus, the Lord Jesus had confounded the lawyer and the Pharisees by giving them one commandment that comprehended obedience to all other commandments in both Tables of the Law. Therefore, by loving God first and foremost, the Lord Jesus was embracing all other commandments in the First Table (the first four commandments) of the Decalogue. Thus, the Lord was ensuring that none of the individual

Commandments concerning God directly could be considered of lesser importance, but all must be considered equally important.

Then, the Lord Jesus proclaimed that wholehearted love and devotion to God constitutes the first and greatest Commandment; for this Commandment subsumes within it the other individual Commandments of the First Table.

## MATTHEW 22:39

Then, the Lord Jesus does the same with the Second Table. Gathering together as a single Commandment the six individual Commandments concerning one's family or neighbour, the Lord declares that this entire group is next in importance to the first. Therefore, once again, the Lord Jesus ensures that no individual Commandment within the Second Table can be considered of more or less importance than any other. Since they are being considered as a single group, therefore all are of equal importance. The Commands of the Law is a unit: Loving God wholeheartedly and loving others are inseparable.

Probably, the lawyer and the remainder of the Pharisees had thought that Jesus would exalt one Commandment in the Law above all others, and thereby diminish the importance of the others. Then, the religious leaders could have criticised the Lord Jesus for downgrading certain elements of God's holy Law. However, by combining the individual Commandments, firstly from the First Table and then from the Second Table, the Lord Jesus gave the Law its true emphasis: Worship of and devotion to God above all others, and service to one's family and neighbour as a consequence of obedience to the first and greatest Commandment to love God.

Of course, while it was true that man before the Fall could love God with the whole of his being, this was no longer true after the Fall of man. The Fall rendered man incapable of attaining to God's perfect standards of righteousness and holiness of life. Nevertheless, God still required obedience to these standards; and he demonstrated this by setting down his requirements in the Law of Commandments. However, the Law was not provided or intended to lead fallen men and women to salvation by its observance, but to show fallen men and women that the Law that condemned them could not also justify them or declare them righteous. Justification had to come by some other means; but it also had to involve total obedience to the whole Law of God, not by the sinner but by the sinner's perfect Substitute.

## MATTHEW 22:40

The entire Word of God or Holy Scriptures—commonly referred to as 'the Law and the Prophets'—was based upon these two commandments. Thus, we see that the Law was never intended to be legalistic in nature, but rather an expression of God's grace, love and mercy: For, after the fall of man, the Law which condemned sinful mankind was also the Law that brought conviction of sin and pointed sinners to the need of sacrifice and redemption. Similarly, the sacrifices of the Old Testament were never intended to be ritualistic merely; but stood as ensigns or symbols for the people by which they learned that God would not accept sinful men or women unless their sins had been atoned for and forgiven through the shedding of blood. The principle of substitution, therefore, was an expression of God's grace, love and mercy toward his sinful people and a demonstration of his willingness to reconcile sinners to himself by means of a perfect and atoning sacrifice. (Eph. 1:7)

Thus, from the very beginning in Genesis and throughout the Law and the Prophets, this theme is repeated. Without the shedding of blood there is no remission. (Heb. 9:22) However, the LORD has provided for himself and Lamb—and the provision of this Lamb is the ultimate expression of God's grace, love and mercy to fallen sinful mankind. Those of us, therefore, who have experienced such love and grace ought to love God with all our heart, soul, and strength, and our neighbour as ourselves; for this is the sum and substance of the teaching expressed in the Law and the Prophets, and further expounded by the Lord Jesus and the writers of the New Testament.

## JESUS QUESTIONS PHARISEES ABOUT THE CHRIST

***Matthew 22:41-45***

### MATTHEW 22:41-42

(Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44)

While the Pharisees were standing there, the Lord Jesus put a question to them: *"What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?"* (v.42a)

The Pharisees, of course, believed the Old Testament Scriptures concerning the Messiah (or Christ). They believed that he would be a king like David and a descendant of David, who would rule over his people Israel. However, they believed that the Christ would be exalted above King David, and would have the power and authority to deliver his people from their enemies. The Pharisees, however, thought principally of the Messiah's 'enemies' in earthly or political terms, rather than spiritual or heavenly terms. Thus, to them, the Christ would come to deliver the people from their earthly oppressors—in this case, the Roman occupiers of Israel. Many Jewish people believed also that, when Messiah appeared, he would set up his kingdom on earth and rule over that earthly kingdom, and possibly also all the kingdoms of the earth.

Thus, from a rather earthbound perspective, the Pharisees replied to the Lord's question concerning whose son the Christ was, as *"The son of David."* (v.42b) That is, the Messiah would be a direct descendant of King David (King David's greater Son) who would rule over God's people on earth. Apart from the fact that the Pharisees did not think of the Messiah's kingship and kingdom principally in spiritual terms, they compounded this error by considering that the Christ was a descendant of David and nothing more. Yes, the Lord Jesus was certainly a descendant of David, as the prophets had declared. However, the same Lord Jesus was much more than a prestigious and favoured descendant of David's royal line.

### MATTHEW 22:43-45

To this end, the Lord Jesus challenged the answer given by the Pharisees, by asking,

> *"How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet'?* (Cf. Ps. 110:1; cf. Acts 2:32-35)
>
> *"If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?"*

Psalm 110, from which this verse is quoted, was commonly accepted by the religious leaders generally and by the Jewish rabbis[51] more specifically as being a messianic Psalms. Thus, what was written in this Psalm concerning King David was written also—and in a much more significant sense—concerning King David's greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. However, to emphasise that the words of the Psalm did not reflect merely the mind of the human writer, the Lord Jesus states that—when he penned these words—David was speaking or writing 'in the Spirit'. Therefore, since David was being inspired by the Holy Spirit, the exact words that he used were words impressed upon his mind by the Holy Spirit—and these exact words expressed the mind and will of God.

In Psalm 110, 'the Lord' is rendered as 'the LORD': i.e., the 'I AM' or YHWH. In this passage, the LORD (God Almighty) is addressing prophetically King David's Lord: i.e., the Lord, King and Messiah descended from King David's royal line. It is this King (the King of kings) who will come and who will rule from Zion.

The fact that 'the Lord' of whom this Psalm speaks is the Lord Jesus Christ is confirmed by verse 4 of that Psalm. There, God says of this Lord, "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek"—a statement that was made concerning Christ alone and fulfilled in Christ alone. (Heb. 5:6,10; 6:20; 7:17)

Furthermore, in Psalm 110, the LORD (Yahweh) commands the Lord (Jesus Christ) to sit at his right hand and to remain there until God has put every enemy under his feet. (Mark 12:36; 1 Cor. 15:25) However, the right hand of God speaks of equality with God in power, glory, rule and eternity. It speaks of that place at the Father's side that no one can occupy except the Son alone—for he alone is worthy. (Matt. 26:64; Mark 14:62; 16:19; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:33-34; 5:31; 7:55-56; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Heb. 1:3,13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22)

Therefore, in addressing these words to David's Lord, God the Father could have had no other Person in mind but his own Son, become highly exalted and set down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. From there, he will reign over the entire creation until everything is brought into subjection to him; at which time he will hand over the power and authority to God his Father so that the Father may be all in all. (1 Cor. 15:24-28; Eph. 1:21-23)

However, as Jesus asks the Pharisees, if David acknowledges this Supreme Ruler as his Lord, how can he be his son?

The Pharisees, of course, believed that the Christ would be a descendant of David's royal line, and therefore 'a son of man' only. The Lord Jesus is correcting their error by pointing out that the Christ would be both Son of Man and Son of God. This, however, the Pharisees failed to understand. They left Jesus' presence completely perplexed by his words, and at a loss to comprehend the spiritual and prophetic truths of their own Scriptures which he had just expounded to them.

## MATTHEW 22:46

No one among this learned group of religious teachers had been able to answer the Lord's question. These were intelligent and highly educated men. From an academic point of view, they were well versed in the Scriptures. However, their knowledge of God's Word was 'head knowledge' only. Although they could quote the Law and the Prophets, the Pharisees were at a loss to comprehend the true meaning of

[51] *rabbis*: Joden; Berachiah; Hadarson, Gaon, etc.

the Law and the Prophets. To some extent, this explained their undue emphasis on legalism, ritualism, ceremonialism and the tradition of the elders. Several of these things had their place; being ordained by God. However, the religious leaders misunderstood and misapplied many of these sacred ordinances. Granted, a small number understood and believed everything of which these things spoke; but this small number (comparatively) was the remnant of true believers who understood and believed because of the Holy Spirit's presence in their hearts and lives. Such people included Abraham, Sarah, the patriarchs, Noah, David and many more of like faith in God.

The majority of the Pharisees, however, lacked true faith in God. Their religion was a religion of externals, which made no difference to the way they lived because—without the Holy Spirit in regeneration—their hearts remained unchanged. They were yet in their sins, and alienated from God.

For these reasons, the Pharisees dared not ask the Lord Jesus any further questions. They could not withstand his power and authority nor were they able to refute his application of the Scriptures. A few among them would seek genuinely for the truth—and would find it. However, the overwhelming body of the Pharisees and other religious leaders gave up debating with the Lord Jesus and determined among themselves to silence him in a different manner, and to do so swiftly and permanently.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 23

## JESUS DENOUNCES THE PHARISEES

***Matthew 23:1-12***

### MATTHEW 23:1-2

The Lord Jesus now turns his attention to the crowd standing around him, and to the disciples. They had heard the various test questions put to the Lord Jesus by the Pharisees, and also by the Sadducees and other religious leaders. They had heard the Lord Jesus reply to these questions, using the Scriptures to confound the religious leaders and to leave them speechless.

Now, however, the disciples and the crowd following Jesus must have been somewhat perplexed by the inability of their own religious leaders to comprehend the Scriptures aright or to understand spiritual truths. Their own rabbis or synagogue teachers came from among the Pharisees. Yet, some of these same religious leaders had attempted to ensnare the Lord Jesus in his words—only to be confounded by him from the Word of God. However, if the scribes and rabbis from among the Pharisees did not themselves understand the Word of God, how could they teach the people reliably in the synagogues? And if the Pharisees did not live by the Word of God, how could they be an example of godliness to the ordinary Jewish people?

The Lord Jesus is about to deal with these very issues. However before he does so, Jesus reminds the crowd and his disciples that the scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: i.e., they occupy the place of learning and exposition in relation to the Law of Moses. They are the expert interpreters and preservers of that Law. None are better placed than they to have a thorough knowledge of the Law, and of how it should be applied. Admittedly, their knowledge was of an academic nature only, as acquired from their teachers at the theological or rabbinical schools. For most of the scribes and Pharisees, it did not involve spiritual enlightenment or understanding of these sacred Scriptures. Nevertheless, by preserving the sacred Scriptures intact, the scribes especially were preserving the Word of God for the people, and ensuring that the Scriptures of truth were kept pure or uncorrupted for the operating power of the Holy Spirit.

### MATTHEW 23:3

Because, therefore, of their very important position as preservers and expounders or teachers of God's most holy Law, the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees was to be given the respect and honour that the Law of God required. Thus, the people were to obey or practice anything that the scribes and Pharisees taught them from God's Law; for, ultimately, the people would be rendering their obedience to God, not to their teachers.

Thus, we learn that it is appropriate to listen to the Word of God even when it being expounded by unregenerate and ungodly men. This gives absolutely no support to unregenerate or ungodly preachers, but simply acknowledges that the Word of God is powerful to save and to nourish the believer, even from the lips of the unsaved. The application of God's Word is not made effective by the preaching or oratory of men, but by the convicting, convincing, and converting power of the Holy Spirit. (John 16:8-11)

However, having instructed his disciples and the crowd to practice and observe whatever the scribes and Pharisees told them, the Lord adds that the people must not emulate the behaviour of the scribes and Pharisees. For, although they preach God's requirements to the people, they themselves do not observe these requirements.

## MATTHEW 23:4

It might be considered that the scribes and Pharisees would not require too much of the people in their teaching, since they themselves rendered so little. On the contrary, however, these religious teachers made great demands of the ordinary people. In their teaching, they laid law upon law, rule upon rule, tradition upon tradition, regulation upon regulation, until the people were barely able to stand up under the weight of teaching imposed upon them, or to know where to begin in observing that teaching. To the scribes and Pharisees, the holy Law of God had become a system of rules and regulations, void of spiritual content, and applied with a legalistic formality. (Cf. Isa. 28:10,13)

Thus, having laid this heavy burden on the shoulders of the people, the religious leaders exhorted the people to go forth and do everything that they had commanded. However, the leaders themselves were completely unwilling to help the people bear these burdens: i.e., they showed no concern or compassion for the people by explaining to them how God's Law should be understood and observed, or by helping them to understand the truths of which the Law and the Prophets spoke. Furthermore, they failed to lighten the burdens that they had placed on the shoulders of the people, by refusing to remove all the non-essential, man-made, rules and regulations so that the people might set their hearts and minds on that which God required. (Micah 6:6-8)

In passing, we might observe the contrast between the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees and that of the Lord Jesus. The former laid upon the shoulders of the people a heavy burden, grievous to bear. The latter called the people to come unto him and to take upon themselves his yoke; for his yoke was easy and his burden light. (Matt. 11:28-30)

## MATTHEW 23:5

Now, the Lord Jesus reveals the main reason for the scribes and Pharisees' attitude and behaviour. Their concern was not primarily for the spiritual or moral welfare of the people, but for their own social and religious standing in society. Everything that most of these scribes and Pharisees did was done for public observation and acclaim. In other words, they were 'religious' showmen or actors, intent primarily on self-aggrandisement—a situation that can still be found among certain 'religious' leaders today.

These 'spiritual' leaders boasted of their high office in religious affairs. They enlarged the size of their phylacteries (Scripture verse containers) hanging from their heads and arms, making it appear to others that they were spiritual and godly individuals. However, when it is done only for show or for a 'testimony' in public, enlarged phylacteries will never commend a person to God. (Nor will large Bibles carried in public if the aim is to give the impression of spirituality and godliness to the unsaved world, *rather than to honour God from a pure and humble heart*.)

Not content with vaunting their enlarged Scripture boxes, the Pharisees also extended the fringes on their robes. Thus, instead of having a modest hem or fringe at the foot of their garments, the extended fringe became so obvious as to be unmistakable. To the common people, the extended fringe conveyed the

idea of an exalted and honourable religious dignitary. Some even extended their fringes to such an extent that it formed a train behind the main garment, necessitating bearers to carry the train. However, in the Lord's eyes, such ostentation spoke of spiritual barrenness, hypocrisy and fraud.

## MATTHEW 23:6-7

Not content with this degree of religious showmanship, the scribes and Pharisees also sought the places of honour at feasts and the most prestigious seats in the synagogues. Thus, these men loved to exalt themselves above others, and to have other people look up to them as most eminent members of the religious hierarchy.

However, their pride and prejudice did not stop here. Even in the very busy market places, the scribes and Pharisees expected the people to signal their respect and honour for them by uncovering their heads and bowing the knee to them as they passed. Furthermore, they expected the people to address them by their religious titles, such as 'rabbi' (i.e., 'Master' or 'teacher'; in a sense equivalent to 'Doctor of Divinity', etc.)

(Some versions express this greeting as 'Rabbi', 'Rabbi' (or 'Teacher', 'Teacher'), and it may indeed have been the case that the expression was doubled in this way by the people for emphasis or for supposed added respect and reverence.)

## MATTHEW 23:8

Selecting this one particular issue, the Lord Jesus tells his followers that they must not be called 'rabbi' ('lord', 'master' or 'teacher'). In the sense in which the scribes and Pharisees employed it, the term 'Rabbi' was understood as a term of superior religious standing or rank. That is, as rabbis, they considered themselves to be more spiritual than the common people, more acceptable to God because more knowledgeable in the Law, and more committed to God because detached from many of the everyday defilements of the world.

This, however, was religious pomposity. Granted, those who represented the holy things of God must keep themselves pure and uncontaminated from the defilements of the world, the flesh and the devil. Granted, the people ought to show respect for their religious teachers and for the priests who mediated before God on their behalf. However, none of these things made the religious teachers or the priests morally or spiritually better people than those who did not hold such offices—although the religious hierarchy liked to believe otherwise, and to claim the highest honours for themselves, as we have seen with the scribes and Pharisees. Furthermore, although the religious leaders taught and ministered to the people in the house of God, the Lord God did not expect them to dissociate themselves from the people, or elevate themselves above the people, either within his house of prayer or when on the streets.

The Lord Jesus—the Holy One of God, and Prophet, Priest and King *par excellence*—associated with sinners and ate with them, without being contaminated in any way by sin. Thus, the scribes, Pharisees, priests and other religious leaders should not have hesitated to associate with the people (as some did); nor—since not themselves faultless—should they have elevated themselves above the people merely on account of their religious office or their superior knowledge of the Scriptures.

Thus, the Lord Jesus tells his disciples that they must not be known as 'rabbis' when serving Christ and ministering in his name to the people. There was one Teacher among the disciples—viz., the Lord Jesus Christ himself. No other was to take his place—least of all, any of his disciples. The disciples were brothers, and of equal rank with each other. They were servants of the Lord Jesus and ministers of his Gospel. They were not, however, to be known as 'Rabbis' or 'Masters' like the scribes, or leaders of eminence and rank like the Pharisees.

The Lord Jesus was not forbidding the calling and appointment after Pentecost of certain of his disciples to serve him in the church as deacons, elders (or bishops), pastors and teachers, etc. Nor was he asserting that these men should not be able to exercise godly authority as under-shepherds and guardians of the Lord's flock. However, these men would be acting as those called and appointed by God himself, through the Holy Spirit, and serving God's church as the humble and sincere ministers of the Lord Jesus. The fact that—in later centuries—church office often degenerated into another form of Pharisaism with its religious pomposity and ungodly and hypocritical office bearers shows only what happens when men assume office in the church who have never been called or appointed to that office by the Lord Jesus.

## MATTHEW 23:9

In speaking of 'father' here, the Lord Jesus is referring to its use in a religious sense, not in the sense of a father within a family. In the religious sense, the followers of the Lord Jesus were not to address anyone—including one of their own—as 'father' (Gk., πατέρα, patera). This was because the expression 'father' in the religious sense implied superiority, elevation or eminence above others, and authority or rule over others. No one among the Lord's disciples or among his followers more generally, was to aspire to this title as a servant of Christ or to call any other servant of Christ by the name or title of 'father'. This term was not one of those that was to be used later in the church, therefore the expression 'father' or its derivatives has no place among the servants or office bearers of the church.

There was one situation, and one situation alone, in which this term was to be used in a religious sense: viz., when addressing God as our Father in heaven. (Matt. 6:9) This was the only occasion on which 'Father' was to be used outside the normal family use of the word. Thus, 'Father' speaks of the divine authority, eminence and superiority of our Father in heaven, while 'father' (without capitalization) speaks of the human authority, eminence and superiority with which God has invested fathers in their respective families and households. The latter reflects (albeit dimly) the Fatherhood of God and the responsibilities of this position. However, because of the suggestion of authority, eminence and superiority implicit in the term, the Lord Jesus forbids the term 'father' from being used in connection with religious teachers or other ministers in his church.[52]

## MATTHEW 23:10

It was human nature to attempt to circumvent express instructions, and the Lord Jesus knew that some of his followers would aspire to the very positions or titles that he had just proscribed. However, to avoid

[52] Other titles and offices in the church—such as 'pastor', 'deacon', and 'elder' ('bishop' or 'overseer')—emphasise that the ministers of Christ are his humble servants. As servants of Christ, they are authorised to oversee, guide, guard, feed, and otherwise minister to the flock, restoring gently those who stray. These servants of God and of the church are equal in all respects with—but not superior to—all other members of the church.

breaking the Lord's express commands overtly, they would attempt to circumvent the Lord's prohibition by seeking to use alternative names or titles that indicated the nature of their office.

Anticipating this, the Lord Jesus now forbids his followers from being known as 'instructors'. This was a word that gave rise to several related terms; e.g., 'master' or 'teacher'—already forbidden above. However, by using a different word on this occasion, the Lord Jesus was warning his disciples not to attempt to circumvent his prohibition of official titles or names by using alternative titles or names. For these alternative terms still conveyed the idea of power, dignity, authority and superiority over others—the very thing that the Lord Jesus was forbidding in relation to his followers.

Thus, we see the degree of emphasis that the Lord Jesus is placing on this matter. Those who minister in the name of the Lord Jesus must never consider themselves as elevated rulers, eminent teachers, or spiritual dignitaries. They must not allow the people to address them as such. Those whom the Lord calls to teach, preach, and to oversee his flock, are his servants (or slaves). Thus, they are to minister to the people in the name of the Lord, serving them as they would their Master in heaven from a pure, humble and sincere heart. Such an attitude leaves no room for a proud haughty spirit that seeks to be elevated to positions of honour or eminence within the church; that seeks to rule the church from a high-handed or haughty spirit, or that seeks worldly acclaim through outward expressions of religious ostentation and pomposity, all of which is devoid of true spiritual life and godliness.

## MATTHEW 23:11

This verse confirms what has been said above. Those of the Lord's followers who sought the positions of highest honour would find it only in abasing themselves, submitting wholeheartedly to the will of the Lord Jesus, and ministering to his people as a servant or slave. This is true greatness—illustrated practically when the Lord Jesus girded himself with a towel and stooped down to wash his disciples' feet.

This is the kind of service that the Lord requires of his ministers: a willingness when preaching to put oneself below the level of the people and to implore them in the name of the Lord Jesus to be reconciled to God, to whom they must give account. It is to show a willingness when teaching to bring oneself down to the level of the congregation (without compromising God's Word) in order to explain God's requirements in terms that ordinary people can understand. It is to show to the people that the preacher or teacher is not without faults or sins of his own, but that he too is dependent on the mercy and grace of God to forgive him and to keep him from falling.

What, in principle is true of all those who preach and teach (pastors) is true also of all other servants and office bearers within the church. A pastor ought to demonstrate humility as an individual, and love, mercy and compassion for God's flock. Similarly, all others who serve in the church ought to demonstrate a like humility, love, mercy and compassion toward the people and flock of God.

## MATTHEW 23:12

The Lord sums up his teaching in this verse by reminding his hearers that those who sought to place themselves above others or who sought the highest positions would find themselves abased in God's eyes. Those seeking to be elevated in the affairs of the world or of the church will be brought down from their lofty pedestal by the Lord who delights in an unassuming, sincere and humble heart.

Those are most highly esteemed in the eyes of the Lord who are willing to assume the lowest places in the world and in the church. Such are truly the servants and exemplars of the Lord Jesus Christ. Such are the most likely to find themselves honoured and lifted up; not by self or by other men, but by the Lord.

## WOES ON THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES

***Matthew 23:13-36***

### MATTHEW 23:13

Earlier, we remarked that many of the Pharisees were unregenerate and ungodly men, making pretence of faith in God and piety toward God. In this verse and in the passage that follows, the Lord Jesus confirms this to be true of these religious leaders. However, before describing the true character and attitudes of the scribes and Pharisees, the Lord made it clear to the people that they must still listen to and obey their teaching—because that teaching was from the Scriptures. It was the Word of the living God.

Now, however, the Lord Jesus addresses the religious leaders directly. In these verses, we find a succession of 'woes' pronounced upon the scribes and Pharisees. By using this expression, the Lord was uttering a most solemn warning of coming and final judgment; the Judgment of God that would fall upon these religious leaders (and others like them), and that would be commensurate with their hypocritical faith and materialistic lifestyle. Then, everyone would see that God is no respecter of persons, even when clad in religious robes.

James tells us that those professing to be religious teachers (including leaders, pastors, bishops or any other similar office), will be judged more strictly. (Jas. 3:1) Those church leaders or teachers whose profession was false, and whose faith in God was either non-existent or hypocritical, will be judged accordingly. Even although they might have occupied high office in the church, those without a personal saving experience of Christ in their lives, and devoid of the Holy Spirit's work in sanctification, will be separated from God and from Christ forever. This is why the Lord Jesus pronounces such solemn words against these religious imposters; for, unless they repent and turn to God in time, they will be lost for all eternity.

The Lord Jesus addresses these religious leaders as 'hypocrites'. A hypocrite is a 'play actor'. In the theatres, these players or play actors held a mask in front of their faces to conceal their real person and character from others and to portray a different character or identity. This was exactly what the scribes and Pharisees were doing; masking from others their true personality or character. However, the Lord was now about to unmask these hypocrites and show them up for what they really were.

Perhaps, most serious of all concerning these religious leaders was the fact that they misled the people, and directed their steps away from the truth, from the way of salvation and from God in heaven. As the Lord Jesus said, they had shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. Instead of presenting the people with the light of the truth, the scribes and Pharisees kept them in spiritual darkness and burdened them with traditions, rules and regulations that God had not required. Part of the reason for this was because these leaders were unregenerate men, and therefore spiritually blind themselves. The blind were leading the blind, and both would fall into the ditch. Thus, the scribes and Pharisees had failed to enter the kingdom of heaven; and, effectively, they prevented the people from entering in by failing to teach them the truth of the Scriptures.

## MATTHEW 23:14

(Mark 12:40; Luke 20:47)

As if it were not bad enough to mislead the people and to withhold the truth from them, many of these same scribes and Pharisees took advantage of the people. Instead of ministering to the poor and needy, these men deprived the poor and needy of what little they had. Under the pretence of giving their money or material goods to God or to his service, the scribes and Pharisees extracted money from widows, most of whom could not afford the large contributions that these religious leaders exacted from them. In this way and in other similar ways, the Pharisees devoured or consumed widows' houses; i.e., what little money or material goods they possessed.

Again, and probably in order to impress such widows or other people, the scribes and Pharisees regularly prolonged their prayers. However, their prayers were merely a superficial pretence at godliness. Such shallow and insincere prayers are never heeded by God in heaven–regardless of their length or appearance of piety.

For reasons such as these, the Lord Jesus warns these religious leaders most solemnly that they will face the greater condemnation. Therefore, it becomes abundantly clear that–on the Last Day–no religious leader (so-called) will escape either the righteous judgment of God or the condemnation of God. Their religion and their profession of faith have proved to be in vain. And their empty profession will carry them to the depths of hell.

How important it is, then, for those who preach or teach in the church to ensure that their faith is genuine and that they are genuine servants of the Lord Jesus, and not mere charlatans or imposters; and how important for the people of God to test those who claim to be the Lord's servants, and to assess them according to their works, their character, and their lifestyle. (Cf. 2 Cor. 13:5-7; 1 Thess. 5:21; 1 John 4:1)

## MATTHEW 23:15

It was bad enough that these men deceived others by their hypocrisy. However, it was a great deal worse when they attempted to deceive others into following the same hypocritical kind of worship and lifestyle that they themselves practised. Yet, this is exactly what they did. Determined to make disciples for their respective sects, these religious leaders travelled far and wide to proclaim their message and to win others to their schools. So eager were they to make even a single convert, that they were prepared to cover vast tracts of land in order to find one person whom they could persuade to join with them in their 'pursuit of righteousness'; i.e., righteousness as it was understood by the scribes and Pharisees.

However, the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was a righteousness of works, of self-effort, of obeying rules, regulations and the traditions of men. This was a legal righteousness that was completely antithetic to the righteousness that God requires or that is provided by him as a gift of his grace. The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was self-righteousness; a kind of righteousness which–to the most holy God–was wholly unacceptable and no better than filthy rags or polluted garments. (Isa. 64:6) Those in possession of such righteousness (so-called) remained under the wrath and curse of God. Therefore, any proselyte who joined these religious groups and followed their way of righteousness was being made twice as much a child of hell as were the Pharisees themselves. This may be because these new converts were already dead spiritually before associating with the scribes and Pharisees. However, instead of finding salvation and life through their message, these new converts had found only another

form of spiritual death. They were now spiritually dead twice over; and therefore twice as much a child of hell as they had been before. (Cf. Jude 1:12) Thus, once again, the Lord Jesus pronounces 'woe' on these blind spiritual guides, and addresses them as 'hypocrites' or 'play actors'.

## MATTHEW 23:16-17

In pronouncing a further woe in this verse, the Lord Jesus addresses the scribes and Pharisees expressly as 'blind guides'. One who is blind spiritually cannot possibly guide others who are similarly afflicted. Furthermore, one who is blind spiritually is in no position to interpret or teach God's Word accurately; for without the illuminating presence and power of the Holy Spirit, he cannot see (i.e., understand or comprehend) the truths of that Word aright. Thus, these religious leaders were often incapable of comprehending the moral and spiritual ramifications of much of their teaching. For example, they tried to distinguish between matters that were inseparable, making one of lesser importance than the other. Thus, according to their teaching, if a person was to take a solemn oath or vow in the name of the temple then this kind of oath could be treated lightly or disregarded at pleasure, because the temple was only an edifice of stone. However, if a person were to take a solemn oath or vow by the gold of the temple, then this oath would be binding because the gold represented that which was of much greater value than the stones of the temple.

However, the scribes and Pharisees erred immeasurably when they spoke thus. Therefore, in verse 17, the Lord Jesus addresses them as 'blind fools'. Not only were they blind guides unable to see the truth, but also they were blind fools morally and spiritually incapable of interpreting the truth or of applying its principles aright. Thus, the Lord challenges them directly with the words, *"For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?"*

Of course, the temple was the dwelling place of God on earth and the place where he had caused his name to be remembered. It corresponded with the throne of God in heaven; and it encompassed within its walls both the holy place and the holies of holies. Therefore, nothing could form a part of this holy temple without its being sanctified by the temple; for the holy presence of God filled the sanctuary. Therefore, it was in vain that these religious leaders spoke disparagingly of oaths taken in the name of the temple, and exalted those taken in the name of the gold within the temple. Indeed, no such oaths should have been taken. Nevertheless, God would hold everyone responsible for the oaths they made before him, regardless of what object they had used in making the oath.

## MATTHEW 23:18

Another rule of the scribes and Pharisees concerned oaths taken at the place of sacrifice or offering. According to the religious leaders, anyone swearing by the altar of sacrifice was not bound by his oath. The altar was merely a structure for bearing the offerings placed on it, and–according to them–was of little or no consequential significance. However, if a person were to swear by the gift offered on the altar, then his oath was binding. The value of the gift, and the fact that it had been offered to God, ensured that any oaths taken by the gift or offering were essentially oaths taken in the name of the LORD.

However, as the Lord Jesus makes abundantly clear, the religious leaders were not only greatly mistaken in this but they had also inverted the true significance of the altar and the offering.

## MATTHEW 23:19-20

Once again, the Lord Jesus point out the folly of these religious instructors, and once again we see that many of these men were blind morally and spiritually to some of the most important truths of God's holy Word. Yes, oaths taken by the gifts on the altar were binding. However, they were binding because they had been sanctified or set apart as holy to the LORD by the altar. It was the altar of sacrifice and offering that rendered the gifts holy or sacred to God; for–by his own holy ordinance given to Israel–it was by means of the altar that gifts and sacrifices were to be offered unto him, and by this means alone. Therefore, typically or typologically, it was the altar that rendered the gifts sacred or sanctified to God. Therefore, the altar was of greater significance than the gift. Consequently, anyone swearing by the altar–which the Pharisees dismissed as insignificant and irrelevant–swore not only by the altar but also by everything offered on it. And every oath taken by the altar of God was a binding or irrevocable oath, since it was taken at the place of sacrifice to God.

## MATTHEW 23:21

Having dealt with the folly of the Pharisees concerning oaths by the altar, the Lord Jesus now returns to speak of the temple of God itself, first mentioned in verses 16 and 17.

The Jewish religious authorities had asserted that swearing by the gold of the temple was more significant than swearing by the temple itself. According to the Lord Jesus, however, anyone swearing by the temple was in effect swearing by the name of the LORD, for the temple was his holy dwelling place on earth. Therefore, contrary to the teaching of the Pharisees, oaths taken by the temple were solemn, and binding or irrevocable oaths, for they were oaths taken in the presence of God and in the name of God.

## MATTHEW 23:22

The same principle applied to oaths sworn in the name of heaven. These were just as binding or irrevocable, because heaven represented the dwelling place and throne of God above. Thus, any oath taken by heaven was taken not only by the celestial dwelling place of God but also by the glorious throne of God or the place from where he exercises sovereign dominion over the entire created universe.

## MATTHEW 23:23

Now, the Lord pronounces additional woes upon the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees for their manner of tithing. The religious leaders observed the utmost punctiliousness in weighing out a tithe or tenth of all their herbs and dedicating those tithes to the Lord. Thus, they ensured that they never failed to set apart to God the precise amount of mint, dill or cumin required. By the same token, they insisted that the people should follow their example in tithing herbs or plants to the Lord.

In principle, the scribes and Pharisees were right: because they were following the instructions of the Old Testament ordinances. However, while they laid great emphasis in the observance of these any many other similar ordinances, they neglected almost completely to observe the much more important Mosaic Law, and to apply its principles to their hearts and lives. Thus, these weightier matters–justice, mercy and faithfulness–were given much less prominence by these religious leaders. Perhaps they found it easier or less burdensome to tithe their possessions than to commit themselves to the observance of God's holy law and to practise love, mercy, justice and faithfulness. (Micah 6:6-8) Nevertheless, by their neglect

of the more important matters and by their pretence of godliness, the scribes and Pharisees had incurred the wrath of the Lord Jesus Christ.

## MATTHEW 23:24

At this point, the Lord Jesus exposes these men for what they really are: hypocrites of the highest order. As theological lawyers and teachers, and members of the religious establishment, these men professed to be the instructors or guides of Israel. However, although they may have possessed great knowledge of theology and of the Scriptures, their knowledge was intellectual knowledge only, devoid of a saving and sanctifying knowledge of the truth. Thus, spiritually, these men were blind. Their lack of spiritual comprehension made it utterly impossible for them to understand God's Word aright or to explain it aright to others. (1 Cor. 2:14) Truly, this was a case of the blind (religious leaders) leading the blind (uninstructed people). Both, of course, would fall into the ditch! (Matt. 15:14)

The Lord Jesus now applies another analogy to show the spiritual ignorance and darkness of these religious leaders. When about to drink, the scribes and Pharisees were like those who would do their utmost to ensure that the drinking vessel and the drink itself was meticulously clean and free of even the most minute foreign bodies. It they found even the tiniest of insects, such as a gnat, they would strain it out of their drink before consuming it. Probably, in fact, the presence of the gnat would cause them to pour out their refreshment in disgust. However, at the same time as they were searching for gnats, they completely failed to notice the large camel in their drink–and swallowed this mammal whole!

Of course, by using this analogy, the Lord was pointing out the ludicrous nature of the scribes and Pharisees' rules, regulations and practises. They emphasised matters of less importance at the expense of much more important matters. They inverted the truths of God's Word, or distorted God's teaching, to fit their own ideas of how the Scriptures should be interpreted.

We should remember, of course, that most of these men were attempting to understand and interpret God's Word without the aid of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it was inevitable that their carnal or unspiritual minds would fail to grasp the truth; and from these same unspiritual minds emanated all manner of errors, misapprehensions and misapplications of God's inerrant Word. This, of course, is true of any church leader, preacher or pastor today who is attempting to understand and apply God's truth without the presence, power and guidance of the Holy Spirit in his life.

We too, however, must be careful not to strain out gnats from our teaching, while at the same time swallowing camels by our misapplication of God's Word or by our inconsistent lifestyle. If we would guide others aright in the way of truth and righteousness, it is essential that the Holy Spirit be our Interpreter and Guide in all matters respecting the Word of God.

## MATTHEW 23:25

In verse 25, the Lord Jesus turns his attention to the scribes and Pharisees' obsession with hygiene. The religious leaders possessed an entire catalogue of rules and regulations concerning cleanliness that they had added to God's law. The one cited here by the Lord is simply one example. The scribes and Pharisees would cleanse their cups, plates and other vessels and utensils most meticulously. Not a speck was to be found on any of these vessels or implements. Indeed, if one such vessel or utensil was handled by some-

one who was ceremonially unclean, that cup, etc. would be destroyed. It had been rendered permanently unfit for further human contact.

However, while expending such efforts on physical cleanliness, the scribes and Pharisees completely neglected the much more important moral and spiritual cleanliness; or godliness. As far as their moral nature was concerned, these men were essentially corrupt; not only in the spiritual sense common to all unregenerate mankind, but more so in that they worshipped the gods of materialism or possession and wealth to an inordinate degree. Thus, the Lord describes them as not just being *guilty of*, but of being *full of* greed and self-indulgence. Greed, covetousness–or the lust for more, more, more–was the true object of their devotion, and therefore their true god. Pleasing or satisfying of self mattered more to these religious leaders than pleasing and serving God. Everything they did in their lives revolved around pleasing themselves and winning the praise and acclaim of the population for their (supposed) exalted piety.

## MATTHEW 23:26

The Lord Jesus, however, condemns the attitudes and practices of these pseudo-religious hypocrites; and, once again, Jesus refers to the underlying cause of their hypocrisy and ungodliness. They are blind: That is, they are blind to spiritual realities; wholly incapable of comprehending the true meaning of God's Word, and therefore of doing what God requires except in a mechanical and unspiritual sense. This is true of anyone who is still in an unregenerate state. Although they may follow religious rules and regulations mechanically, the fact that they have never experienced spiritual regeneration or the new birth means that they are still in their sins, still alienated from God and still under the holy and righteous wrath and curse of God. (Cf. Eph. 4:17-19)

Thus, the Lord Jesus turns the attention of the scribes and Pharisees to inward rather than to outward cleanliness. The religious leaders were to seek first to cleanse their hearts and souls from moral and spiritual corruption or uncleanness; because cleansing of the heart or soul would result in a character and attitudes that were morally pure and that produced the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. Of course, such inward cleansing involved faith in God and in the atonement provided by him for the remission of sin. It was imparted only to those whom the Holy Spirit had called to grace and salvation. However, it was available to anyone who called upon the name of the Lord; for none could call except they had first been drawn by the Spirit of God. (Acts 2:21,38-39,47; Rom. 10:12-13) Then, those who had been blind would receive their sight. For the first time in their lives, they would be able to see the Light of the world, the Light of life and the Saviour of sinful men and women, and to believe on him with all their hearts. Then, by the Spirit of God, their character and conduct would be transformed through ongoing sanctification of life, producing the kind of life and behaviour that God requires of his redeemed and holy people.

## MATTHEW 23:27-28

The scribes and Pharisees, however, had no intention of seeking moral and spiritual reformation. This was one of the reason why the Lord referred to them as 'hypocrites': They were not only acting a part, but also they were completely insincere and indeed disingenuous about their professed faith in God. Although there were some exceptions, many of these religious leaders did not desire a close relationship with God, nor did they desire to observe the LORD's requirements. The scribes and Pharisees followed to the letter their own man-made rules and regulations, but these originated from their carnal or unspiritual hearts or minds. Yet, they wanted the people to believe that they were pious and religious men, who

spent much time in the presence of God, and who made long, ostentatious and very public prayers to God. However, their aim was to achieve public admiration and acclaim, not to please and honour the Lord. At the same time, they would be pursuing their ungodly and materialistic lifestyles, setting their greedy and idolatrous hearts and minds on the accumulation of ever more wealth or possessions.

Nevertheless, the ordinary people believed that these men were holy and righteous individuals, who were especially close to God. Of course, the people could not see into the hearts of these scribes and Pharisees. They could judge these religious leaders only by outward appearances; and, outwardly, their flowing robes and dignified demeanour gave the (false) impression of piety. Thus, the people believed that everything taught by these men–including the man-made rules and regulations–was taught by God and required by God. In truth, however, the Lord Jesus described these men not only as being full of hypocrisy but also as being full of lawlessness (v.28). For all their claims to be upholders, guardians and teachers of God's law, they were guilty of breaking God's law frequently. Their failure to obey God's requirements for justice, mercy and faithfulness was just one example of this (v.23).

It was no wonder that the Lord Jesus became justifiably angry with these religious pretenders. They had augmented the Word of God with their own teachings and traditions; they had laid this heavy burden on the people, requiring their unquestioning obedience to commands that God had not given, and they were giving the impression to the people that they were the true servants of the Lord God–like the faithful prophets and teachers of the Old Testament.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that the Lord Jesus pronounces yet more woes on these insincere and impious individuals. Indeed, on this occasion, the Lord illustrates something of the nature of these men's true character: They were akin to whitewashed tombs! A tomb speaks of death, decay, putrefaction, dissolution and uncleanness. However, a whitewashed tomb gives the (false) impression to those standing outside of beauty, cleanliness and order within. So it was with the scribes and Pharisees. Like the depths of the tomb, their hearts and souls were containers of death (spiritual). Their minds were decayed, putrefied, and in the process of dissolution (morally and spiritually). Consequently, their souls or minds were filled, morally and spiritually, with every kind of corruption or uncleanness.

These were just some of the reasons why the Lord Jesus pronounced such severe woes upon these religious teachers. As James says in his epistle, teachers will be judged more strictly. So it will be with these hypocritical and ungodly individuals, and so it will be also with every religious teacher today whose character and conduct is akin to that of the scribes and Pharisees. This applies to all those, even in the most exalted religious positions, whose teaching or lifestyle denies the faith they profess, or who condone of or approve the very things that God in his Word condemns.

Of course, as mentioned earlier, not every religious teacher in Israel would fall under the condemnation of the Lord Jesus. Some were seeking earnestly to know the Lord–such as Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin. (John 3:1-15; cf. John 7:50-52; 19:39) Some would be found by the Lord, such as the former Pharisee and persecutor of the church, Saul of Tarsus or Paul the apostle. (Acts 8:3; 26:10; 1 Cor. 15:9) Similarly, under the preaching of the apostles, many of the priests would turn to the Lord Jesus in repentance and faith. (Acts 6:7)

## MATTHEW 23:29-32

Once again, the Lord Jesus exposes the rank hypocrisy of these religious scholars and teachers. Over the years, these men and their predecessors had set great store by setting up monuments to the Old Testa-

ment prophets. They would emphasise to the people the importance of these monuments, since they spoke of the faithful prophets that God had sent to his people over the preceding centuries. As long as a monument to their name existed in Israel, these prophets would be remembered for their faithfulness to God in making known his word to the people. Thus, in remembrance of their name, the scribes and Pharisees would build memorials to the prophets and embellish them with beautiful and decorative features.

Of course, the scribes and Pharisees were careful to distance themselves from the sins of their forefathers–because it was they who had abused, tortured and killed God's faithful servants. In many cases, the religious authorities of the day had instigated the death of these faithful prophets, or had connived with others in putting them to death. They silenced the messengers in order to silence the message.

Thus, the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day disassociated themselves from these wicked crimes committed by their ancestors. Nevertheless, the Lord does not see them as guiltless. On the contrary, the Lord Jesus sees their hands as polluted with the same blood. This is not only because they are the direct descendants of these murderers, but also because the Lord Jesus knew the hearts and minds of these scribes and Pharisees. The Lord knew that–had these men lived in the days of the prophets–then they too would have joined in killing the prophets; as subsequent events in Jesus' life were to show only too clearly.

Once again, therefore, these religious leaders show themselves as hypocrites or 'play actors'. By their own testimony, they had admitted their forefathers' guilt in slaying the prophets of God. However, by making such an admission, they were acknowledging (unwittingly) that they were the descendents of wicked murderers. Yes, even the most heinous of offences can be forgiven; but those who refuse wilfully and consistently to repent of their wickedness can never experience mercy or forgiveness.

Thus the Lord commands these men to *'fill up the measure of their fathers'* (v.32): i.e., to accept that they are as guilty as were their fathers; that they would have committed the same monstrous crimes given the opportunity, and that–even now–they were plotting to commit the ultimate murder by putting to death the Prophet and Messiah of Israel, the Holy One of God.

## MATTHEW 23:33

Now, the Lord Jesus shows the true source of these men's character and conduct. Jesus likens the scribes and Pharisees to serpents; referring to the entire class of these writhing creatures. By so doing, the Lord is associating these men's character and conduct with that of the Serpent: i.e., Satan, the devious, cunning, subtle deceiver and the enemy of God and man. Just as the devil practised all kinds of deceit, cunning and evil so also the hearts or minds of these religious leaders were filled with deceit, cunning and evil. (Gen. 3:1-14; cf. 2 Cor. 11:3; Rev. 12:9; 20:2)

The Lord Jesus, however, does not only describe these men as 'serpents' but also (and like John the Baptist) as a 'brood of vipers'. (Matt. 3:7; 12:34; Luke 3:7) Not only did they possess the characteristics of serpents (metaphorically speaking) but also they possessed the characteristics of venomous serpents or vipers. The thoughts of their hearts were corrupt to the core. Their teaching–although appearing godly–was unsound, contrary to the Scriptures, and permeated with distortions of the truth and man-made additions to the law of God.

For the Lord Jesus to employ such language against the highly respected and revered religious teachers of his day shows just how offensive to God was their hypocritical pretence at godliness. Yet, far from being godly, the Lord Jesus makes it abundantly plain to these scribes and Pharisees that they cannot escape being sentenced to hell.

How great the responsibility on each servant of God to ensure that they are serving him only because called and appointed by God to that office or position in the church, and that they remain utterly faithful to God in their lives and in their teaching.

## MATTHEW 23:34

(Matt. 10:17; 24:9; Mark 13:9; John 16:2

The Lord Jesus demonstrates that–despite their protestations to the contrary–these scribes and Pharisees were no better than their forefathers. Just as their forefathers had abused, tortured and killed God's faithful servants, so the present day religious leadership would do likewise. Though prophets were sent to call them to repentance (like John the Baptist), yet they would call for their arrest and death. Similarly, the few among the religious leadership who were truly wise, such as Nicodemus, would be scorned and abused by their peers in the Sanhedrin. (John 7:50-52) Likewise, the few truly godly scribes among them would be set at nought by their fellows. Some of these faithful men of God would be killed at the hands of the ungodly scribes and Pharisees. Others would endure flogging in the synagogues for not conforming to the teaching or practises of these evil imposters in places of authority. Still others would be hounded from town to town for their faithfulness to God and to the teaching of his Word.

Thus, the Lord Jesus shows that these men possess exactly the same devious, deceitful and murderous character as their forebears. Therefore, it is with full justification that God's Word can say of such men that the sins of the fathers have passed to their children–and both will be held accountable.

## MATTHEW 23:35-36

Now, the Lord Jesus shows that far from being guiltless of their fathers' sins they are in fact inexcusably culpable. Indeed, their guilt is greater than that of their forefathers, because they were aware of their forefathers' sins and of God's judgment upon them. Furthermore, they ought to have learned from their forefather's sins and avoided them in their own lives–but they failed to do so. Therefore, the sins of the forefathers visited upon the children brought down upon their heads all the crimes committed against the LORD's servants. This extended from the wilful murder of righteous Abel to that of Zechariah whom their forefathers slew within the LORD's holy temple.

Thus we see that–when the same kind of sins are practised without repentance by both parties (ancestors and descendants)–the sins of the father are visited on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate (or despise) the LORD.

In verse 36, the Lord Jesus reiterates his solemn warning concerning the sins of the forefathers coming upon the present generation. Note, too, that the Lord precedes this warning with the word, 'Truly' (or 'Verily'). This expression underlines the solemnity of the warning and the necessity of hearing and responding to the Lord's words. In this case, the only appropriate response to such a solemn pronouncement upon the generation who rejected and abused the Lord Jesus would have been heartfelt repentance

and a plea for God's mercy. However, except in the case of a small minority, no such repentance was ever shown. With few exceptions, no one of that generation sought to call upon the Lord for mercy or to seek his forgiveness and his grace.

## JESUS GRIEVES OVER JERUSALEM

***Matthew 23:37-39***

### MATTHEW 23:37

(Luke 13:34-35)

Now, the Lord turns from his condemnation of the religious leadership to the population of Jerusalem itself. Jerusalem had been the city which God had chosen. The temple on Mount Zion was the place where he had caused his Name to be remembered. Jewish worshippers from among all nations would flock to the holy city for the festivals of the LORD, and there too the Gentiles would approach the courts of the temple to seek the LORD.

However, the people of Jerusalem had forsaken their God. Like their religious leaders, they had become hypocritical in their worship. They attended the temple; they met for the festivals, and they came with their offerings and sacrifices. However, for many among them, their attendance, worship and sacrifices were expressions of religious duty, rather than genuine heartfelt praise and worship for God, or with any real sense of repentance and contrition in their hearts.

Granted, there were a number of exceptions who proved true and faithful to the Lord, and who worshipped the Lord in sincerity and truth. But this did not reflect the true state of the majority in Jerusalem (taken comprehensively for the entire nation of Israel).

Therefore, knowing the true state of the nation's heart, the Lord Jesus grieves deeply over the wayward and disobedient people. They had belonged to the one nation that God had chosen. However, they had shown themselves as a disobedient and backsliding people, or as a people who had never truly been included among those whom God had called and chosen for himself. They had experienced all the blessings that God had bestowed upon the people as a nation. However, for many of them at least, their connection with the chosen nation of Israel had not guaranteed that they had been chosen individually to life and salvation. Many of the professing Jewish people were still in their sins and still alienated from God and from his love. Therefore, in spite of God's love to his people over many generations, these individuals found themselves at enmity with God and under the wrath and curse of God for their unforgiven sins.

It was the ancestors of these individuals who had stoned and slain the LORD's holy prophets, and had despised and rejected the LORD's words proclaimed to them by the prophets. (Neh. 9:26) And just as the religious leadership of that day conspired with the wicked people to kill the LORD's servants, so this present generation of priests and people would conspire against the LORD and against his Anointed to bring about the death of the Holy Son of God. (Ps. 2:2,10-12; Matt. 26:3-4; John 7:1; Acts 2:23)

Yet, knowing their rebellious and stubborn hearts, the Lord Jesus grieves deeply for the people of Jerusalem. He knows what blessings they might have received at the hands of the Lord. However, he knows also what judgment will fall upon them for all eternity at the hands of the Lord. For they who knew most

must endure most punishment for their rejection of the truth and for despising and setting at nought the LORD's Christ.

The Lord Jesus emphasises however that the people were wholly culpable for their present state and condition, and for their coming judgment. When the Lord had offered to receive them, they had rejected him and repudiated his words. They did not want him in their lives, nor did they want to submit to God or to the will and ways of God. They were as intractable now as their forefathers had been in the desert under the leadership of Moses. Thus, the Lord Jesus adds these words, *'...and you would not!'* (Cf. Matt. 22:3)

## MATTHEW 23:38

Speaking prophetically, the Lord Jesus announces the solemn words foretelling the loss of their place of worship. The sanctuary which they imagined vainly guaranteed them acceptance by and access to God would be razed to the ground. No longer would they be able to resort to the temple; for the place where God had caused his name to be remembered would be removed from their midst. Then, as always, God would be found only by those who worshipped him in spirit and in truth–irrespective of where their house of worship was located. (John 4:19-24)

Thus, for these people, the desolation of Jerusalem's city and temple had all but arrived. Those who sought to worship God only in a formal manner would continue to embrace a dead form of religion–but without the temple signifying the dwelling place of God on earth. Those, however, who worshipped God in spirit and in truth–both Jews and Gentiles converted to faith in Christ–would experience the power and presence of God wherever they called upon his most holy name.

## MATTHEW 23:39

These words are a solemn declamation against an unrighteous and hypocritical people. Yet, they were not pronounced against the most wicked or evil people in the world (judging by outward appearances), but against a formally religious people Many of these people performed all the duties of the Jewish religion and attended the festivals. But they did so out of ritual and not with a sincere and contrite heart. Like the scribes and Pharisees, they were religious outwardly, and many of the people believed them to be pious believers in the LORD. But, inwardly, they had never experienced the grace of God or the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration. These 'pious' people were still in their sins.

Therefore, the Lord Jesus proclaims to them–and to all others like them–that they will never see him again: i.e., until they acknowledge him as the Saviour or Messiah whom God had sent, and until they seek salvation through him alone. Then, from their hearts, they would be blessing the One who comes in the name of the Lord. However, this would require a complete transformation of heart and life, including a radical change of attitude and behaviour. This could be brought about only by a work of the Holy Spirit, bringing them under conviction of sin, convincing them of coming judgment upon the impenitent, and converting them to God. Thus, the people of God ought to pray for the peace of Jerusalem; and for the Jewish people their eyes may be opened to see the Lord Jesus as their Messiah and their God. (Rom. 11:1-10,23-36)

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 24

## THE OLIVET DISCOURSE: SIGNS OF THE END

***Matthew 24:1-51***

*(Luke 21:5-36)*

The Lord's discourse to his disciples on the Mount of Olives occupies chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew's Gospel. In this discourse, the Lord teaches his disciples about very distressing and troubling times ahead, beginning with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple and continuing through the centuries until the period of "great tribulation" presaging the end of the age. The teaching in these two chapters is in response to the questions posed by the Lord's disciples:

a) *"...When will these things be..."* [i.e., the destruction of the temple, etc.], and

b) *"...what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?"* (v.3)

Apparently, the disciples believed that these two events would occur simultaneously or in very close proximity to one another. However, in the two chapters that follow, the Lord Jesus makes it abundantly clear that the fall of Jerusalem and the end of the age are two distinct events separated by a very considerable span of time. During this time span, a number of specific events must occur, troubling times must intensify in the world, false prophets or false messiahs would arise (including, latterly, the appearing of the antichrist or man of sin (or lawlessness) (2 Thess. 3:1-12; cf. 1 John 2:18,22; 4:3; 2 John 1:7)), and the Gospel must be preached to every nation under heaven. (Matt. 24:14; Mark 13:10) Only after all these events had been fulfilled would the Son of Man appear in his glory, bringing in the end of the present age and the beginning of the new age.

Until that time, the Lord's disciples were to remain faithful to him, serving him in the capacity to which he had called and appointed them, and standing fast for the cause of Christ even under the most intense persecution. Whatever the outcome of their stand for Christ, the Lord would preserve his redeemed people in their salvation until the end.

### MATTHEW 24:1-2

After pronouncing these most solemn woes upon the scribes and Pharisees, the Lord Jesus takes his leave of the temple in Jerusalem, and he would never again return to it.

However, as he was departing, the Lord's disciples began to point out to him the outstanding architectural beauty of the temple building. The present structure had been set up by builders working for Herod, whose architectural achievements were renowned throughout the land. Herod the Great had provided lavishly for the building of this temple. Even at the present time, some of its outer precincts were still under construction–although the sanctuary itself had been completed some decades earlier.

However, as the Lord's disciples admired this magnificent edifice, Jesus knew that the building would not remain standing in its spectacular glory for much longer. In AD 70, Jerusalem would be overrun by the Emperor Titus and his soldiers, and the city overwhelmed by the Roman army. Although Titus would issue orders for the temple to be spared, the emperor would be unable to control the actions of his en-

raged soldiers. In their fury, the soldiers would set light to everything that could be burned. Ultimately, the magnificent temple on Mount Zion would be desecrated and razed to the ground. Concerning the sanctuary itself (although not the outer walls), not one stone would remain upon another. Thereby, the Lord would show unmistakably that he had brought to an end the Jewish system of sacrifices and offerings for sin. Because one final sacrifice had already been offered to take away sin forever, the temple as a place of sacrifice and priestly mediation was now wholly redundant.

## MATTHEW 24:3

Soon, Jesus and his disciples came to the Mount of Olives, on the slopes opposite the city and overlooking the temple. As the small group rested there by themselves, the disciples began to question the Lord about the destruction of the temple, and the events associated with it. However, perhaps without realising it, the disciples had asked two distinct questions: (a) When would the destruction of the temple occur? And (b) what would be the sign of the Lord's coming and the close of the age? Perhaps, of course– as we have said above–the disciples had assumed that the two events would occur simultaneously or in close proximity. In the verses that follow, therefore, and to remove any misapprehension about the imminent end of the age, the Lord Jesus takes the opportunity to explain the succession of events in more detail.

## MATTHEW 24:4-5

Knowing that false teachers would arise, the Lord Jesus forewarns his disciples about being misled, or caused to depart from the truth. As we will see in the following verses, the list of events that must occur before the close of the age indicates that a considerable period was likely to elapse between the Lord's speaking of these events and their ultimate fulfilment. It is probable that the events began with the destruction of the temple in AD 70, and will continue throughout successive generations until the Lord's second coming.

The first point mentioned by the Lord Jesus is the claim by many false professors who would arise in succeeding periods claiming to be the Messiah or Christ of God. At the time Jesus spoke, several men had arisen claiming to have been sent by God. They had gathered disciples around them and had sought to speak and act against the Roman government. Ultimately, these men and their followers had been arrested or dispersed by the authorities. (Acts 5:36-37) However, others making similar false claims would arise in the future; some claiming specifically to be the Christ. Clearly, these would be imposters and false claimants, since the true Christ had appeared already. Therefore, the Lord Jesus warns his disciples to watch out for such false christs, and not to be misled by their claims or by their teaching. Unfortunately, many would be led astray by these imposters. Presumably, this would refer to nominally religious people or to those who were not sufficiently versed in the teaching of God's Word. Nevertheless, the Lord's words make it very clear that large numbers of people will give heed to these false christs or false teachers, and will become their followers.

However, other events would occur prior to the end of the age. One of the most frequent is conflicts between ethnic groups and nations, and threats of political instability worldwide. Thus, in verses 6 and 7, the Lord declares:

## MATTHEW 24:6

Since the fall of man, conflict between men and nations has persisted. However, it appears that the Lord is speaking of conflicts intensifying as the ages pass; threats of war becoming increasingly frequent, and methods and modes of war becoming increasingly horrific and deadly. Wars and rumours of wars around the world would continue almost unabated. However, of themselves, these conflicts would not mark the end of the age. These were but indications that the end was coming; but other events also had to take place before the end of the present age occurred. Therefore, when they heard of or experienced periods of conflict, the disciples were not to become unduly alarmed. These events were distant precursors of the culmination of the age, but they were not the culmination of the age itself.

## MATTHEW 24:7-8

The Lord's use of this terminology seems to imply that a considerable period of time would elapse during which these events would occur; a time period to be measured in centuries or millennia rather than weeks, months, or years. This seems to be suggested by the mention of nation rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom (implying repeated or recurring action over a prolonged period, although not necessarily involving exactly the same protagonists on each occasion).

Events in history bear this out. From the time of the Roman occupation, through the fall of the Roman Empire, to the many subsequent wars around the globe, the Lord's words have been vindicated. Yet, in keeping with his word, the end of the age has not yet come.

Another signal precursor of the end of the age would be the increase of drought, famine and plague conditions. Of course, these conditions were not unknown in Israel before the coming of the Lord Jesus. However, as with conflicts and wars, drought, famine and plague is now much more widespread. Suffering has increased immensely, and on a much wider scale than previously–at least in certain parts of the world.

Similarly, phenomena such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis and other natural occurrences have thrown towns and cities in various parts of the world into confusion and disarray. Yet, these are but a precursor of what is yet to come; or as the Lord says, *"All these are but the beginning of the birth pains" [or "sorrows"]* (v.8). The beginning marks what is about to follow–and what is bound to occur at the proper time. Therefore, these beginnings (wars, famines, earthquakes, etc.) are not merely political or natural events alone: they are the certain indicators that the end is coming–and that it will come at the proper time. However, in view of the Lord's words, and the teachings on this subject elsewhere in God's Word, it would be unwise to speculate on precise dates for the Lord's coming, or on the precise events immediately preceding his return in glory.

## MATTHEW 24:9

Nevertheless, although not marking the immediate end of the age, these signs would mark the beginning of the end–which would involve a time of increasing sorrows and sufferings for the people of God ('*the beginning of the birth pains*').

'They' in this verse probably refers to the governing authorities; either ecclesiastical (as with men like the scribes and Pharisees) or civil (as with men like Herod, Pilate and other rulers). Throughout the succeed-

ing ages, the Lord's people would be delivered into the hands of such ungodly men on account of their faith or because of their preaching of the Gospel (as with the apostles, including Paul). Throughout succeeding ages, these ungodly authorities would subject the Lord's people to cruel trials and afflictions. Some of the believers would be tortured, and some would be put to death for their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. In certain countries, the preaching of the Gospel would be forbidden on pain of death. In other countries, where it was found unpalatable to ungodly and sinful ears, the teaching of God's Word would be misconstrued to constitute a 'hate crime' punishable by fines or imprisonment.

As the age progressed, and more and more of the Lord's people held faithfully to the teaching of God's Word, the hatred and opposition of an ungodly world would intensify. Exposed on a daily basis to the upright conduct of the believer and convicted in their own conscience of their sins against God and against his Word, certain elements of the unregenerate world would lash out against the redeemed people of God, maligning and condemning those who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Whether from ungodly authorities or from the general population, many of God's people would be exposed to great affliction and would endure hatred and scorn from some or many of those around them. Nevertheless, the Lord's people must remember that their Lord and Master was also scorned and abused unjustly at the hands of evil men. Furthermore, we must remember that those who so vilely attack the people of God and their faith are doing so because they cannot reach God to attack him directly. How feeble and futile the attempts of sinful men to rail against God: the Judge of all the earth who, one day, will hold every one of them to account and judge them as their deeds deserve!

Thus, those who suffer for the sake of Christ's name should consider it an honour to be so privileged as to represent the name of the One who will come in glory to gather his people home and to judge the nations for their stand against him and against his redeemed and holy people.

## MATTHEW 24:10

One of the effects of this severe persecution against the church and people of God will be to purge the church of its impurities: That is, to expose and remove false professors from among the people of God.

Many people who profess allegiance to Christ do so not because of genuine faith in Christ but because of the external privileges or benefits that church membership may afford. For example, church membership may increase one's standing or status in certain communities. It may give to the church members an appearance of respectability and integrity, whether justified or not. It may imply constancy and reliability in relation to employment matters or future promotion. For these and many other reasons, a person may seek church membership–*without ever having experienced personal saving faith in Christ.* Thus, we find that–in some local churches especially–a large proportion of their congregations are composed of unregenerate 'churchgoers' or 'church attendees' rather than the redeemed children of God.

With this in mind, it is easy to see how these false professors or 'churchgoers' will not stand in times of severe persecution. They did not join the church to follow Christ but to pursue their own interests or careers. Therefore, when persecution or any other conflicting interest threatens their comfortable way of life, they will promptly abandon their (false) profession of faith and return to the world. Thus, the Lord's words are true: *"...Many will fall away..."* (Cf. Matt. 13:21; John 6:66)

However, the Lord continues: *"...and betray one another and hate one another."*

Here we see once again that these people were never the true children of God. Faced with persecution and the upheaval of their comfortable lifestyle, they begin to attack and betray others of their kind. Ultimately, their animosity develops into a rank hatred for one another, resulting in splits or divisions. Many depart altogether from the meetings of the church, returning to the ungodly world to which they belong. Others, however, depart from the church only to set up rival fellowships representing their own unspiritual and carnal viewpoints and propounding their own form of heresies. Either way, these people have shown that they do not belong to Christ; that their profession was false; that they were never members of the true (invisible) church of which Christ is Head, and that they are still in their sins and under God's wrath and judgment.

At this point, we must remind our readers that these remarks apply only to false professors: i.e., to those who have never experienced spiritual regeneration or the salvation of the Lord in their lives. Only they can fall away or apostatise from the faith. True believers–those regenerated by the Holy Spirit–cannot fall away or apostatise. They may stumble into sin at times, but they cannot fall fatally so as to be lost eternally. It is impossible for anyone to cause a redeemed child of God to be lost, or to forfeit their salvation. Their eternal salvation is guaranteed to them eternally on the basis of Christ's perfect and finished work on earth and his continuing intercession in heaven. Salvation is not based on a redeemed person's character or conduct. (Rewards are so based, but rewards—or lack of rewards—do not affect a person's eternal salvation in any way.) Again, the free gift of God's salvation is as sure as the word and promises of God. It cannot become forfeit until the day that God cannot keep his Word or fulfil his promises. (Isa. 55:11; Titus 1:2)

## MATTHEW 24:11

We mentioned above that some of those who forsook the church would set up their own 'fellowships' and propound their own heresies. However, even within the more established churches or fellowships themselves, heretics or false prophets would arise. Sadly, many professing Christians in these churches or fellowships would be led astray (albeit temporarily) by these false teachers. (Matt. 7:15; 2 Pet. 2:1)

From this, we learn that the children of God must always be on their guard against false teaching, especially since that teaching may be given by someone within the congregation and therefore known to its members and leadership. However, in order for the Lord's people to be alert to error and heresy, they must be familiar with the Word. Those whom Jesus mentions as being led astray are almost certainly those who did not know the Word of God as thoroughly as they might have done. This may be understandable in the case of spiritually immature or young believers (spiritual infants). However, it should not happen to more mature and more spiritually advanced believers. They should be sufficiently versed in the teaching of God's Word to recognise false teaching whenever they hear it, and to respond to it accordingly. (2 Tim. 2:23-26; Titus 1:9; 2:1)

Thus, we see how important it is for the people of God to search the Scriptures, to understand the Scriptures, and to apply them practically. If this were done consistently by the church leadership, then much error, false teaching, heresies or other ungodly practices would be halted before they began harming the church fellowship and testimony in any significant way. As it is, however, we see many examples in various churches where heretical teaching is promoted, or vile and ungodly lifestyles are condoned and practised not only by certain members of the congregations but also by ministering clergy of those churches. (1 Tim. 1:3-11; 6:3-5) In another, but related, context the apostle Paul described such wicked 'fellowships' as 'synagogues of Satan.' (Rev. 2:9; 3:9)

## MATTHEW 24:12

As the present age (or 'the last days') progresses, this lawlessness or iniquity will intensify both among false professors within the church and among the ungodly world more generally. People will become more and more outwardly and openly depraved, and this depravity will affect certain professing members of the church. The wickedness and corruption of an ungodly world will infiltrate certain parts of the church by means of ungodly and irreligious men and women who associate with the church. Thus, the very practises that God's Word expressly condemns and forbids will be found even among those who profess to belong to the Christian church (although, in fact, they are imposters with no part or lot in the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10; Rev. 21:27). Nevertheless, when the children of God see these things taking place among professing Christians and in the 'Christian church' (so-called), some of them will become greatly discouraged. They will not remember that the Lord Jesus warned of such things happening before the end of the age. Rather, they will become despondent and their love for Christ and the things of Christ will become lukewarm, and then cold. (Rev. 2:4) Thus, these people will lose their spiritual vitality (although not their spiritual life or salvation), and they will cease to grow spiritually as they should.

Nevertheless, this should not happen to true believers–especially since the Lord Jesus has warned us beforehand of the very trying and difficult times that will come upon the church and the world. Rather than becoming depressed or despondent at the evil around and within the church, the true children of God should rise to the challenge. They have been called to represent the name of Christ by word and deed. Therefore, at such difficult times, the genuine believer should stand his ground fearlessly and consistently for the name and sake of Christ. If this invites even greater persecution against him, then he must remember that he was called not only to believe on Christ but also to suffer for his sake (Phil. 1:28-30); and, if the Master of the house was abused and treated shamefully, then it will be no surprise if the Master's servants are treated likewise. (Matt. 10:25)

## MATTHEW 24:13

This sentence should not be misunderstood. In the present context, the Lord Jesus is not speaking about the possible loss of salvation but about severe tribulations or persecutions that genuine believers might need to endure for the sake of Christ's name. The Lord had said already that many would not endure these persecutions but would depart from the church. These, of course, are people who had never experienced spiritual regeneration. The Lord is now saying the same thing in a different way: Those who *do not depart* from the faith and from the church–i.e., those who endure to the end–will be saved. Those, that is, who–in spite of the intense suffering, trial or persecution–hold fast to their faith until the very end, are demonstrating that they are genuine children of God, and therefore are those who are and will be saved eternally.

## MATTHEW 24:14

In this verse, the Lord Jesus makes it clear that his disciples were not to expect the end of the age to occur imminently. Much would happen before the end of the age, including the destruction of Jerusalem. However, this event alone would not herald the end. Many other events had to occur first throughout the world. One of these was the proclamation of the Gospel to all nations. The Lord Jesus knew that this would be a very long term project. Therefore, it is certain that he did not teach that the end would come in a matter of months, years or decades. Rather, it would not come until everything written in the Scrip-

tures concerning the end times had been fulfilled. However, the destruction of the temple would mark the beginning of these end times, as verse 15 indicates:

## MATTHEW 24:15-16

The 'abomination of desolation' refers to the desecrating sacrilege set up in the holy place by the morally and spiritually 'unclean' Gentiles or pagans. This utter desecration of the sacred place had been foretold by Daniel the prophet. (Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). Many Jews believed that this prophecy had been fulfilled in the days of the Maccabees. At that time, the Syrian king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes[53] (175-164 BC) had stripped the temple of its sacred furniture and ornaments (1 Macc. 1:21-23). Again, Antiochus had set up a pagan altar over the altar of burnt offering. In these and many other ways, Antiochus had utterly desecrated the house of the LORD and had turned it into a pagan temple dedicated to Jupiter Olympius (Zeus), complete with every vile practice. (2 Macc. 6:1-7). The Jews were compelled to make obeisance to the altar and sacrifices of swine now dedicated to Olympian Zeus. This perhaps is what they considered as 'the abomination of desolation' or 'the desolating sacrifice' (or 'sacrilege').[54]

However, although this grotesque and despicable event may have been considered as an abominating sacrilege, it was not the only one prophesied by Daniel. The Lord's words indicate that similar or even greater detestable sacrileges will be repeated in the future. One example of this was the trampling underfoot of Jerusalem and the temple when besieged and invaded by the Roman army in AD 70. When Jerusalem fell to the Romans, Titus and his army carried their imperial standards into the city and set them up within the city precincts. To the Jews, the presence of these pagan standards standing inside the holy city, together with their depiction of the Roman Emperor as 'divine', was highly sacrilegious and offensive.

Furthermore, as Gentiles, the Romans violated the holy sanctuary of the temple by entering those areas reserved exclusively for the Jewish priesthood alone. By so doing, the Jews considered that they had utterly desecrated the temple of God; which, in any event, the Romans were about to raze to the ground–thus fulfilling the Lord's prophecy concerning the temple.

Many of the Jews thought that the end of the age had come upon them at this time, or was very near. However, the Lord Jesus warned his disciples not be misled by these events. Yes, in a few short years, the temple would be desecrated and destroyed. Yes, the presence of the Roman armies would involve the Jewish people in a time of great distress and tribulation, as their homes and temple were overturned by the Gentile armies. Yes, the approach of the besieging and invading army would force many of the Jews to flee the city and the surrounding countryside and head for the hills. However, dreadful as these events would be, this would not be the end of the age but only the beginning of the end, or the commencement of the last days. And, shortly before the culmination of this present age, another and unspeakably vile desolating sacrilege would occur. This one would be even worse than the offering of pigs on the altar of burn offering, or the prostitutes brazenly plying their trade within the courts of the Jewish temple–as occurred under Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The ultimate abomination of desolation would surpass

[53] *Epiphanes:* The Jewish people altered the letters of this name into 'Επιμανής' *(Epimanes),* meaning, the 'maniac' or 'madman'.

[54] *The abomination of desolation:* For further details of Jewish beliefs on this matter, see Jewish Encylopedia.com under Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

all former types in gross evil and utter perversity, bringing down upon its perpetrators the righteous wrath and judgment of God.

## MATTHEW 24:17-18

Therefore, when the preliminary events concerning Jerusalem occurred, the Lord Jesus warned his followers to shelter from the invaders, and–with all those living in Judea–to seek refuge in the mountains and caves some distance away. Nor were they to delay or return to their homes to gather together their belongings. Rather, when they realised that invasion was imminent, they were to head for the mountains without hesitating or turning back.

What happened during the invasion and destruction of Jerusalem would be repeated in other lands in succeeding periods. The fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 did not bring about the end of the age. Nevertheless, it demonstrated what kind of civil and religious turmoil and instability would occur increasingly around the world until the end of the age. It is true that–throughout its history–Israel had been familiar with conflict, warfare, invasion and captivity. However, on all previous occasions, they had never lost permanently their place of worship, either in the form of the tabernacle or the temple. This time, however, the temple would not be rebuilt as the house of the LORD. In God's eyes, it had served its purpose. No longer would animal sacrifices be offered as atonement for sin. Now–in the last days–the Lord would work out his purposes for the nations until the end of the present age and the coming of the Lord Jesus in his glory. Until that day, however, believers on the Lord Jesus Christ were to proclaim the Gospel of the kingdom to every nation under heaven.

## MATTHEW 24:19-20

Yet, the Lord Jesus recognises the great distress that will be caused to many people in days such as these. Jesus thinks especially and tenderly of those in need of special care, including pregnant women and those with nursing infants. For them, the hardship would be all the greater. Therefore, those more able were to take care of such women, and also others such as the sick, the infirm and the elderly.

Similarly, the Lord tells his disciples to pray that these events will not take place during winter or on a Sabbath. Severe winter conditions would add greatly to the already grave hardships of flight and refuge, making it more difficult to climb up into the mountain retreats, or to reach other places of shelter. Furthermore, should these events happen on a Sabbath, the Jews might find themselves inhibited by Sabbath restrictions on work and travel. Again, animals that might have been used in flight would not be readily available but would have been stabled or pastured the previous evening in preparation for the Sabbath.

## MATTHEW 24:21

It is evident from the scope of this passage that the Lord Jesus is not confining his remarks to the events surrounding the destruction of the temple alone, but is beginning at that point and is extending his discussion to comprehend many successive periods (all falling within 'the last days') until the culmination of

the age (or, 'the end of the world'). Thus, when Jesus speaks of 'great tribulation'[55] in this verse, he is referring not only to that tribulation associated with the overthrow of Jerusalem and the flight to the mountains, but also to other periods of extreme hardship and difficulty until the end of time. However, it is also apparent from this verse that the Lord is speaking of one particular time of *'great tribulation'* that surpasses all others in intensity and that marks the imminent culmination of the present age. Never has such a period of intense tribulation occurred in the past, nor will it ever be repeated in the future. Although not expressly stated here, perhaps this period of 'great tribulation' will occur in conjunction with the appearing of the antichrist or man of sin. (2 Thess. 1-12)

## MATTHEW 24:22

(Mark 13:19-20)

So great will be the tribulation of those days that no human being might be expected to survive. Even God's redeemed people will be exposed for a time to the extreme trials and persecution of this period. However, for the sake of the elect, this period of indescribably intense suffering will be interrupted. In fulfilment of prophecy, the days will be cut short and the suffering children of God will be delivered from the teeth of this 'great tribulation'.

It may be argued that God would not permit his redeemed children to enter this period of great tribulation or to suffer in such a manner. However, we must remember that although God loves each one of his children with an everlasting love, he does not promise to deliver them from all suffering or pain. Indeed, we are told very clearly by the apostle Paul that we have been called not only to believe on Christ but also to suffer for his sake. (Phil. 1:29) The intense suffering of believers is exemplified in the lives of many of the apostles who were martyred for Christ, and in the lives of many others of the Lord's people over the centuries who endured extreme suffering, torture and death for the sake of Christ's name. Therefore, when the Lord promises deliverance to his people, he may be speaking primarily of deliverance of the soul (rather than the body); although, of course, there are very many occasions when the Lord intervenes to deliver a person physically or to shorten that person's suffering in the body.

## MATTHEW 24:23-25

(Mark 13:21; Luke 17:23; 21:8)

Even in the midst of this persecution, many fantasists would arise claiming to know the whereabouts of the coming Lord Jesus, or claiming to be specially privileged insofar as the Lord would appear to their group before any others. Thus, these people would point to Christ's appearing in one place or another, inducing many naive souls to flock to the supposed place of the Lord's second coming.

The Lord warns his followers against being deceived by these cultists or fantasists. From the time of the Lord's ascension into heaven until his coming again in glory, many individuals would arise at different times, claiming either to be Christ themselves or claiming to know when and where the Lord would return. These men, however, were false prophets or false christs. Such imposters were not to be believed or followed by any of the Lord's genuine people. The Lord Jesus warns his disciples very clearly that

[55] *tribulation*: trouble that inflicts distress [BDAG]; very intense persecution producing unparalleled suffering, sorrow, grief, or pain.

these false prophets or false messiahs would prove very convincing not only by their beguiling oratory and arguments but also by their outstanding demonstrations of supernatural power. By means of that power, they would be able to demonstrate some very remarkable signs, marks or tokens that would appear to give credence to their alluring words. Furthermore, by that same supernatural power, these false prophets would be able to perform convincing miracles and many other demonstrations of supernatural authority.

Yet, although able to perform supernatural works or miraculous signs, these were not divine miracles or signs from God. They had no connection with God whatever. Indeed, these false christs or prophets derived their supernatural power from the arch-enemy of God; i.e., from Satan himself. Thus, these men were the apostles or emissaries of the devil, and by these signs and lying words they were attempting to lead the people of God away from the truth and into the lie of the devil. (2 Cor.11:13-15; 2 Pet. 2:1-3; 1 John 4:1)

So convincing would they be, however, that even the elect would have been led astray by their beguiling words and lying miracles–had this been possible. Yet, God will not permit his elect people from being deceived in this way. Even although they may be misled briefly by such false ministers, the Spirit of God will make them aware of the truth and will cause them to forsake their error and their association with these false teachers. Nevertheless, God's people must remain alert at all times; for, even from their own midst (the church) such imposters and servants of Satan will arise and will attempt to draw disciples after them. (Acts 20:29-30; 2 Pet. 2:1-22) As the Lord Jesus implies in this passage, this kind of deception from false christs and false prophets will intensify as the end draws closer, and will be at its most intense immediately before the end–when the Lord Jesus will come in all his glory and majesty. (2 Thess. 2:3-12)

Therefore, having told his disciples exactly what to expect, the Lord strongly warns them against believing any claims made by the religious pretenders or pseudo apostles that would arise from within the church or that would infiltrate the church from outside.

## MATTHEW 24:26

(Mark 13:21-23; Luke 17:23)

Nevertheless, although the Lord Jesus has forewarned his disciples in the clearest possible terms, he still finds it necessary to reiterate that warning in a slightly different form. This shows us that the Lord considered his disciples somewhat dull of hearing (spiritually) or slow to appreciate the true significance of their Master's solemn words.

Thus, Jesus speaks of these false prophets pointing toward some remote location (represented here by 'the wilderness'). If these pseudo-ministers claimed that the Messiah had appeared in this distant and solitary location, and was waiting for his people to meet him there, the disciples of the Lord Jesus were not to believe this claim. This assertion was completely untrue and contrary to the Lord's intention for the manner of his second coming. Yet, even in more recent times, we have seen people flock to such locations and to associate themselves with some false prophet–only to perish with him when they realised that they had been deluded and deceived by their cult leader.

However, not all false prophets would point to the coming Messiah in some remote location. Some false prophets would claim that Christ had appeared, or was about to appear, in some secret room or private

location. There, he would gather his people together. Only those present at this gathering would be taken to be with the Lord.

This, of course, would be another lie of the devil. It would be completely untrue and would be yet another attempt to deceive the Lord's people and draw them away from the truth and from true fellowship with the Lord. Thus, the Lord Jesus tells his disciples not to believe any of these lies. Later, this warning would be repeated by the New Testament writers when they penned their epistles to various churches and individuals.

Yet, how were the Lord's people to recognise his genuine appearing for his church? The Lord answers this in verse 27.

## MATTHEW 24:27

(Luke 17:24)

The coming of the Son of Man will be unmistakable. There will be nothing secret or secretive about the Lord's appearing. Every eye will see him–from one end of the earth to the other. (Matt. 24:30; Rev. 1:7; 6:15-17) For, when he comes in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, it will be like a lightning flash illuminating the night sky. (Matt. 25:31; Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26; 17:24; 1 Thess. 4:16-17; 2 Thess. 1:7-8)

Just as lightning is visible not just to some but to everyone within sight of the electrical discharge, so will be the coming of the Lord Jesus. Everyone, everywhere will see his appearing and will behold his glorious decent through the clouds of heaven. Of course, unlike the lightning flash that is visible only in a certain region of the earth, the glorious appearing of the Son of Man will be visible from all points around the globe. His splendour and his glory will illuminate the entire heavens, and everyone on earth will see him and fall prostrate before him.

## MATTHEW 24:28

This glorious appearing is typified in the following proverbial expression, *"Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures [or eagles] will gather."*

Although this may be merely a proverbial expression, the Lord Jesus may also be linking it to the invasion of Jerusalem and using that invasion as an illustration of his own second coming for surprise and suddenness (although, nevertheless, this event was preceded by very clear warning signs as the enemy approached the gates). The Roman Legions bore down upon the holy city, besieging it, and eventually overwhelming it with their great power and strength. Significantly, perhaps, the banners and standards that they carried before them were crested with the Roman eagles–the same word translated here as 'vultures'. Beyond this, it would not be safe to press the analogy. However, just as the Roman legions coming upon Jerusalem were marked by their suddenness and surprise, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.[56]

[56] Nevertheless, the Lord's coming will be preceded by very clear warning signs. These include a marked apostasy from the faith, vile teaching and practises within certain so-called churches, increasing wickedness on the earth, an intensity of natural disasters, political corruption and instability, and moral, social and family disintegration at all lev-

Taken in an ordinary proverbial manner, as was perhaps intended by the Lord Jesus, the expression just means that wherever a particular activity occurs (the discovery of the corpse), there are clearly discernable associated events (the circling of the vultures)–and these events are visible to all.

Other explanations have been offered, but these should not be allowed to detract our attention from the very important remarks that the Lord Jesus now makes in the next two verses.

## MATTHEW 24:29-31

This verse is rooted in prophecies that would be well known both to the disciples in particular and to many Jewish people more generally. Likewise, they would know that some of these expressions were not intended to be understood literally but were expressive of unparalleled tumult, chaos or disorganisation among the nations of the world. We will note the prophetic references, but they are too numerous for the full text of each to be reproduced here. However, if the reader refers to them, he or she will see the connection between the Lord Jesus' words here and those spoken by the LORD God through the prophets.

The following list of references is based on chapter 24 of *The New Testament Commentary: Matthew* by William Hendriksen:[57]

> (29) *"Immediately after the tribulation of those days..."*
>
> *"...the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light..."* (Isa. 13:20; Ezek. 32:7-8; Joel 2:10b,31; Rev. 6:12)
>
> *"...and the stars will fall from heaven..."* (Isa. 34:4; Rev. 6:13)
>
> *"...and the powers of the heavens will be shaken."* (Isa. 34:4b; Joel 2:10a; Hag. 2:6,21; Luke 21:25-26; Rev. 6:13)
>
> (30) *"...Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn..."* (Zech. 12:10,12; Rev. 1:7)
>
> *"...and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory..."* (Dan. 7:13-14; Matt. 16:27; 26:64)
>
> (31) *"...and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call..."* (Isa. 27:13; Matt. 13:41; 16:27; 1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16; 2 Thess. 1:7)
>
> *"...and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."* (Deut. 30:4; Zech. 2:6)

From checking out the various references, it will be evident that a few of these expressions may be intended to be understood figuratively. Thus, when God's Word says *'...the stars will fall from heaven'* (cf. Dan. 8:10) or, '*...the powers of the heavens will be shaken*' these expressions may represent an out-

els of society. Latterly, this breakdown in world order and political and social stability will be associated with the presence of the Man of Sin (or Antichrist). (2 Thess. 2:1-12)

[57] *The New Testament Commentary: Matthew,* Banner of Truth Trust. Copyright © 1973 William Hendriksen. From reprint of first British edition, 1976.

standing visitation of God's judgment on the earth which may or may not involve physical disturbances to the planet. However, although some expressions may be figurative, others are not–for they are expressed in other parts of God's Word in narrative, rather than poetic, form. For example, the coming of the Lord Jesus is taught explicitly elsewhere in narrative or didactic form and this second coming should never be understood metaphorically or figuratively. We will consider the text of these last few verses in more detail below.

In verse 29, the Lord Jesus begins with the expression, *"Immediately after the tribulation of those days..."*

At this point, we must remember that the Lord Jesus was responding to the questions asked by his disciples concerning the fall of Jerusalem and the end of the age (which, probably, they considered as a single event). The Lord had spoken to them about the invasion of Jerusalem by the Roman armies and the subsequent destruction of the temple. Then, he had moved on to other great events that would occur during succeeding centuries, until the final or 'great tribulation' just before the end of the present age. Before he closes this discourse, the Lord Jesus will allude again to the fall of Jerusalem and to the signs preceding that fall. However, at the moment, the Lord is concentrating on those signs immediately preceding the end of the age.

(29) *"Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light..."* (Cf. Rev. 6:12)

Immediately before the end–and thus just before the Lord appears–the earth will be plunged into total darkness; a thick, pervading and unparalleled darkness. For a short but significant time, the sun's light will no longer reach the earth, and consequently the moon will be unable to reflect that light. The total darkness enveloping the entire world will strike terror and foreboding into every nation on earth. They will know that some great catastrophe is about to occur or that some great event is about to take place–over which they have absolutely no power or control. Therefore, in stark terror and abject fear, they will flee to the rocks and the mountains, stumbling blindly in the darkness, seeking for a place to hide. Perhaps, at this stage, many of them will remember the words of the Lord Jesus who foretold this great event and of his apostles who spoke of the end times. However, for those who despised the warnings of the Lord or of his servants, it will be too late. Thus, in their perplexity, confusion and unmitigated terror, they will call out to the rocks and to the mountains to fall on them and to hide them from the coming wrath. (Rev. 6:15-16)

"*...and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken...*" (cf. Rev. 6:13-14)

Whether understood figuratively or literally makes little difference to the significance of these words. If literal, then this marks the beginning of the end of the present creation in preparation for the inauguration of the new heavens and the new earth. If figurative, then this language portrays the cosmic-wide disturbances that are about to unfold, and which will involve this planet directly. Ultimately, however, these words express the complete transformation that is about to take place in the world, and indeed in the entire creation, immediately afterward.

(30) *"...Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man..."*

While the world is still plunged into total darkness, suddenly–and without warning–an indescribably brilliant and blinding light will illume the entire world and the surrounding heavens. This marks the appear-

ing of the Son of Man in his glory, together with his holy angels. So great will be the glory of the Lord that every living person on earth will fall down before him (as did Saul on the Damascus road (Acts 22:6-11)). Everyone now will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and Messiah (Rom. 14:11; Phil. 2:10); and that he is the Son of Man who has received an everlasting kingdom from the Ancient of Days–as prophesied by Daniel. (Dan. 7:13,22) Thus, now, all people on earth will acknowledge Christ as Lord and God of all. However, for the majority, this confession will not result in their eternal salvation, for it has come too late. Rather, they will stand before the Lord of all the earth for that judgment that leads to their eternal condemnation.

The phrase, *"the sign of the Son of Man..."* is probably an extended way of saying, *"the Son of Man..."* Some older commentators believed that this phrase intimated that the Lord Jesus would carry a physical sign, such as a cross, at his coming. However, this may be an over-literal interpretation of the phrase. If any literal signs accompany the coming of the Lord Jesus, it is his resplendent glory illuminating the previously darkened heavens and earth, and the glory of the holy angels who accompany him. (Let us remember the great light from the heavenly host announcing the birth of the Lord Jesus and on other occasions. (Luke 2:13))

*"...and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn..."*

From this phrase, we see that the glorious appearing of our Lord Jesus will not be confined to a certain part of the world or to a certain part of the human race. Here, we are told quite plainly that *all tribes* of the *earth* will mourn. Clearly, then, this appearing of the Lord Jesus in his glory will affect every tongue, people, tribe or nation on the entire earth–and in the heavens; possible, a reference to people travelling by air or in space. Those mentioned here are the wicked exclusively; as they alone will have cause to mourn when the Lord comes in his majestic glory. Then, those who–until this time, have ignored, despised and rejected the Lord Jesus Christ, will realise with great terror the error of their ways. However, it will then be too late for their repentance, for the Day of the Lord has come–and this is why they now cower in fear and mourn grievously at the appearing of the Lord Jesus.

*"...and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with power and great glory."*

As they watch, all mankind will see the Lord Jesus appear in all his majestic glory; for that glory will fill and completely surround the earth. Again, as they watch, they will see the Son of Man descending in the clouds with almighty power and majesty. Now, indeed, the Son of Man spoken of by Daniel the prophet has come to reign over his new creation. Now, indeed, the Lord Jesus who referred to himself repeatedly as the Son of Man comes now to reign over the new age in his eternal glory. Now, the King of kings has come and has subjected all rulers, people and nations unto himself.

Yet, before he begins to reign over his new creation, the Son of Man must gather his redeemed people to himself, removing them from among the wicked still on earth. Hence, the Final Judgment must precede the establishing of the new creation in peace and righteousness.

(31) *"And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call..."*

As soon as the Lord Jesus appears in his glory, a loud trumpet blast will announce the dispatch of his accompanying host of holy angels to the ends of the earth. The trumpet need not be a literal instrument of that name, but is intended to remind us of the ram's horn used to summons the people of Israel to the Tabernacle. Just as the sound of the ram's horn was trumpeted from one end of the Israelite camp to the

other, so also a similar blast will resonate from one end of the heavens to the other. In the case of Israel, the trumpet blast was intended to gather together at one central point all of the Hebrew people. At the Lord's coming, the trumpet blast will signal the gathering together of all his redeemed people–irrespective of their race or nationality. Thus, concerning the angels sent forth at the trumpet blast, the Lord declares:

*"...and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."*

The angels of the Lord will set out around the world to call every elect individual into the presence of the Lord Jesus. The apostle Paul tells us that those who are still alive until the coming of the Lord will be caught up to meet him in the air, while those who have died will be raised, their resurrected bodies changed or transformed, reunited with their immortal souls to join with all the elect people of God in the presence of their Redeemer. (1 Cor. 15:50-58; 1 Thess. 4:13-18)

In verse 31, the Lord Jesus has been speaking of his own redeemed people (the elect), whereas in verse 30 the Lord had been referring primarily to the wicked who–in contrast to the righteous–would mourn at this coming. As we continue looking at this passage, it will become more evident that the Lord is dealing both with the righteous and the wicked. When Paul speaks of the saints being raised to meet the Lord in the air, however, the apostle is concentrating on how the appearing of the Lord Jesus affects the righteous (or saints). At this stage in his letter to the Corinthian church, he is not discussing the fate of the wicked, although he does this elsewhere–as also does the Lord Jesus in chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel.

## THE PARABLE OF THE FIG TREE

***(Matt. 24:32-35)***

### MATTHEW 24:32-33

At this point, the Lord Jesus begins to recapitulate, beginning again from the signs preceding the fall of Jerusalem and moving through the ages to the signs indicating the end of the age. Thus, returning to the disciples' initial question, *"Tell us, when will these things be..."* (i.e., the signs indicating the imminent fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple), the Lord uses a parable or analogy concerning the fig tree. The Lord declares that they were to learn from this shrub. They could tell that summer was approaching when the fig branches became tender and they began producing leaves. This was a clear 'sign of the times': i.e., the imminent approach of summer. In the same way, when the disciples saw the Roman armies approaching Jerusalem to lay siege to the holy city, this would be a clear sign that the destruction of the holy place was imminent.

Similarly, toward the end of the age, unmistakable signs would herald the imminent approach of the 'great tribulation', and subsequently of the appearing of the Lord Jesus in his glory.

Concerning the signs associated with the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, however, the Lord Jesus declares:

### MATTHEW 24:34

Although the disciples could scarcely believe that Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed, the Lord tells them plainly that this will indeed happen–within their own generation. If we understand 'generation'

to mean 'contemporaries', then the Lord was saying that the present generation would not pass away before all these things (concerning the city and temple) had taken place. Indeed, this was fulfilled about 40 years later in AD 70 when Jerusalem was besieged by Titus and the Roman armies, and then razed to the ground.

However, by saying, *"...This generation will not pass away until all these things take place,"* the Lord Jesus may not have been confining his remarks to the fall of Jerusalem. If we understand the word 'generation' to mean 'race' (which is a valid translation of the Greek word, genea), then the Lord would be saying that 'this race' (i.e., the Jewish people) would survive until everything spoken of in these verses by the Lord Jesus had come to pass: i.e., until the end of the present age. In view of what follows, this may be the preferred interpretation; although the first cannot be wholly excluded.

## MATTHEW 24:35

(Matt. 5:18; Heb. 1:11-12)

It was utterly impossible for the words for the words of the Lord Jesus to fail of fulfilment. (Isa. 55:11) Everything must come to pass in the specified manner and in the time known only to God the Father. Indeed, even if heaven and earth were to be dissolved, then the words of the Lord would stand. Heaven and earth will indeed meet with a great conflagration and renewal at the regeneration of all things. (2 Pet. 3:7-12) However, even then, the words of the Lord Jesus will remain unchanged and unchangeable. What he has declared from ages past concerning future events will find its fulfilment in the new creation, in which righteousness dwells. (2 Pet. 3:13)

## DAY AND HOUR UNKNOWN

***(Matt. 24:36-51)***

## MATTHEW 24:36

(1 Thess. 5:1-2)

However, although the Lord Jesus told his disciples what signs to expect before the fall of Jerusalem, and what kind of signs would occur in subsequent ages until the end of time, the Lord did not reveal to his disciples exactly when the events leading up to and culminating in his second coming would occur. Indeed, the Lord tells his disciples that the day or time of these events remains concealed in the counsels of God. Therefore, concerning the day or hour of the Lord's coming, no human being could know before the event nor could they foretell when the event would occur. Even the most holy angels who served and worshipped in the presence of Almighty God where unaware of when the Lord Jesus would come again in his glory. Furthermore, the Lord Jesus himself was unaware of the time when he would be returning to earth in power and glory. The Father alone knew when these events would take place; and–at the present time–these matters were not about to be revealed to any person or to any holy angel.

When the Lord says that he, as 'the Son', did not know when these events would occur, he was speaking of himself as 'the Son of Man', not 'the Son of God'. In other words, Jesus was speaking from the perspective of his perfect, sinless, human nature (true Man) that he had assumed when he became incarnate. In this nature, he was subject to all of the limitations or restrictions imposed upon the human body

and mind. Although he remained perfectly sinless, he endured hunger, thirst, fatigue, and–from childhood–he was said to grow in knowledge and wisdom, etc. Thus, speaking as the perfect Man (or Son of Man), the Lord Jesus remained ignorant of the time of his second coming. (Phil. 2:6-7) However, in respect of his divine nature (true God), then the Lord Jesus would be completely aware of the times and seasons for every matter that his Father had planned from eternity.

## MATTHEW 24:37-38

(Luke 17:26-27)

Some very clear warning signs would precede the Lord's coming. However, people would become so accustomed to the 'signs of the times' that they would tend to ignore them or accept them almost as normal. Thus it was in the days of Noah. Because of their rank wickedness, vile behaviour, and gratuitous violence, God decreed to destroy the entire world of mankind living in that day. Thus, the LORD commanded his faithful servant Noah to build an ark to preserve himself, his family, and various animal species alive when God's judgment fell in the form of a cataclysmic deluge. (Gen. 6:1-22; cf. 2 Pet. 3:3-7)

During the many years that it took Noah and his workmen to construct the ark, Noah warned the people of the judgment to come. (2 Pet. 2:5) However, the people did not believe God's servant and continued to practise their wicked, vile and violent way of life. Instead of repenting of their sins and seeking God's mercy and forgiveness, the world of that day continued to live as though nothing was going to change. They ate, they drank, and they married–with no regard for the warnings issued over the years by Noah. Ultimately, the ark was completed; Noah and his family entered in and God sealed the door. Then came the judgment of God upon a world that had despised and rejected his word. Apart from those in the ark, all mankind perished in the waters of the flood.

In like manner, just before the Lord's coming in glory, the world of mankind will be hearing, despising and rejecting the word and warnings of God. As in Noah's day, men and women will descend into lives of increasing wickedness, vile behaviour and violence. Yet, they will be living as though nothing was ever going to happen to the world or to their lives. They will be eating, drinking, getting married–while at the same time utterly ignoring and despising the Word of the Lord concerning coming judgment. Yet, that judgment will come–when it is too late for impenitent mankind to do anything about it. Just as an indifferent, unbelieving and impenitent world perished in Noah's day, so also an indifferent, unbelieving and impenitent world will perish at the coming of the Lord Jesus to judge the world in righteousness. On that Day, the glorious Lord Jesus will condemn to hell every single individual who despised and rejected His name–now, He who is Judge of all the earth.

Of course, as in Noah's day, those who have sought refuge in Christ for their salvation will remain safe for all eternity. Their place will be with the Lord Jesus forever in the presence of the Father and of the holy angels.

## MATTHEW 24:39

Verse 39a says *"and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away..."*

This cannot mean that the world of Noah's day was unaware or ignorant of the coming judgment, or that it came upon them unannounced. During the entire period that Noah spent building the ark, he preached

to the people of the judgment to come and of the sole way of deliverance from the flood by entering the ark. During this period, Noah's message would be relayed by travellers and merchants to all other parts of the inhabited earth. Thus, all mankind would have been fully aware of God's coming judgment on the world.

Nevertheless, although they heard the warning message, sinful mankind chose to disregard or ignore that warning. They shut their eyes to what was happening, and they closed their ears to the message of judgment and also to the offer of salvation; because, in their hearts, they did not believe that judgment would come. Ultimately, of course, judgment did come. The flood, which God had said that he would send, deluged the earth, sweeping away every human being and other living creature on the surface of the earth. (Gen. 6:17; 7:21-23)

*"...So will be the coming of the Son of Man."*

Just as before the flood mankind refused to believe that judgment would come, so also before the appearing of the Lord Jesus mankind will refuse to believe that he will come–until it is too late. Then, the time of repentance and salvation will have passed. Then, will have arrived the time of separation of the righteous from the wicked, or the saved from the lost.

## MATTHEW 24:40-41

(Luke 17:34-35)

When the Lord Jesus appears in his glory, he will send forth his angels to separate the righteous from the wicked. (Matt. 13:41; 24:31; Mark 13:27) Then, of two men working in the fields, only one will be taken while the other will be left. Of two women working with a hand-mill, one will be taken and the other will be left. This principle will be applied to every area of life around the world. Whatever people may have been doing, some will be taken and others left. From those in their homes, some will be taken and others will be left. From those travelling or away from home, some will be taken and others left.

Ultimately, those taken will be brought together by the angels to meet with their returning Lord Jesus–for they are the elect, or the redeemed of the Lord. However, all those who have been left now comprise a single category–the lost, or the totality of impenitent mankind. Not one of the Lord's redeemed people will be found among them; although many who professed the name of Christ falsely, or who practised a vile and hypocritical lifestyle while claiming falsely to belong to Christ, will be numbered among the lost. For these, there can be but one outcome: eternal condemnation in hell.

## MATTHEW 24:42

(Mark 13:33)

The Lord has outlined the signs associated with the fall of Jerusalem and also with the days immediately preceding his second coming. However, he has not revealed the date or time of that appearing, but has left this matter in the counsels of his Father. For this reason, the disciples must remain constantly alert. They must watch for the signs of the times in the sense that mankind in Noah's day could have seen the signs of their times by considering the blatant wickedness and violence of their age, and by heeding God's message through Noah.

Again, some signs would occur in the short term, such as the besieging of Jerusalem which would presage the imminent fall of the city and the destruction of the temple, as foretold by the Lord. Therefore, since the disciples did not know whether the Lord would return in the short term or in the long term, they were to watch continually for his appearing. More importantly, they were to teach this message to the church, so that each generation of believers would remain watchful unto the coming of the Lord in his glory. At no time, however, were they or any other believers to doubt the Lord's coming. For just as the flood came upon the earth in Noah's day, so also will the Lord Jesus come back to earth in his own day. And just as mankind was judged in Noah's day and did not escape, so also mankind will be judged in the Day of the Lord and will not escape.

## MATTHEW 24:43-44

(Luke 12:39-46)

The Lord now gives an example of constant wakefulness or vigilance. With reference to a homeowner who desires at all costs to protect his property from intruders, he would observe the utmost diligence and take every possible precaution. However, should his vigilance cease for a time (as during sleep), the house owner may find that robbers had broken in when he had been completely unprepared. Of course, had the master of the house been aware of the exact time the thief would appear, he would not have slept during that time but would have remained constantly watchful and alert.

Of course, the Lord Jesus is not saying that homeowners should not sleep. The Lord is using an analogy which must not be applied in the wrong way. Jesus is saying simply that his disciples must always be ready for his appearing. They do not know the day or the hour, so (spiritually) they must not fall asleep or begin to think that the Master will not come. For, just as suddenly as the thief surprised the house owner, so suddenly will the Lord Jesus appear: That is, he will arrive like a thief in the night, or at a completely unexpected moment.

## MATTHEW 24:45

(Luke 12:42)

Since the Lord's followers ought to remain constantly vigilant, how ought they to conduct their everyday affairs? They should do so with wisdom (spiritual insight, as well as the application of that wisdom from above), faithfulness and godliness. (2 Pet. 3:10-14) The Master (the Lord Jesus) sets each one of his redeemed people over his household. They are each given particular responsibilities in looking after that household. However, whatever they have been called to do, they remain accountable to the Master; and he expects them to render wise and faithful service.

In view of what God's children know concerning their Master's return, they are to conduct themselves as though he could appear at any moment. This does not mean resorting to inactivity or idleness, but quite the opposite. Knowing that their Master will come back, but unaware of the time or date of his return, the Lord's servants are to work diligently at the task he has entrusted to them. In a hostile world, they are to prove themselves as wise as serpents but as harmless as doves. (Matt. 10:16) In relation to their service for the Master, whether sacred or secular, they are to prove that they are utterly faithful and reliable in all that they do.

Thus, these wise and faithful servants are seen to be administering their gifts, talents or abilities as God intended, and ministering to the poor of the church and of the world. In these ways, they are–as it were–providing food to the household at the proper time: i.e., whenever spiritual or material support is needed or required.

## MATTHEW 24:46

(Luke 12:37)

It is such as these mentioned above that the Lord will bless abundantly when he comes. They have been wise in their administration of God's gifts to them and in their work and home lives here on earth. Likewise, they have proved faithful to the Lord in all that has been required of them, and–in ministering to the needs of others–they have ministered to their Lord. (Matt. 25:40) Thus, they shall be blessed; for they have demonstrated their love for their Lord and Master by what they have done in his name–even although it may have cost them dearly on this earth.

## MATTHEW 24:47

(Luke 19:17)

The wise and faithful servants inherit their Master's supreme blessings. However, their diligence in the Lord's service has earned them the reward of greater responsibilities. Now, instead of being entrusted with the Master's household alone, the Lord Jesus will entrust to his faithful servants the responsibility for the stewardship of his entire possessions.

Of course, the Lord is using a parable or analogy to illustrate a particular principle. The point of the analogy is that those who prove faithful to their Lord and Master in lesser forms of service will be rewarded in the new age with responsibility for greater forms of service. (Luke 19:17)

## MATTHEW 24:48-49

Not all who profess to be the Lord's servants are such in fact. Among those professing faith in Christ will be many who have never experienced the Lord's salvation. Yet, they call themselves 'Christians'. They profess to follow Christ. They participate in the things of Christ. However, ultimately, it will be seen that they do not belong to Christ.

This is illustrated by the next part of the parable. Among those servants whom the master has placed over his household are many who would prove both foolish and unfaithful. These are termed 'wicked servants' in the parable. These servants (so-called) have no genuine concern for their master's household. Indeed, when they see that the master appears to be prolonging his return, they take full advantage of the delay. Instead of making the best possible use of the time afforded to them by the delay, they waste that time by indulging in self-satisfying pleasures with complete disregard for the needs of the master's household. Even worse, these wicked servants bully, berate and beat their fellow-servants, trying to coerce these other more malleable servants into assuming the duties and responsibilities which had been assigned to themselves. Thus, having abandoned their charge to others, these wicked and unfaithful individuals now proceed to eat and drink with drunkards or to associate with other similar company.

## MATTHEW 24:43-50-51

Ultimately, the folly of these faithless servants is exposed, and they receive their due reward. At a time when these wicked servants are least expecting it–and probably while engaged in their ungodly pursuits or pleasures–the master will return. Caught completely unawares, these wicked servants will find themselves arraigned before their master for judgment. Yet, there can be only one just judgment for the wicked. The master will dismember these wicked servants and cast them among all the other hypocrites. Yet, banishment from their master's home and service will not mark the end of their miseries, but only the beginning. For, in that place where the wicked servants and hypocrites have been cast, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The 'weeping' denotes unending grief, sorrow and remorse for lost and wasted opportunities, for persistent unfaithfulness, and for the fact that their present sufferings will never end but must be endured perpetually. The 'gnashing of teeth' denotes the bitter anger and internalised rage of these wicked servants when they realise the full magnitude of their folly, acknowledge that their punishment was just, and accept with the greatest reluctance that this punishment can never be shortened but will endure forever.

As we have said, this is a parable; but parables are designed to convey or illustrate important facts. In the next chapter, the Lord Jesus will expand on the truths of this parable and will teach the same general facts of this coming to judgment in other parables.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 25

## THE OLIVET DISCOURSE: PARABLES OF THE END

### THE TEN VIRGINS

***Matthew 25:1-13***

#### MATTHEW 25:1-2

The Lord Jesus now uses another analogy to illustrate his second coming: on this occasion, a parable of ten virgins awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom.

The ten virgins represent the kingdom of heaven; or, rather, those who profess to belong to that kingdom or who profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and his Gospel of the kingdom.

These ten virgins took their lamps and went out to await the arrival of the bridegroom (Christ). In verse 2, however, the Lord tells his disciples that five of these virgins were foolish and five were wise. This corresponds to those who are not prepared to meet the Lord when he appears, and those who are prepared.

#### MATTHEW 25:3-5

The foolish or unprepared virgins failed to take oil with them for their lamps. This showed a lack of foresight or forethought together with negligence. These foolish virgins should have anticipated the possibility of a delay in the bridegroom's arrival, and therefore should have known that a spare flask of oil would be advisable. Indeed, in their wisdom, the other virgins took such precautions and ensured that they carried with them spare vessels of oil. Not so, the foolish virgins. They left to meet the bridegroom equipped only with the oil that was in their lamps already, and which would last for a limited time only. Thus, should this oil become exhausted by a delay in the bridegroom's arrival, these foolish virgins would have no spare containers from which to refill their lamps.

In fact, the bridegroom's arrival was delayed. Therefore, becoming drowsy during the prolonged wait, the virgins fell asleep.

#### MATTHEW 25:6-9

Suddenly, while the virgins were asleep, a loud cry or shout announced the sudden approach of the bridegroom. (1 Thess 4:16) Immediately, the virgins were commanded to arise and to go out to meet the bridegroom. Thus, the young ladies arose and trimmed their lamps. However, while doing this, the foolish virgins discovered that their lamps were beginning to go out as their existing supply of oil failed. Therefore, in desperation, they appealed to the wise virgins for a share of their spare oil.

However, we must realise that the spare oil belonging to the wise virgins would now be required to refill their own lamps. If they were to only half-fill their lamps in order to share some of their oil, it was very unlikely that the partial refill would have been sufficient to keep their lamps alight during the arrival

ceremonies–which were only now about to begin. Thus, sensibly, the wise virgins declined to share their little remaining oil, so that they would not find themselves unprepared for the ceremonies ahead. However, they encouraged the foolish virgins to go to the dealers in an attempt to find the necessary oil. Perhaps, they would be able to find someone who could be awoken to provide them with oil, or even someone working during the night who would allow them to borrow some oil.

## MATTHEW 25:10

Thus, the foolish virgins set off to find a supplier of oil somewhere in the town or village. However, while they were still on their way, the bridegroom arrived. Immediately upon his arrival, the five wise virgins who had been ready and waiting for his appearing joined the procession and proceeded into the banqueting hall to enjoy the marriage feast. Then, the doors were shut.

## MATTHEW 25:11-12

After a while, the five foolish virgins returned to the banqueting rooms, only to find that the doors had been closed securely against them. Nevertheless, they cried out to the bridegroom for admission. Surely, he would recognise them when they called him, 'lord'. They professed his name; surely the bridegroom would not close the door against them now.

How wrong they were! The bridegroom heard their voices and heard their appeals for admission to the marriage feast. However, instead of permitting them access to the feast, the bridegroom denies that he knows them. Quite categorically, he states, *"I do not know you."* (v.12) Of course, the bridegroom was well aware of who these people were. However, he was aware also that when they professed him as 'lord' their profession was insincere and hypocritical. In reality, he was not their lord. Therefore, these virgins were wholly unprepared to meet the Lord when he came. Thus, they were excluded from the Lord's kingdom and presence forever. (Matt. 7:22-23)

The five foolish virgins represent all those who profess to follow Christ or to acknowledge Christ as Lord, but who are completely unprepared to meet him. Their profession has been false. They are as yet unprepared; still in their sins, and still under the wrath and curse of God. If their dim and failing lamps represents anything, it represents the fact that they had access to the truth (or Light of the world) but that they failed to nourish or improve on the light they had, allowing it to falter and die out, until they were plunged into (moral and spiritual) darkness. Thus, although they came to the very threshold of salvation, they failed to enter into the kingdom of light and life.

## MATTHEW 25:13

The Lord Jesus used this illustration to warn his disciples that they must always be on their guard; that they must always remain alert, watchful, and vigilant. They must never assume that because certain events must take place before the Lord's coming, therefore they can cease to be watchful or diligent. They do not know when the Son of Man may appear. Therefore, they must neither relax their vigil nor become caught up in any matters that would reduce their preparation for the Lord's appearing. Even although this was not to occur in the immediate future, yet they were to live as though the Lord could return at any moment. In addition to the personal vigilance and faithfulness required of the disciples, this ensured also that the many people who died in the Lord before his appearing would die fully prepared to meet him in eternity.

## THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

***Matthew 25:14-30***

### MATTHEW 25:14-15

The Lord Jesus now expands on the theme of vigilance and faithfulness, using the parable of the talents as an illustration. The Lord assumes that a wealthy landowner is about to leave his property to travel abroad for a while. However, the landowner wants to ensure that his property is managed wisely and competently while he is away. Therefore, he summons three of his servants and entrusts to them the stewardship of his estate.

Knowing their individual gifts and abilities, the master divides his estate among the three. Each is entrusted with that portion of the estate which is consistent with his managerial competence. To the most capable servant, the estate owner entrusts five talents; to another servant, he entrusts two talents; and to the third servant the master entrusts one talent. Although not equally gifted in business or financial matters, the master knows that they are equally capable of managing the different amounts entrusted to them. Therefore, he expects them to prove equally faithful with their respective sums of money. Then, having charged his servants with their tasks, the master departs on his protracted journey abroad.

### MATTHEW 25:16-17

Wasting no time, the servant who had been entrusted with the five talents went at once to trade with, or invest, his sum of money. Being a wise and faithful servant, he would choose the most appropriate and prudent method of multiplying his talents in the shortest possible time. Ultimately, however, and because of his careful and sagacious investments, he accrued an additional five talents.

Similarly, the servant who had received two talents set off to double his investment. In this he was successful. His prudence and faithfulness was rewarded, and he was able to reserve four talents for his master's return.

### MATTHEW 25:18

However, unlike the first two servants, the third servant proved unfaithful to his charge. Instead of seeking to multiply the sum entrusted to his stewardship, this servant decided to hide his master's money. It was not that this man was incompetent to manage or trade with his master's talent; for otherwise his master would have chosen a different servant for the task. Rather, the fact that he buried the money in the ground showed that he was too lazy to put his master's money to work, and to track its progress on his master's behalf. It was too much effort for him to trade with the talent or to track investments. Therefore, so that he would not lose the talent, he buried it in the ground until the master returned.

### MATTHEW 25:19-20

After some considerable time, the master returned from his journey. Soon after his arrival home, the master summoned his three servants to receive an account from them and to settle with them according to their prudence and faithfulness.

When the three men assembled before their master, the servant entrusted with the five talents approached his master presenting him with the original five talents together with the additional five talents that he had gained. We note this servant's sense of duty, responsibility and faithfulness toward his master, when he declares, *"Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more."* (v.20) From this, we see that this servant felt duty-bound to honour his master to the utmost of his ability. "*...You delivered to me..." "...I have made...*" Of course, this is the way each one of the Lord's servants should feel toward their Master, and this is how each one of us should serve him: duty-bound to honour him, from a loving and grateful heart.

## MATTHEW 25:21

Now, this faithful servant receives his master's commendation and blessing–and this is an indication of the rewards, duties and responsibilities laid up for those who serve the Lord faithfully during their life on earth:

"*...'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.'"*

The servant had been good: i.e., he had proved beneficial and profitable to his master throughout his master's absence. The servant had been faithful: i.e., he had proved completely trustworthy and honourable with his master's money, returning to his master double that which had been committed to his stewardship. Yet, this level of stewardship was only a foretaste of what was to come. Because this servant had proved faithful in the little that his master had committed to him in the present, therefore the master would commit to him much greater responsibilities in the future. Therefore, this servant is invited to enter into the joy of his master; or to participate and fellowship with his Lord and Master in his new and glorious creation.

We should note that Jesus is not saying that this man entered heaven because of his deeds–whether by his goodness, faithfulness, trustworthiness, sagacity or any other characteristic. These characteristics demonstrated that this man was a true servant of Christ. They were the fruit of an already renewed and sanctified life. Therefore, when the Lord Jesus invites this servant to enter into the joy of his Master, he is inviting him into his immediate presence so that he can receive his rewards in heaven for faithful service on earth. These rewards are completely distinct from salvation, which is an unmerited gift of God's grace. Nevertheless, the fact that this servant received the invitation to enter the joyous presence of his master is evidence that he was a true servant of Christ and not a false professor.

## MATTHEW 25:22-23

The servant who had received two talents and doubled them also received the same commendation and blessing from his master. He had proved equally faithful and equally profitable to his master. Granted, he returned four talents to his master against the other servant's ten talents. However, both servants produced the same 100 percent gain on the master's investment, therefore both were equally worthy of the appropriate reward.

Therefore, this servant too is invited to enter into the joy of his master. There, he also will receive his reward, including stewardship of much greater responsibilities in that new age.

## MATTHEW 25:24-25

At this point, the servant who had received the one talent approached his master. The first thing we notice about this man is the string of excuses he makes before presenting his master with the money owed to him. However, this servant's excuses are peppered with false accusations, misrepresentations of the facts, and downright lies. He accuses his master of being a 'hard man'. Manifestly, this was untrue. The master has specifically chosen three servants whom he knew were capable of performing the task required of them; some more effectively than others. The master knew also that his time spent away from his estate would leave his servants plenty of scope and opportunity to multiply the amounts that he had entrusted to them. Therefore, in these and all other respects, the master was scrupulously fair and just; and certainly not of a 'hard', intolerant, or demanding disposition.

However, to emphasise his malicious accusation of 'hardness' or intolerance, this wicked servant accuses his master of reaping where he had not sown: i.e., of expecting results where he had performed no labour, or of expecting results from those who were not able produce the results required of them. Again, this was an evil accusation against the master. The master knew before he selected this servant that he was perfectly capable of putting his talent to work and of reaping the reward. However, because of his own laziness, the servant was not prepared to expend the necessary effort, and therefore attempted to shift the blame for his unproductive returns onto his master.

Finally, the servant confesses that he had not put his master's talent to work in any manner whatever. Rather, he had taken it and buried it beneath the ground where he considered that he could return it to the master intact, without loss of value. However, by doing so, the talent had lost value–as the master is soon to note.

Then, the servant hands back to the master the one talent that he had been given to use in his master's service.

## MATTHEW 25:26

This servant considered that he had acted prudently with his master's money. He had not put the money at risk by making unwise investments or allowing it to be used for risky loans. Rather, he had deposited the talent in the ground where it had remained secure until his master's return.

Nevertheless, the servant's master does not view the matter in this light. The master has a completely different appraisal of his servant's actions. The master considers his servant as both wicked and slothful. He denounces the servant for his total unfaithfulness toward his trust and toward his master, and declares that his servant must be numbered among the evil or wicked of society. Furthermore, he accuses his servant of slothfulness or downright laziness and inaction. This servant had not been incapable of putting his master's talent to work. Rather, he had been too lazy to put in the necessary effort and to ensure that the one talent with which he had been entrusted profited his master in the long run.

The master then takes the servants malicious words against him and turns them back upon this wicked individual. He had accused his master of being grossly unfair and of requiring more than what his servants were capable of delivering. Manifestly, this was untrue and a slur on the master's character and reputation. However, had these false accusations contained even a grain of truth, or had the servant believed (mistakenly) that they contained even a grain of truth, then he should have acted accordingly and not as he did–as the next verse makes clear:

## MATTHEW 25:27

Since this wicked servant was too lazy to put his master's talent to profitable use, then the very least he could have done was to have invested the money with the bankers. Then, he would have received the money back with interest–a fair amount on even a single talent. However, by burying the talent in the ground, he not only deprived his master of the interest due to him but also returned to his master a talent that was now devalued on account of inflationary pressures.

Perhaps we should point out that there was no banking system in Israel as we now know it today. Money was handled by money changers, exchangers or 'bankers' who set up their stalls in the market places or in the outer precincts of the temple. Even so, it was possible to put money on deposit with these 'bankers', or to take out loans and conduct other forms of financial arrangements with these money lenders and bankers. However, instead of taking advantage of one of these arrangements to benefit his master, this wicked lazy servant did nothing–apart from hiding his master's talent in the ground.

## MATTHEW 25:28

The last two servants had been rewarded for their faithfulness to their master. This servant, too, received his due reward. The single talent that had been entrusted to him was removed from his care and entrusted to that servant who had ten talents.

Furthermore, the other two servants had been rewarded with greater responsibilities in their master's service for their faithfulness with little. However, this wicked servant received no reward and no commendation for his service. Rather, for this unfaithfulness and rank laziness, the servant was denounced by his master; and even this would not signal the end of his master's disfavour and disapproval, as verse 30 will reveal.

## MATTHEW 25:29

This may seem like an enigma or puzzling expression, but the essential meaning is quite clear. Those who have (i.e., those who have been entrusted with) a certain level of responsibilities, duties, etc., and who prove faithful at that level, will in due course be entrusted with higher or greater responsibilities. As they continue to prove faithful in service, so they will continue to be advanced until ultimately they receive very high responsibility or they accumulate very great proceeds by their faithfulness, diligence and integrity.

However, those who prove unfaithful with minor commitments (in position or money, etc.) will lose even the little they had entrusted to them. Since they have proved unreliable, untrustworthy, inactive in service, or apathetic toward their superiors, they will be relieved of all further responsibilities and dismissed from service. Thus, such a worthless person will end up of no use to anyone and ultimately impoverished.

## MATTHEW 25:30

Yet, the wicked and slothful servant will not rest in idleness for long. He had been entrusted with that which was most important in the eyes of his master, and he had failed to honour his master. Although he had been numbered among his master's servants, this man had shown himself to be unworthy servant and not fit for a place in his master's house. Therefore, since his true character has now been revealed to

all, the master does not hesitate to condemn this wicked servant to his rightful place. He commands that this evil and unfaithful individual be removed from his master's household and cast headlong into outer darkness.

'Outer darkness' is one of the expressions used by the Lord Jesus to illustrate the dreadful isolation, suffering, and despair which will be experienced by those who are separated from his holy presence for all eternity. It is another name for hell, or the lake of fire. Hell is a reality. Nevertheless, some of the expressions associated with hell are not meant to be understood literally. Rather, they are intended to illustrate something of the horrors, torments, and enduring nature of hell. Therefore, expressions such as 'outer darkness', 'lake of fire', and other similar phrases are not intended to describe the appearance of hell, but the nature of hell's suffering.

'Outer darkness' speaks of being totally unable to see (i.e., to experience) the presence, love, grace or favour of God for all eternity. 'Lake of fire' indicates something of the intensity of hell's pains or torments, sorrows and griefs for all eternity. Thus, Jesus adds these solemn words: *"In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." 'Weeping'*... is another powerful metaphor illustrating the never-ending sorrow and grief expressed by those committed to that place (Hell). '*Gnashing of teeth*' illustrates the intensity and perpetuity of the pain and suffering endured in hell.

## THE COMING OF THE SON OF MAN

## (THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS OR THE FINAL JUDGMENT)

***Matthew 25:31-46***

### MATTHEW 25:31

(Matt. 16:27: Rev. 20:11-15)

Up to this point, the Lord Jesus has been teaching his disciples about the events associated with the fall of Jerusalem; of subsequent periods throughout the church age, and of those signs preceding the end of the age. Now, Jesus teaches his disciples about the culmination of the present age, or the returning again of the Son of Man in his glory. He had hinted at this already, pointing out that everyone would see him because his majestic glory would illuminate and transcend the gross darkness of this world. (Rev. 1:7) Now, however, the Lord Jesus teaches his disciples what will happen when he–the Son of Man–returns to judge the world of mankind in righteousness. (Cf. John 5:22,27)

We note from this verse that the Son of Man will return in his glory. This is in contradistinction to his first coming to earth, when the incarnate Son of God took upon himself the form of a man–sin apart–and humbled himself, submitting even unto death (which had no claim over him, since he never sinned). On that occasion, he came as the lowly Lord Jesus in order to save the world. Now, however, the Lord returns to earth again in order to judge the world. Thus, instead of returning in meekness and humility, the Son of Man comes this time in the fullness of his majestic glory. He comes as the highly exalted One at the right hand of the Father; and he comes by his Father's authority to judge the world in righteousness. The world of mankind—which previously despised and rejected him, and put him on a cross—will find now that the Sovereign Lord Jesus will judge them as their thoughts and deeds deserve.

However, the Son of Man will come not only to judge sinful men and women but also to judge repentant, believing and forgiven men and women (or his 'saints'). These, too, will be judged according as their thoughts and deeds deserved. However, in the case of the redeemed, this judgment will be for degree of blessedness or rewards (or for loss of that blessedness or rewards) but not for loss of salvation.

We see, therefore, that what follows concerns the final judgment. This is not a separate judgment pertaining only to a certain period in the church's history, or pertaining only to the manner in which the Lord's redeemed people have treated the Jewish race or nation. To place such an interpretation upon this passage would be to take the passage out of context from the preceding part of the chapter and from the previous chapter where the Lord is instructing his disciples about events preceding the fall of Jerusalem and about events preceding the end of the age, including his coming again in glory.

Verse 31 tells us explicitly that–when the Lord Jesus returns with his glorious and holy angels–he will sit on his glorious throne; i.e., the Lord Jesus will assume the role of Judge of all the earth (without necessarily occupying a literal throne). This is the throne (or position) of judgment; the throne before which all mankind will stand silent; awaiting to hear the final and irrevocable pronouncement from the lips of the Judge of all the earth. Of course, impenitent sinners will know what fate awaits them; and will stand in abject fear and awe. The saints of the Lord, too, know the outcome of their judgment in advance (although not their degree of blessedness or reward). They will stand in reverence and awe, but with confident assurance in the atoning work of their Lord and Redeemer on their behalf.

## MATTHEW 25:32-33

Now, the Lord tells his disciples that all nations on earth will stand before him. The innumerable company involved here presents no difficulty to the Judge. He who can see and judge all mankind from heaven can see and judge all mankind though they were to fill the earth many times over.

The apostle Paul says that the saints will join with the Lord Jesus in judging the world. (1 Cor. 6:2) However, whether the Lord's redeemed people would be competent to aid in this kind of judgment, when they cannot see a person's heart, is highly debatable. It is probable that the apostle Paul was using the word 'judge' in the sense of 'rule'. It is certainly true that the saints will join with the Lord Jesus in exercising 'rule' or 'dominion' in the new creation.

Once the nations have been assembled to stand before the Judge of all the earth, the Son of Man will separate one person from another and assign them to one of two groups or categories. This is akin to a shepherd who divides his flock between the sheep and the goats, ensuring that each is placed in its own category. So will the Lord Jesus do with the peoples, tribes or nations of the earth. Those whom he classes as his sheep (those belonging to the Good Shepherd's fold) he will place on his right hand. However, those not classed as his sheep and not belonging to the Good Shepherd (i.e., the goats), he will place on his left hand.

## MATTHEW 25:34

At this point in his address to his disciples on the Mount of Olives, the Lord Jesus changes the title he had been using from the 'Son of Man' to the 'King'. Now, the Son of Man (speaking of his association with mankind) is the King (speaking of his absolute and sovereign dominion over all mankind). However, before he can reign in righteousness over his new creation, the King of kings must judge all mankind.

Thus, continuing with his analogy of the sheep and the goats, and turning his attention now to those on his right, the King invites this vast multitude to enter into the blessings of the kingdom. This kingdom had been prepared for them from before the creation of the world. And, since their redemption, the Holy Spirit had been sanctifying and preparing these people to enter into this glorious kingdom. This, then, is the reward kept in store for all those who are blessed by the Father, and who have experienced personally the Father's love, grace, mercy and forgiveness in their lives.

## MATTHEW 25:35

The Lord Jesus now tells this blessed multitude how he views their love and faithfulness. They had not merely professed faith in Christ, but they had proved the reality of their faith by their deeds or good works. Thus, the Lord Jesus tells them that when he had been famished, these blessed people (*'the righteous'* [58] (v.37)) had fed him. When the Lord Jesus was crying out for water, the righteous had provided him with all he needed to slake his thirst. When, on another occasion, the Lord Jesus had appeared before them as a stranger in need of shelter, the righteous (or the redeemed child of God) had welcomed him in and shown him generous hospitality.

## MATTHEW 25:36

Again, when the Lord Jesus had been found naked, these blessed people had had compassion on him and provided him with clothing for cover, warmth and protection. In sickness, the righteous had taken the time to visit the Lord Jesus; and, likewise, when incarcerated in prison or another institution, the righteous had gone out of their way to come to the Lord and to minister to him in his isolation.

In all these ways and more, those whom the Father had blessed had ministered to the Lord Jesus and fulfilled his needs. With love and compassion, they had acted consistently to relieve his suffering or to assuage his sorrows, pains, or grief.

## MATTHEW 25:37-39

However, in utter astonishment, the righteous will protest vigorously and will ask the Lord Jesus when they ever performed such works of love, mercy, compassion and kindness toward himself–especially, since they had never met him while he was on earth.

## MATTHEW 25:40

Now, the King gives these amazed questioners their answer: They had performed these good deeds for him every time that they had ministered to another human being in their need and for his sake. When the righteous had provided food and drink for the starving and thirsting masses of mankind, they were ministering not only to many needy people but also to Christ, the Son of God, in whose image and likeness these people had been created. Likewise, when the righteous had welcomed these impoverished and distressed people into their midst or into their homes, or who had enabled others to do so on their

[58] *The righteous:* That is, those whom God has pronounced righteous by his grace (or, the 'justified); to whom the Holy Spirit is imparting ongoing righteousness, and whose lives are characterised by the practise of holiness, righteousness and godliness.

behalf, they were inviting and welcoming the Lord Jesus Christ into their midst and into their homes. And what they did for them, they did also for the Lord of glory.

Similarly, when the righteous provided clothes for the needy, or when they visited people when they were sick, or in hospital or in another institution, or in prison, then the righteous were ministering unto Christ himself. For, among the many people to whom the righteous provided help, comfort, sustenance, encouragement or hope, were those who belonged to Christ and who were most precious in his eyes.

In this verse, the expression, 'my brothers', may be understood in one of two possible ways:

a) It may be considered as an interjection addressed to the disciples personally. We must remember that, at this time, the Lord Jesus was sitting with his disciples alone on the Mount of Olives. Therefore, the Lord may have been saying, *"...as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me."* Taken by itself, this sentence is complete; however, the Lord Jesus may have interjected, '*my brothers'*, as a method of addressing his disciples individually and showing them their respective responsibilities in these matters. In modern English, this would require a comma to be placed before and after the expression, 'my brothers', as occurs in the ESV. The fact that this expression is not repeated in verse 45, where 'my brothers' would have been inappropriate, seems to lend support to this interpretation. (Cf. Heb. 2:11) However, another interpretation is possible:

b) By interjecting the expression, 'my brothers' (inclusive of 'my sisters') into the sentence, the Lord Jesus may be making it plain that the least of these to whom the righteous ministered included among their number those who were the brothers and sisters (spiritually) of the Lord Jesus, and were therefore of inestimable value to him. These–'the Lord's brothers and sisters'–were the redeemed, but poor, suffering, abused, and downtrodden children of God in this world. However, although they may have suffered severely in this world, their reward in heaven's glory was absolutely assured. Meanwhile, the Lord counts as extremely blessed those who minister to the needs of these poor, afflicted saints of God.

## MATTHEW 25:41

The King turns now to those on his left; i.e., the 'goats' in the analogy. However, far from receiving the King's commendation and blessing, the Lord Jesus denounces those on his left and places them under a curse, or sentence of doom. The very first word that the King utters to these people is, *"Depart..."* Then the Lord continues, *"Depart from me..." "Depart from me, you cursed..."*

Now, as they stand before the King for judgment, this vast assembly of unrepentant and unbelieving mankind on his left hand side hear the dreadful sentence of righteous wrath and condemnation. They are commanded to depart from the presence of the Lord for all eternity. Never again will they hear his Word; nor his command to seek the Lord while he may be found, nor or his gracious invitation to come unto him and rest. These people had heard, and they had rejected every opportunity. They had heard, and they had neglected their soul's eternal welfare, or they had expressly denied the name of the Lord Jesus; or, in their arrogant pride and rebellion, they had treated that holy name with sullen contempt and disdain. They had lived a life of ungodliness, alienated from the true and living God in this life by their own sinful lifestyle and destined to spend eternity separated from God's love, mercy, grace, and favour.

Thus, the King commands those standing on his left to depart into that place prepared for the devil and his angels:[59] i.e., Hell. In that place, their sufferings will be so intense that they will be concerned only for their own personal miseries. They will not benefit in any way whatever from the company of others present in that dreadful place; because every individual in hell will be so caught up in their own personal sorrows, pains, grief and other miseries that the sorrows and grief of others will be of no concern to them whatever. The supposed solace of others of like mind will be the last thing on their benighted and tormented minds.

And, in that dreadful place of final and everlasting separation from God and his love, these people cannot die, perish, or cease to exist. This is because their souls are immortal and imperishable. It is also because their previously mortal bodies will have been transformed to render them incapable of death, destruction, or annihilation. This is why the sufferings or torments of hell–in body and soul, physical and psychological–are declared to be eternal (or everlasting).

## MATTHEW 25:42

But what criteria did the King use to determine that all those now being committed to hell were in fact worthy of hell? He judged them by their deeds. This, however, does not mean that salvation is by works or that God's favour can be merited by the performance of good deeds. It means only that those who perform good deeds consistently in the name of the Lord Jesus, and who live a godly life, are doing so because they already know the Lord Jesus as their Saviour. Those, however, who neglect such good deeds, and who fail to live a godly life, demonstrate by their inaction and ungodliness that they have never experienced the salvation of the Lord. This is the case here, as the following verses will show. First of all, however, we should note that these people were condemned primarily for the good they *failed* to do rather than for the evil they actually did (although the latter would count toward their condemnation). Thus, the Lord says that when he was hungry, *they had failed* to offer him food, and when he was thirsty *they had failed* to offer him a drink.

## MATTHEW 25:43

Similarly, when the Lord had come to them as a stranger, these people had ignored his presence, had failed to welcome him or to show to him the least form of kindness or hospitality. In their hearts, they had despised and rejected the stranger. Again, when they saw the Lord Jesus naked, these people had failed to provide clothing for protection, warmth and comfort, or they had failed to provide the means for others to have done so on their behalf–even although it was well within their power. In their hearts, they had considered the Lord to be no better than an outcast of society, not fit to be offered clothing or protection. Likewise, when sick or in prison, these evil individuals had failed to visit the Lord or to minister to his needs in any other tangible way. In their hearts, they had considered the Lord as one to be forsaken, abandoned and left alone in isolation.

Thus we see that throughout this episode those whom the King has cursed and sentenced to hell are those who failed deliberately, repeatedly and inexcusably to respond to the Lord Jesus by seeking his mercy and forgiveness in their hearts and lives and by failing utterly to trust, serve, and obey him as God required. For, had they sought the Lord, they would have been found of the Lord. Had they responded in

[59] *angels*: That is, the fallen angels, evil spirits, or demons.

repentance and faith to the message of the Gospel, they would have experienced the salvation of the Lord, as the Spirit of God enabled them. And, had they experienced God's forgiveness and mercy, they would then have served and obeyed the Lord–and this would have led them to practise the very deeds that they failed to practice. Their sins, therefore, were first of all sins of omission. However, to these sins would be added their sins of commission. And, for both categories of sins together, there could be only one just sentence–the sentence of final condemnation, *"Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."* (v.41)

## MATTHEW 25:44

The audacity of those standing on the Lord's left hand side (the 'goats') is remarkable. Protesting their innocence, they ask with apparent incredulity, "Lord, when...." The first thing that we notice about these hypocrites is that they address Christ as 'Lord'; indicating that they had deceived both themselves and others about their true allegiance–for it certainly was not to Christ as Lord, as subsequent events will show.

Nevertheless, under the pretext of being followers of Christ, a sizeable number of those included among the 'goats' will ask the King when–i.e., on what occasion or under what circumstances–they had failed to perform any of the duties mentioned or to minister in the name of Christ. (Others among the 'goats', of course, will not pretend to know Christ, but will stand condemned for their denial and rejection of him.)

Clearly, however, whatever duties or service these false professors to the name of Christ had performed had not been done from a pure, honest, sincere, and forgiven heart. They may have performed religious services and duties punctiliously (as did the Pharisees). However, like most of the Pharisees, they did so from an unregenerate heart. Their life was still alienated from God by wicked works (due to an unsanctified heart), and therefore they were still abiding under God's righteous wrath and curse. Therefore, no matter how commendable in themselves, any works, duties or services performed by them were to God like filthy rags.

Furthermore, it did not occur to these people to show compassion to those in need; to feed the hungry, to welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, or to visit those in prison or otherwise confined.

## MATTHEW 25:45

In spite of their neglect of these essential services, those standing on the Lord's left hand side objected vehemently to the sentence that the King had pronounced upon them, *"Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."* (v.41) However, the King makes it abundantly plain to these ungodly hypocrites–and to all others on his left hand side–that they are being judged as their deeds deserved: for, on every occasion that they had failed to help or minister to others in their need, they had failed to minister to Christ–the King and Judge of all the earth. In other words, and despite the claims of many among them to know Christ as their 'Lord', their actions–or lack of them–proved that they did not know Christ as their Saviour or their Lord. How, however, they knew him as the King and their Judge.

Included among those to whom these people might have ministered were those whom the King terms, *"...the least of these..."* Possibly, these were not merely the least esteemed in the eyes of men, but also the humble, sincere and contrite children of God. However, by failing to help these dear saints in their

need, those on the Lord's left hand side were effectively refusing even a cup of cold water to one of his own. Thus, they were denying any association with Christ and with his redeemed people. Clearly, then, and despite any claims to the contrary, these individuals did not belong to Christ.

## MATTHEW 25:46

Having shown why these people stood justly condemned and why they were being commanded to depart from the loving, merciful and gracious presence of the King of Righteousness, the Lord now executes that sentence which he has pronounced already. Every one of the 'goats will then be committed to eternal punishment. Comprising the vast multitude of the eternally lost will be every finally unrepentant and unbelieving member of the human race. This will include countless numbers who professed (falsely) to belong to Christ and who may have attended church services punctiliously. (Rev. 21:8)

From this, we see that hell is not only a place of everlasting separation from God's love, mercy, grace, favour and from any hope of future forgiveness (all of which is punishment in itself), but also a place of positive punishment for sins committed during their lifetime and unrepented of, and for their neglect or rejection of the person and work of Christ. In addition to these sufferings, those committed to hell will endure forever the torments of an ever-accusing conscience and other miseries of body and soul for their foolishness in despising or rejecting Christ or in professing to know him while living an evil, ungodly and hypocritical lifestyle. Furthermore, their agony of mind or soul will increase when they realise that there will be no further opportunities afforded them of repentance and no possibility of terminating their torments since their soul is imperishable and their bodies have been transformed into bodies incapable of destruction or annihilation.

In complete contrast to all this, the sheep or those depicted as standing on the Lord's right hand side now enter into the eternal blessedness which the Father has kept in store for them. These people will inherit eternal life in the presence of the Father and the Son, and will experience throughout the everlasting ages the fullness of God's never-ending love, mercy, grace and favour in the immediate, glorious and joyful presence of their Lord and Redeemer. With him the saints will dwell in heaven, and with him the children of God will reign over the new heavens and the new earth. This will be the culmination of eternal life; but only the redeemed of the Lord will enter that holy place. (Rev. 21:27)

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 26

## THE PREPARATION FOR THE PASSOVER

### RELIGIOUS LEADERS PLOT JESUS' DEATH

***Matthew 26:1-5***

#### MATTHEW 26:1-2

In the last two chapters, Jesus had been sitting on the slopes of the Mount of Olives answering his disciples' questions about the destruction of the temple, and forewarning them of many future events preceding and culminating in the end of the present age. The Lord had finished discussing these matters with his disciples by teaching them the parable about the sheep and the goats–depicting the Final Judgment.

Now, as the Lord Jesus brings this discussion to a close, he reminds his disciples that because the great annual feast of the Passover is only two days away, they must now prepare for this solemn celebratory event in the Jewish calendar. Although unknown to the disciples at this stage, this would be the last Passover that the Lord Jesus would celebrate with them and the last Passover recognised by God. For this Passover would be the fulfilment and culmination of the Passover sacrifices. It would be the offering up to God of the perfect, Paschal Lamb; once-for-all.

On many previous occasions, the Lord Jesus had spoken to his disciples about the sufferings that awaited him at Jerusalem. Initially, the disciples had not understood their Lord's words about suffering and dying there. Later, however, they had begun to believe Jesus' words, and they showed this by attempting to dissuade their Master from returning to Jerusalem. Yet, the Lord must fulfil his Father's will and purposes. Therefore, in verse 2, the Lord reminds his disciples once more that when they enter Jerusalem on this occasion, he will be taken and will be delivered up for crucifixion. (Matt. 20:17-19)

#### MATTHEW 26:3-5

(Luke 22:1-2)

Meanwhile, some of the religious authorities had gathered together to plot against Jesus. Among them was the high priest, Caiaphas. Caiaphas was the ruling high priest, although sometimes he was assisted in his office by his son-in-law, Annas—the former high priest. Also present were some of the chief priests. These were senior priests, but their office was distinct from and subordinate to that of the high priest. Among this group also were a number of the elders of Israel, supposedly representing the people. This austere group had assembled for their nefarious purpose in the palace of the ruling high priest, Caiaphas.

Acting in concert, these wily men plotted the arrest of the holy Son of God. It was their intention to arrest the Lord by stealth, or by engaging in underhand or cunning tactics to entrap him. However, to avoid the possibility of a riot or other civil disturbance, they determined not to make the arrest during the feast of the Passover when very large crowds would be present in Jerusalem and its environs.

## JESUS ANOINTED BY MARY

***Matthew 26:6-13***

### MATTHEW 26:6

Meanwhile, the Lord Jesus and his disciples had resorted to the house of Simon the leper, who lived in the village of Bethany. Presumably, Jesus had healed Simon of his affliction on some previous occasion, although he will still known locally by his former appellation as 'the leper'.

### MATTHEW 26:7

While the Lord Jesus reclined at table with his disciples, a woman came up to him with an alabaster flask in her hands. In his Gospel, John tells us that this woman was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. (John 11:2) Standing near her Master, Mary then broke open the alabaster flask and poured its contents–a very precious and expensive ointment–on the head of the Lord Jesus. Of course, Mary could not have realised the significance of this very kind and thoughtful deed, but it was a practical demonstration of her love and devotion for her Master, and one by which her name would be remembered.

### MATTHEW 26:8-9

The disciples, however, expressed indignation almost to the point of outrage. They saw this act of kindness as a waste of money or a misuse of valuable resources. Their contention was that the money spent on this lavish gift might better have been spent on purchasing food and clothing for the poor. This was a plausible, but specious and misplaced argument.

### MATTHEW 26:10

Jesus, however, would not permit his disciples to demean the woman or to disparage her act of devotion and kindness toward him. The Lord forbade his followers from upsetting and distressing Mary by their unkind and ill-considered remarks. Rather, Jesus points out to his disciples that Mary had done a beautiful thing to him. The disciples did not appreciate the significance of Mary's act of devotion; and neither did Mary! However, the Lord is about to explain to them what this anointing truly accomplished.

### MATTHEW 26:11

Clearly, the disciples' indignation was misplaced. Concern for the poor was commendable. However, serving our neighbour must never take precedence over worshipping and serving the Lord. The disciples' priorities were wrong. Their attention should have been directed toward their Lord and Master firstly, to worship and serve him above and before all others. Only then, should they have expressed concern for their neighbour, including the poor.

Mary had realised this truth. She had come to worship and adore her Lord and Master, and to serve him before all others. She demonstrated her love and worship for her Saviour and God by her actions. As we know from John's account of this family, Mary and Martha commonly showed kindness and hospitality to

Jesus, to his disciples, and to others. So it is certain that this family did not neglect their duty to the poor. However, their first priority was to worship and serve their Lord and God.

Thus, Jesus reminds his disciples of their priorities. The poor would always be found among them, and they would have ample opportunity to minister to their needs. However, their first priority should be toward their Lord and Master, to worship and serve him during the short time remaining to him on earth.

### MATTHEW 26:12

Now, the Lord Jesus explains the significance of Mary's act of love and adoration. She had performed this act to prepare the Lord's body for burial. Mary may have anointed the Lord's head without realising that his death and burial was imminent. On the other hand, however, she perhaps understood better than the Lord's disciples that he was about to die at Jerusalem, and had come for the specific purpose of preparing his body for burial in accordance with Jewish custom (although in advance of the normal time for this procedure).

### MATTHEW 26:13

It seems that Mary's act was not simply an act of kindness, love, devotion and worship. No doubt, these attributes contributed toward the Lord's commendation of Mary. However, if in fact Mary anointed the Lord's head in anticipation of his imminent death and burial, then she exhibited an outstanding measure of faith. Even the Lord's closest disciples could barely comprehend the Lord's words when he spoke to them about the sufferings, crucifixion and death that he would undergo at Jerusalem, nor about this resurrection. Peter had rebuked his Master for speaking in these terms, and the other disciples had accepted only with the greatest reluctance and reserve that Jesus would die at Jerusalem.

At this stage, however, Mary seemed to understand this aspect of Jesus' teaching and mission much more clearly than the Twelve. Apparently, she was convinced that her Lord and Master must lay down his life for the sins of his people. Believing, therefore, that this time was now very close, she had come with her alabaster flask filled with precious ointment to minister to her beloved Lord perhaps for the very last time before his death and resurrection. This exemplary exhibition of her love and faith called forth the Lord's commendation, coupled with these words: *"Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."*

Mary sought only to honour her beloved Master and Lord. She sought no recognition for herself, or praise for her act of kindness. However, her remarkable faith and devotion causes the Lord to declare that her name and her deed will be remembered forever. Thus, Mary's act of loving kindness and outstanding faith is set forth in the Gospel of Matthew as a memorial and an example of true spiritual worship.

## JUDAS CONSPIRES TO BETRAY JESUS

***Matthew 26:14-25***

### MATTHEW 26:14-15

In complete contrast to Mary's love and devotion, we now leave the sister of Martha and Lazarus, to meet with the enmity and treachery of Judas Iscariot. The first thing that Matthew tells his readers about

Judas Iscariot is that he was one of the Twelve. He was one of those select few whom Jesus had chosen and called to be counted among his disciples. Yet, from the beginning, the Lord knew that Judas would betray him, and that he would despise the Lord's Person and work. (John 6:70-71; 13:27)

From this, we learn that it is possible to be associated with the Lord Jesus and to participate in fellowship with his people and yet not belong to Christ. It is possible to be engaged in church ministry or service, or to preach in the name of the Lord, and yet not belong to Christ.

We should note carefully the nature of Judas' call: Judas was chosen and called as a disciple, and this involved preaching in the name of the Lord Jesus. However, Judas was not chosen or called to salvation and eternal life, as subsequent events demonstrated. In other words, he was not one of God's elect, chosen in Christ from before the creation of the world. Thus we observe that many of those who 'follow' the Lord (as did Judas Iscariot) are not necessarily saved (regenerated) individuals. Many of those who 'serve' the Lord or who preach in his name (as did Judas) are not necessarily true disciples of Christ. Like Judas, their hearts are not right with God. Although professing to be the Lord's servants, and acting in this capacity, they are imposters and charlatans. These individuals are still in their sins. These are the kind of false apostles that are ready to betray Christ at any moment by their plausible but distorted teaching or by their corrupt, hypocritical and sometimes vile lifestyles. (Titus 1:15-16; 2 Pet. 2:1-3; Jude 1:3-23)

Judas must have been plotting for some time how he might betray the Lord Jesus. At the same time, the chief priests and other religious leaders had been plotting how they could arrest Jesus in order to have him condemned and put to death. Thus, when Judas approached the Jewish chief priests to ascertain how much they were willing to pay for the Lord's betrayal, the traitor found a very receptive group of quasi-religious men. They must have been delighted at the offer proposed by Judas. Now, they could arrange for Jesus to be trapped and arrested quietly, and without fear of alerting the general population, who–at this stage–still acclaimed Jesus as the Messiah and King of Israel.

The religious leaders offered to pay Judas 30 pieces of silver for the service of betraying the Lord at an appropriate time and place. Indeed, so pleased were the chief priests with Judas' offer, that they paid the traitor the 30 pieces of silver in advance of his evil deed. Now, the chief priests had entered into a wicked and criminal pact to bring about the death of the Lord Jesus–the holy, spotless, Son of God. Now, Judas too had sealed his fate and brought upon himself the just wrath and curse of God: a sentence that would lead him to the lake of fire.

## MATTHEW 26:16

From that moment on, Judas Iscariot sought an opportunity to betray the Lord Jesus. The money he had been given was equivalent to the price paid for a slave. This shows the low value placed on the life of the Lord Jesus both by Judas, who was willing to accept this sum, and by the chief priests who considered this the amount worth for the person of the Lord Jesus.

None of these matters took the Lord Jesus by surprise, however, Jesus had known from the very beginning what Judas would do, and how he would sell his Master to the chief priests for the price of a slave. However, both Judas and the chief priests were greatly mistaken concerning their objective. Both believed that they were conspiring together to arrest Jesus in order to have him condemned and executed. They believed that, without this intervention, Jesus would have continued to teach and preach to the people for many years to come–and this they were determined to prevent.

However, in this, they erred greatly. No power or authority on this earth would or could put Jesus to death, unless it was authorised by the express decree, consent, will and purpose of the Father in heaven. If the Lord Jesus had so desired, he could have escaped the clutches of the Roman authorities, and death on the cross, by commanding ten thousand angels to destroy the world and set him free. (Matt. 26:53-54) This, however, he would not do; for he was about to die–voluntarily–for the sins of his people. Therefore, he personally–of his own will or volition–would lay down his life in accordance with his Father's will and purposes, and not according to the will and purposes of evil men or according to the unlawful misapplications of Jewish or Roman law. (John 10:17-18)

## MATTHEW 26:17

We come now to the preparations for the Passover. The Lord Jesus and his disciples had been making their way to Jerusalem to celebrate this Feast. During their journey up to the holy city, the disciples asked Jesus where he wanted them to make preparations for the Passover.

Matthew tells us that it was the first day of Unleavened Bread. The Festival of Unleavened Bread continued for 7 days, beginning on Nisan (March/April) 15 and continuing through to Nisan 21. The preparations for the Feast, however, would commence on the afternoon of Nisan 14 (Thursday). (We must remember that Jewish time ran from sunset on one day to sunset on the next day. Therefore, at sunset on the Thursday, Nisan 14 would change to Nisan 15 (i.e., Friday)–and so on for each day of the week.)

## MATTHEW 26:18-19

Jesus instructed his disciples to go ahead of him into Jerusalem, to a given location. By saying that they were to contact 'a certain man', it seems that the Lord Jesus was directing his disciples to a specific address in the city. Possibly, the Lord had made prior arrangements with this man to use one of the rooms in his home to celebrate the Passover. Clearly, this must have been a fairly substantial property as the room would need to be large enough to accommodate the Lord Jesus and his twelve disciples, reclining around a suitably large table. Therefore, although not identified in the Scriptures, the owner of the property may have been a person of substantial means.

The message that the disciples were to convey to this man was, "*The Teacher says, 'My time is at hand',*" etc…

Up until this point, the Lord Jesus had declared that his time was not yet, or that his time had not yet come. Now, however, the Lord knows that his time has come when he must go to Jerusalem to lay down his life in accordance with his Father's will and purposes for him. Therefore, knowing also that this will be his last Passover, the Lord sends his disciples ahead to alert their host to the group's imminent arrival and to ensure that the large upper room is fully prepared for the Passover.

The disciples did as the Lord had directed them and prepared the upper room for their Master's arrival.

## MATTHEW 26:20-21

After sunset ('when it was evening') and when Nisan 14 (Thursday) had changed to Nisan 15 (Friday), the Lord and his disciples reclined at table to begin the Festival meal. As they were eating, the Lord sud-

denly made an announcement that must have sent shock waves through the group of disciples: *"Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me."*

By using the word, 'Truly', the Lord was intimating to his disciples that what he was about to say was of the utmost seriousness and solemnity. One of the Lord's closest followers–one of their present number–was about to betray him.

## MATTHEW 26:22-23

In consternation and deep distress, each of the disciples began to ask the Lord Jesus if he was the one implicated in this heinous crime. The Lord's answer was precise: The betrayer could be identified as he who had just dipped his hand into the dish at the same time as the Lord Jesus.

Or, possibly, there were several such dishes around the table into which the disciples could dip their bread. The one used by the Lord Jesus for this purpose would also be the one used by Judas Iscariot.

## MATTHEW 26:24

(Mark 14:21; cf. John 17:12)

The Lord Jesus now declared that he–the Son of Man–must go as it had been written of him in the Scriptures. Nevertheless, the fact that the Lord must go to his death in fulfilment of prophecy and according to the Father's will in no way excused or mitigated the involvement of evil men in bringing about the Lord's crucifixion and death. They remain wholly culpable for their wicked deeds and will answer for them before the judgment throne of God. Thus, Jesus says of his betrayer, *"...woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born."*

Now, Jesus no longer counts this individual as his disciple, but refers to him merely as *'that man.'* We should remember, of course, that this impending betrayal did not take the Lord Jesus by surprise. The Lord knew from the outset that this man would betray him, and he knew that–although counted among the Twelve and commissioned to preach and teach in the name of the Lord–this individual was never a true disciple. As we will see later, this man was a child and servant of Satan. Thus, as Satan's agent, the Lord can say of him, *"...woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born."*

## MATTHEW 26:25

At this point, Judas Iscariot–who had not yet asked the same question posed by the other disciples–now asked the Lord Jesus, *"Is it I, Rabbi?"* With rank hypocrisy, Judas Iscariot addresses the Lord Jesus as his 'Rabbi' (i.e., 'Teacher' or 'Master'). Judas need not have asked a question to which he knew the answer already. However, to give the (false) impression of shock and distress to the other disciples, Judas has the audacity to ask, *"Is it I, Rabbi?"* The Lord's answer is explicit: *"You have said so"*: In other words, "The question that you yourself asked identifies and condemns you."

## INSTITUTION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

***Matthew 26:26-29***

*(Mark 14:22-25: Luke 22:14-20)*

### MATTHEW 26:26

(1 Cor. 11:24)

As the Lord and his disciples were eating their meal, Jesus leaned forward to take the bread from the table. He then blessed the bread, giving thanks to the Father for it. The Lord Jesus then broke the bread and passed it to his disciples. As he did so, he gave them this command: *"Take, eat; this is my body."*

This command applied to each of the Lord's disciples: those whom the Holy Spirit identified and sealed as belonging to the Lord Jesus. Each one of them was to share with their Lord in this unique form of fellowship.

The elements here–in this case, the bread–would be a familiar aspect of the Passover Feast, as it spoke of the unleavened bread prepared in haste by the Hebrews when God was about to deliver them from Egypt by his almighty hand. Until now, the bread had not spoken to the Lord's followers as his body. Now, however, the Lord Jesus declares to his disciples, *"Take, eat; this is my body."*

We must be careful to understand and interpret these words aright. Clearly, the Lord Jesus did not mean that the bread was his body in a literal sense, or that they were to eat his body literally. The literal sense is excluded by the fact that the Lord was present with his disciples in literal and bodily form when he declared to them concerning the bread, "...This is my body." Thus, we must understand the words, "...this is my body," in a spiritual and representative (or metaphorical) sense. "This [bread] represents my body", or "This [bread] symbolises or signifies my body."

Nevertheless, we must not consider the bread as a mere token or empty symbol. It is a very real and potent representation of the Lord's broken body, and it is a powerful element of communion or fellowship in the Lord's death. Both the bread and the cup are sanctified or set apart as holy and as a means of grace, indescribably beneficial to the believer's soul. It would be a great error to disparage, devalue or neglect this solemn and holy feast.

### MATTHEW 26:27-28

(1 Cor. 11:25)

After the Supper, Jesus took one of the cups from the table; possibly, the third of the four cups taken during the Passover meal. As he had done with the bread, the Lord Jesus gave thanks to the Father for the cup. Then, passing the cup to his disciples, the Lord said, *"Drink of it, all of you, (28) for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."* Here, the Lord Jesus is commanding each one of his disciples to share or participate in the fellowship of the cup.

On passing the cup to his disciples, Jesus declared, *"...this is my blood of the covenant..."* That is, the contents of the cup spoke of and represented the blood that would be shed by the Lord Jesus to atone

for sin under the terms of the new and everlasting covenant. However, since Jesus had not yet shed his blood, the words, *"...this is my blood..."* etc., cannot mean that the cup contained Jesus' blood literally. Rather, the cup speaks spiritually, figuratively or symbolically of Jesus' shed blood. Nevertheless, as we have said concerning the bread, the cup is not a mere token or empty symbol. Rather, it is a very real, powerful and essential means of grace that has been sanctified by the Holy Spirit. As such, the cup of blessing is of immeasurable benefit to the believer's soul. For it symbolises in a most powerful way not only the death of Christ and his shed blood, but also his real and living presence among those who participate in this Feast. (Cf. Heb. 9:14-22; 10:4-14; 13:20)

To neglect the means of grace provided through the Lord's Supper is to disobey the Lord's express command. To devalue or disparage these elements, or this means of grace, is to hold the body and blood of the Lord Jesus in low esteem.

### MATTHEW 26:29

So far as the Lord Jesus was concerned, this was to be his final Passover celebration. So far as the Lord was concerned, it would also be the final Passover celebration for all time. For, very soon, the Lord would yield up his body to the cross and on that cross would shed his blood as an atonement for sin. (Heb. 9:22) Thus, Jesus would never again drink of the cup in its present form. The Passover spoke of past redemption and deliverance. Now, however, the Lord Jesus was about to accomplish full and final redemption and deliverance from sin and punishment at Calvary. Therefore, there would be no further need to celebrate the Passover as a Jewish festival. Indeed, the Passover was to be superseded by the Supper that the Lord Jesus had just instituted among his disciples; and this Feast was to be celebrated until he returned. (Heb. 9:28) Thus, from this time until the inauguration of the new age and the culmination of the kingdom of God, the Lord Jesus would never again drink of the fruit of the vine. Ultimately, however, the Lord Jesus would share with all his disciples the new cup of fellowship in his Father's kingdom. (Cf. Luke 22:29-30)

## JESUS FORETELLS PETER'S IMMINENT DENIAL

***Matthew 26:30-35***

### MATTHEW 26:30

When they had celebrated the Passover and participated in the Lord's Supper, Jesus and his disciples sung a hymn. In keeping with the occasion, this perhaps would be the Hallel (Ps. 113-118, or Ps. 136). After this, the small group left the upper room to travel the short distance to the Mount of Olives.

### MATTHEW 26:31

While they were making their way to this location, Jesus astounded his disciples by declaring, *"You will all fall away because of me this night..."*

Jesus knew that this was the night in which he would be arrested–although, at this stage, his disciples did not know. Therefore, the Lord forewarned his followers that every one of them would desert him and fall away (temporarily) from their profession of faith in, and allegiance to, him.

Jesus now indicates that this event had been foretold in the Scriptures: *"For it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered'."* (Cf. Zech. 13:7; Ezek. 34:5-6)

Now, the time had come for the Shepherd of Israel and the Great Shepherd of the sheep to be smitten. But, when evil men laid hands on the Good Shepherd, the sheep would be scattered and the flock dispersed.

## MATTHEW 26:32

Thus far, Jesus has been speaking prophetically of his imminent arrest, trial, crucifixion and death, and of the effects that these events would have on his by then demoralised disciples. However, here in verse 32, the Lord Jesus is speaking prophetically of his resurrection. He tells his disciples that–after he has risen–they will not find him Judea where they now are, but in Galilee to the north. There they will meet with their risen Lord.

It is true that the risen Lord Jesus first appeared outside the tomb to Mary of Magdala, and then on two occasions to his terrified disciples who were hiding behind locked doors while still in Jerusalem. However, the Lord did not intend to spend time in Jerusalem / Judea or to appear there publicly after his resurrection. Rather, he intended to appear more openly among his immediate disciples and many other followers who were not of the Twelve. This, however, was to take place in Galilee and its environs, and would continue until his ascension into heaven.

## MATTHEW 26:33

Initially shocked by the assertion that he would fall away, Peter soon recovered his usual assertive self. With loud protestations, this apostle declared vehemently, *"Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away."*

No doubt, Peter was sincere–albeit, more than a little naive–when he made this promise. Although a physically strong individual, the fisherman-disciple failed to realise just how powerless he was morally and spiritually–at least until he had received the Holy Spirit's enabling power at Pentecost. Peter made a promise that he would be unable to keep. He promised never to desert his Lord and Master, even although–at this stage–Peter did not realise that this might have involved his arrest, trial and possibly the death sentence.

## MATTHEW 26:34

Jesus, however, soon corrects Peter's misplaced zeal, revealing to this disciple something of his truly weak character. This same night–before the cock had crowed during the early hours–Peter would deny his Lord and Master on three separate occasions.

As we will see due course, Jesus' words were fulfilled precisely. The strong, rugged and hardy Peter collapsed under some simple rhetorical questions posed by a servant girl and some others. Three times, Peter would deny categorically that he knew Jesus or that he had any connection with him or with his followers.

Here, we see that it is easy to assert our faith publicly when all is going well, and the faith we profess is either well received generally or at least tolerated by society. However, if for any reason our faith or beliefs are challenged openly by society or by the authorities, then it may be all too easy to compromise our beliefs to avoid 'causing offence' or to conform to government legislation that contradicts or seeks to overturn the unchangeable law of God. This, however, constitutes a denial of Christ.

### MATTHEW 26:35

Undeterred, Peter contested his Lord's assertion. His claim that he was prepared even to die with his Lord and Master might have indicated something of the desire of his heart. However, in the event, Peter was not prepared to risk suffering–let alone dying–with his Lord. His later disavowal of Christ demonstrated the true state of his heart. He wanted to survive, even if Jesus did not.

Nevertheless, all the disciples claimed with Peter that they would not deny Peter. (Judas Iscariot had left the scene while the group were still in the upper room, and therefore was not present during this discussion.) Yet, all the disciples later denied their Lord–most forsaking him and fleeing to avoid arrest whenever they saw the guards arrest Jesus.

## JESUS PRAYS IN THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE

***Matthew 26:36-46***

*(Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46; John 18:1-11)*

### MATTHEW 26:36

Having forewarned his disciples that they would soon deny him, the group continue on their way to the Mount of Olives. Soon, they arrive at the Garden of Gethsemane on the slopes of the mount. 'Gethsemane' means 'olive press', so this would be the part of the olive grove where the olive oil was processed.

Jesus then told his disciples to sit down while he went apart from them a short distance to pray to his Father.

### MATTHEW 26:37

Jesus took three of his disciples with him to the place of prayer. These were Peter, and James and John (the two sons of Zebedee). While he prayed to his Father, Jesus became increasingly sorrowful, and his soul was disturbed exceedingly. Of course, the Lord Jesus knew precisely what lay ahead. He knew he had come into the world for the purpose of suffering and dying to atone for sin. However, his holy, righteous and holy Person must have shunned the very thought of being punished for sin–albeit, not his own sin. He must have dreaded the awful wrath that he knew his righteous and holy Father must inflict upon sin, and on Himself–the sinner's Substitute. The Lord Jesus would have known also that his Father's utter detestation of sin would have meant that the Father would abandon his Son while he was acting as the sin-bearer and Lamb of God on the cross. Thus, for these reasons and more, Jesus became greatly sorrowful and troubled while he agonised in prayer to his Father.

## MATTHEW 26:38

Jesus expresses to his three disciples something of the harrowing sorrow and anguish that he is presently enduring. Indeed, we are told elsewhere that such was the Lord's anguish that *"...his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground."* (Luke 22:44)

In this verse, we learn that the Lord's sorrow was so intense that death itself threatened to engulf him. Yet, at this point, death would have been premature. Thus, Jesus endures the agony and perseveres in prayer to his Father. At the same time, the Lord instructs the disciples to stay nearby and to remain watchful or fully alert.

At this point, the Lord Jesus moved a little further away from his disciples and then fell on his face before his Father. This was a common posture for prayer, still practised today in many countries.

At this juncture, the Lord Jesus began imploring his Father with great agony of heart and soul, *"Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me...."*

Here is the Lord's agonising and heart-felt plea addressed to his Father in heaven. Jesus knows that his Father loves him unconditionally, and that he would never subject his one and only Son to unnecessary pain, sorrow, grief or suffering. Yet, the Lord Jesus knows too that his hour had come; the purposes of God for the redemption of sinful men and women must now be fulfilled–at the cost of Jesus' own life-blood. Nevertheless, realising how great that cost will be, the Lord Jesus cries out, "*Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me*...."

The Son is perfectly willing to yield to the will and purposes of his Father in every respect, therefore he uses the conditional sentence, "...*if it be possible...*." '...If there is any other way of paying the price of redemption from sin; if there is any other method of making atonement for sinful men and women; if there be any other means of achieving salvation from sin and its punishment, then let it be found.' *"Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me."* The cup, of course, represented the intense sufferings that must be endured to atone for sin; and that cup must be drained to its last dregs. In other words, everything that culminated in Jesus' vicarious and atoning death on the cross–his arrest, trial, beatings, mocking, and the crucifixion itself–must be accomplished in full and in the precise manner that God had decreed from the eternal ages.

Yet, even as the Son agonised with his Father in prayer, he knew within himself that there was no alternative. He must lay down his life, as it had been written of him and as he himself had foretold. He alone–the holy, spotless, unblemished Lamb of God–could atone for sin and reconcile fallen sinful men and women to God through the blood shed on the cross. Therefore, the Lord Jesus adds, *"...nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."*

In this, we see the complete subjection of the incarnate Lord Jesus to his Father. Although fully equal with God, yet he laid aside his position in glory, humbled himself, and submitted to his Father's will. Ultimately, of course, the Lord Jesus would be highly exalted and would receive the name that is above every name–that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. He who had laid aside his glory to achieve redemption would return again to his glory at the right hand of the Father and to his position of full equality with his Father in essence, power, glory and eternity.

## MATTHEW 26:40

After the Lord Jesus had agonised in prayer with his Father, he returned to Peter, James and John, only to find them sleeping soundly, although the Lord had instructed them to remain alert while he prayed. However, not even the sight of their Master's agonising cries just a short distance away could overcome the disciples' drowsiness. Exhausted with the events of the day, they had succumbed to their fatigue and fallen asleep.

On awakening him, the Lord rebuked Peter mildly with the words, *"So, could you not watch with me one hour?"*

Perhaps, the Lord Jesus is using the word 'watch' in its military sense, and in allusion to the night watches during which the Roman soldiers stood guard. These soldiers were required to remain vigilant against threat of attack from any quarter, and to remain alert throughout the entire period of their three or four hour watch. To have fallen asleep would have amounted to dereliction of duty and would have resulted in execution at the hands of the military authorities.

"*So, could you not watch with me one hour?"*

The Lord had expected Peter, James and John to watch along with him: I.e., to engage in prayer with the Father both to support their Lord and Master and also to receive strength from above for the ordeal that lay ahead. Thus, in verse 41, the Lord adds:

## MATTHEW 26:41

One of the reasons that the disciples were to remain watchful and to engage in prayer was that they might not enter into temptation. The Lord Jesus knew that Satan would be particularly active on this night and in the days ahead. He knew that his disciples were weak and weary, and therefore more susceptible to temptation and sin. He knew that if the enemy of souls, the devil, could attack his disciples successfully–as he had done already with Judas Iscariot–then the evil one could draw the remaining disciples away from the Lord (at least temporarily), or could cause them to attempt to hinder their Lord in the final hours of his mission on earth.

"*"...The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."*

The disciples may have resolved steadfastly in their hearts to stand by their Lord and Master and to support him in prayer. They may have realised how much they themselves needed to pray to God in order to be strengthened and upheld from day to day and from moment to moment. Yet, although they might have recognised these matters in their minds, they very often lacked the ability, the desire, or the will to put these matters into practise. They *knew* what was required, but were too spiritually apathetic at times to *do* what was required. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak.

Although realising the vital importance of vigilance and prayer, the disciples found it extremely difficult to overcome their physical and mental fatigue. Yet, in view of what lay ahead, they could not allow their minds or bodies to rest–however necessary at other times. On this occasion, they must remain awake. They must remain vigilant. They must continue to engage in earnest prayer to God.

### MATTHEW 26:42

After Jesus had spoken to Peter and the other two disciples, he left them again to resume his prayer to his Father. This time, the Lord cried, *"My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done."* 'If these agonising sufferings; if this dreadful punishment against sin and upon the sin-bearer; if it be imperative to abandon the Holy One under God's righteous wrath and judgment while atonement is made on the cross of shame and suffering, then let your will be done. I will 'drink this cup'. I will endure the indescribable agonies of your holy wrath. In everything, I will submit to the will of My Father in heaven.'

### MATTHEW 26:43-44

When he had finished praying a second time, the Lord Jesus returned to his disciples–only to find them sound asleep again. Although the Lord had warned them to remain on their guard and to engage in earnest prayer, the disciples were so overcome with weariness that they could no longer keep their eyes open. Thus, once again Jesus leaves them and returns to pray to his Father a third time, crying out in the same kind of agonies as before.

### MATTHEW 26:45

After he had prayed the third time, Jesus returned to arouse his sleeping disciples. He tells them to *"Sleep and take their rest later on."* This was not the time for resting. Now, was the moment when the Lord Jesus would be betrayed into the hands of sinful men. Therefore, the disciples would need to remain fully alert.

### MATTHEW 26:46

The Lord Jesus then instructs his eleven disciples to arise and depart from that place. *"The betrayer is at hand."* Even before he arrived at the scene, Jesus knew that Judas Iscariot was coming to betray him, and that the traitor would be accompanied by a large crowd.

## JESUS' BETRAYAL AND ARREST

***Matthew 26:47-56***

*(Mark 14:43-50; Luke 22:47-53; John 18:1-11)*

### MATTHEW 26:47

While the Lord Jesus was still uttering these words, the betrayer appeared on the scene. Judas Iscariot is termed 'one of the twelve'; but he was never one of the twelve in the sense of being a true disciple of Jesus Christ. His activities as a thief (while treasurer to the apostolic group) testifies to this. Jesus Iscariot had never committed himself wholeheartedly to Christ or to his cause. He had never acknowledged Christ as his Lord and Master, and Judas had never experienced the life-transforming power of the Holy Spirit. He was yet in his sins. He was abiding still under the wrath and curse of God. Even now, the betrayer was acting in concert with the chief priests, and with the evil one himself whom he served willingly.

Following close behind the traitor as he approached the Lord Jesus was a disorderly mob brandishing swords and clubs, suitably equipped for seizing a desperate, highly dangerous and heavily armed criminal. This motley assortment of rabble rousers and temple guards had been despatched with the tacit approval of the Jewish elder and chief priests to arrest the Lord Jesus. Now, this band of weapon-wielding mobsters descended in force upon the Lord Jesus and his disciples, shattering the peace and quietness of the Garden of Gethsemane.

## MATTHEW 26:48

As if it were not bad enough for Judas to point out the Lord Jesus to those bent on arresting him, the betrayer had arranged to identify Jesus with a sign. The man to whom Judas would extend the familiar kiss of peace and greeting would be the Lord Jesus.

It is absolutely unbelievable to realise that Judas could so lower himself as to use this sign to betray the Lord and Master. In the East, this kiss of loyalty, greeting and friendship was held in the highest esteem. It was considered a sacred sign among its participants, and it exhibited the closest bond of fellowship, communion and friendship among those who exchanged this solemn greeting. To abuse or misuse the sign was to exhibit the utmost contempt not only for the sign itself but also for that which it signified: the bond of friendship, fellowship and communion (or common union).

In this act, we see were Judas really stood in his fellowship and communion with Christ. He was a false apostle; one who had professed to follow Christ, but who had done so deceitfully. And, as an apostate from his profession of faith, he fell into the category of those who repudiate Christ and who despise the grace of God. He had shown himself to be a child of the devil; and, as a child of perdition, he would perish for all eternity. (John 17:12 (cf. 2 Thess. 2:3); Heb. 10:26-31, 38-39)

## MATTHEW 26:49-50

Then, the traitor comes up to the Lord Jesus, saying to him, "*Greetings, Rabbi*!" and following this exchange with the customary and familiar kiss. Judas had the audacity to extend to the Lord and Saviour the kiss of friendship–knowing that by so doing he is in the process of betraying him. Judas addresses the Lord as "Rabbi"–the familiar Jewish term for a respected religious tutor or teacher. However, the son of Iscariot does not submit either to Jesus as his Rabbi or to his Rabbi's teaching.

Most reprehensible of all, perhaps, was when Judas betrayed the Master with the kiss of peace, fellowship, and communion. However, in Judas' case, this was the pre-arranged sign that would single out Jesus from among his disciples as the person to be arrested.

The Lord Jesus, of course, knew what Judas was doing; therefore, the Lord replied to him, *"Friend, do what you came to do."*

From the beginning, the Lord had known that one of the twelve would betray him (John 6:64), and he knew that Judas was a son of the devil rather than a child of God. (John 6:70-71) Yet, even as Judas betrays the holy Son of God, Jesus addresses him as "*friend*." Judas had used the kiss to express friendship to Jesus–although he had done so in pretence, as a hypocrite. However, when Jesus addressed the traitor as 'friend', he did so with honesty and sincerity. Judas had sealed his own fate. He had yielded himself to the service of Satan; and, as the son of perdition, he would suffer with Satan and perish. How-

ever, Jesus still saw him as a friend; albeit, a friend who had placed himself outside the pale of redemption. His actions now and subsequently would preclude all possibility of true and godly repentance; and sorrow or remorse would never avail to achieve his forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Knowing this, Judas would later avail himself of the only option he could see to end his utter despair. (Matt. 27:5)

As soon as Judas had kissed the Lord Jesus, the guards among the crowd moved forward immediately to seize and arrest the Master.

## MATTHEW 26:51

Initially, these events must have instilled deep shock and dismay into the hearts of the disciples. Much to their astonishment, their beloved Lord and Master was now being arrested. The Lord Jesus had told them previously that these events would take place, but the disciples were slow of heart to understand and believe. Now, however, they saw Jesus being seized before their very eyes.

However, upon recovering from his initial shock, one of the disciples stepped forward with a drawn sword and struck the high priest's servant, severing his right ear. (John tells us that this disciple was Peter and that the high priest's servant was Malchus. (John 18:10)) Peter had promised never to forsake his Master; and, if need be, even to die with him. Now, this disciple was demonstrating that he meant to fulfil his promise. On subsequent occasions, however, Peter's faith would falter; he would lose his boldness and confidence, and he would deny any knowledge of his Lord and Master.

The fact that the high priest's servant was present with the arresting party indicated that the soldiers or temple guards were acting with the express authority not only of the chief priests who were known to be plotting Jesus' death but also and more significantly of the high priest himself. This, in turn, indicated that Jesus' arrest had been orchestrated by the entire religious hierarchy–although, perhaps, not with the consent of every individual member.

Yet, although all these evil events originated with sinful men, these men could not have put their plan into effect unless the providence of God in heaven had permitted or decreed it. Sinful men remain wholly responsible to God for all their evil thoughts, plans and purposes, and for the execution of these plans. However, the Lord God remains in sovereign or absolute control of what man can and cannot do, and of when they can or cannot act. Ultimately, God turns the intentions and actions of evil men to accomplish his own plans and purposes in the manner that he himself has decreed from eternity. This was the case here, where God's express purposes for his Son and for the redemption of lost men and women was achieved through the actions of evil men, and notwithstanding their plans to destroy the Redeemer of the world–in which plan they manifestly and monumentally failed.

## MATTHEW 26:52

Peter had attempted to protect his Master by use of force, causing injury to a lawful servant of the high priest. (Jesus healed the unfortunate servant immediately.) The Lord Jesus, however, rebuked Peter for his precipitous action. Wielding the sword of judgment or wrath was no way in which to inaugurate or to extend the kingdom of heaven. On previous occasions, the Lord had told his disciples that his kingdom was not of this world (or age), nor would it be established on earth like the existing kingdoms of this world. (John 18:36) Therefore, there was no place for the weapons of this world in the kingdom of the world to come.

God had appointed magistrates and judges to 'bear the sword' or to exercise rule, authority, and judgment in the civil realm and in that realm to maintain peace and security, if necessary restored by force of arms at the hands of the lawfully appointed military forces; in this case, the Roman authorities maintaining the *Pax Romana*. (Rom. 13:1-4) Magistrates and judges were empowered by God to pass sentences that could involve either corporal or capital punishment; although, under Roman law, they reserved the execution of the death penalty to the Roman judiciary and other law officers alone.

Peter, however, had acted in character but completely out-of-order, unwisely, and unjustly. Attempting to prevent the arrest of his Master, Peter had assaulted a servant of the high priest who was accompanying the arresting officers. Even although these men were about to detain a completely innocent Victim, they were acting under the orders of their superiors and in accordance with their duties as officers of the law; who–unlike Peter–had been empowered to exercise force of arms if required. The blame did not so much lie with these officers of the law who were acting under orders, as with the religious authorities who issued the order to arrest the Lord Jesus based on fabricated accusations and false evidence. Of course, blame lay also with the unruly mob that accompanied the arresting officers–because this crowd had no lawful part in the proceedings. Indeed, they constituted no more than a crowd of rabble-rousers.

Jesus therefore commands Peter to return the sword to its sheath. Then, the Lord issues the disciple with this stern warning: "*…For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.*" If a person is determined to live by violent means, then by violent means he will die. This is not to say that there is no place for lawful and forceful defensive actions in society. However, it is to assert most categorically that there is no place for physically violent means in extending the kingdom of heaven or in imposing it upon others. The forceful or violent imposition of the Gospel or of the kingdom message is mutually incompatible with the spiritual nature of the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God.

## MATTHEW 26:53

The Son of God had no need to resort to human defences for his protection or deliverance. It was not men but God who determined the outcome of events and the destiny of men and nations. Had it accorded with the will of God, the Lord Jesus could have appealed to his Father in heaven to despatch immediately twelve legions of angels. Of course, the Lord did not need the assistance of these mighty, glorious, holy, celestial beings. However, Jesus was making the point that the wrath of man is futile against the sovereign and almighty power of God and of his glorious heavenly hosts.

If taken literally rather than figuratively (speaking of an innumerable company represented by 'twelve legions'), the twelve legions would have amounted to 72,000 holy angels, assuming a single Roman legion constituted 6,000 men-at-arms.

## MATTHEW 26:54

However, although it remained entirely possible for the Lord Jesus to have delivered himself from the hands of evil men, or to have called upon the holy angels to achieve the same objective, this would not have accorded with the plan and purposes of God. From eternity, God had decreed the redemption of sinful men and women through the atoning sacrifice of his one and only Son. That decree had been made known in the Scriptures, and these prophetic Scriptures must now be fulfilled. Therefore, if salvation were to be accomplished through the Lord's death and resurrection, Jesus could not seek any deliverance which obviated his sufferings and death on the cross.

## MATTHEW 26:55

Now, however, the Lord Jesus turns his attention to the angry and clamouring mob. Not satisfied with leaving the matter in the hands of the temple guards or delegated soldiers, this unruly mob had accompanied the arresting officers. However, the mob had come bearing swords and clubs as though they were acting like a posse gathered together to help round up an armed and dangerous criminal. Yet, unbelievably, many of these were the same people who had listened attentively to Jesus as he had taught daily in the temple or the temple precincts. Yet, although they might have detained the Lord Jesus on any one of those occasions, they were afraid to do so until they had gathered sufficient numbers suitably equipped with cudgels, staves and other crude weapons.

Thus we see that it was not only the religious hierarchy who were guilty of rank hypocrisy and ungodliness. Many of the common people who attended the temple and its religious services were guilty of the same hypocrisy and ungodliness. They had a form of godliness, devoid of the power of godliness.

So it is today. Many who attend a place of worship may appear to be very religious, godly and upright individuals. However, God knows the hearts of all men. Ultimately, many who now profess faith in Christ will be found to be deniers and enemies of the cross and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Not all who are within the fold are the sheep of God's flock. Wolves, too, often manage to infiltrate the fold to harass the sheep. Ultimately, however, the Good Shepherd will deal with them according to their true nature.

## MATTHEW 26:56

Yet, none of these events surprised the Lord Jesus. He knew that all these things and more had to take place, for so it had been written in the Scriptures of truth. However, when the disciples realised that Jesus was not going to resist arrest or to effect his deliverance, great apprehension and dread overcame them. Fearing for their lives, they abandoned the Lord Jesus and fled the scene. Whatever was to happen to the Lord Jesus, they did not want to become involved.

This, too, is a sin of which the believer can become guilty–abandoning or denying our profession of faith in Christ through fear of the consequences. Yet, the Lord calls on each one of us to stand by our faith confidently and courageously, and in spite of the possible consequences–even if this means abuse or suffering for the sake of Christ's name. We must remember that we do not stand for Christ in our own strength but in the strength and power of God most high operating in us and through us by means of his Holy Spirit. Ungodly or unspiritual men and women may oppose us vehemently. However, against the almighty power of God's Holy Spirit, their spirits must falter, fail and be utterly discomfited.

## MATTHEW 26:57

The arresting party then escorted Jesus under arms to the high priest. From Luke and John's accounts, we learn that it was the high priest's 'house' (i.e., his palace and court) to which Jesus was taken from the suitability and convenience of this location (cf. v.58; see also Luke 22:54-55; John 18:15).

We note that the scribes and elders were also waiting with the high priest; so, clearly, this gathering and the arrest of the Lord Jesus had been pre-arranged. The high priest was accompanied by the scribes, who were both interpreters and teachers of the law. The elders were representatives of the Jewish people and of the congregation.

## MATTHEW 26:58

One of Jesus' disciples who had forsaken him initially now turned back to follow his Master from a safe distance. This was Peter. Peter was anxious to see what would become of the Lord Jesus, so he continued to follow him as far as the courtyard of the high priest. Many servants and soldiers would have been milling about or coming and going in this busy location, so Peter thought it would be safe for him to mix with the crowd. Thus, believing he would not be noticed, this disciple sat down near a group of soldiers–almost certainly, distinct from the group that had just escorted the Lord Jesus into the presence of the high priest.

Peter determined to wait in the high priest's courtyard until he learned of the Lord Jesus' fate at the hands of the Jews. Little did Peter realise at this time that the Lord's 'fate' did not lie in the hands of the Jews or of any other human power or authority. Rather, the Lord's destiny–which had been predetermined from the eternal ages–lay in the hands of his Father in heaven.

## MATTHEW 26:59-61

With Jesus standing before the chief priests and the entire Council, his accusers attempted to obtain evidence against the Lord; but in this they proved wholly unsuccessful. No adverse testimony could be found; because no competent, reliable and trustworthy witnesses were prepared to testify against the holy Son of God.

Even although the religious authorities managed to find many who were willing to provide false testimony, their testimony could not be made to harmonise with that of other false witnesses, or it was found to conflict with other indisputable evidence.

Ultimately, however, two witnesses were found who agreed in their testimony. This concerned the fact that the Lord Jesus had declared that if the temple were to be destroyed he would rebuild it in three days. Of course, Jesus had not been speaking of the temple building in Jerusalem, but about the temple of his own body–which he would raise on the third day after his death. (John 2:19-22)

It is uncertain whether the chief priests understood the significance of Jesus' words on this occasion. If they thought that Jesus was referring to the temple of stone, then the chief priests would see this assertion as a claim to divine power: for no one except a supernatural being could rebuild the temple of God in three days. However, if the chief priests realised that Jesus was referring to the temple of his own body, then they would see this assertion as a blasphemous claim to divine power. Firstly, they would consider it blasphemous because Jesus was claiming that—in a unique sense—his body was the temple of God. Secondly, they would consider it a claim to deity since Jesus was asserting that he could raise up his body after it had been destroyed–and within the space of three days.

## MATTHEW 26:62

At this point, the high priest stood up in the assembly and declared to the Lord Jesus, *"Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?"*

This shows a certain degree of bewilderment on the part of the high priest. This prestigious dignitary could not understand why the Lord Jesus did not reply to his accusers, nor could he comprehend exactly what they were accusing him of. Hence, his question, *"....What is it that these men testify against you?"*

If this bewilderment was shared by the chief priests and other members of the Council, then clearly they had not understood what Jesus had meant when he had spoken of rebuilding the temple in three days. Probably, they had taken his words literally and assumed that he had been speaking of the temple in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, as pointed out above, they would still have considered a claim to rebuild this temple as being a claim to divine power, since no human being could accomplish this in three days.

In passing, we should observe, that the convening of this Council in the palace of the high priest, together with the hearings that followed, were unlawful. The proceedings had been convened and conducted at night, as were at least some of the subsequent hearings. This rendered them unlawful and therefore the findings or outcome of these hearings should have been rendered null and void.

## MATTHEW 26:63

*"But Jesus remained silent..."* Much to the chagrin of the high priest, the Lord Jesus would not answer the question that had been put to him. Thus, the high priest must have considered that Jesus was now belittling the high priest's office and authority.

Angered that the Lord Jesus remained silent, the high priest declared to Jesus in the most solemn tones, *"I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."*

Now, the high priest was placing Jesus under a solemn religious and legal obligation to provide an answer. Should the Lord decline to answer under these circumstances, this would constitute contempt for the religious court or Council. Therefore, the high priest invokes the name of the living God to ensure that Jesus knew that he was being placed under a solemn oath to testify to the truth.

It is interesting to note the high priest's words, *"...tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."*

The high priest, of course, refused to acknowledge that Jesus was the Christ or Messiah, or that he was the Son of God. Indeed, the religious authorities considered it blasphemous for Jesus to claim that he was the Son of God. Therefore, if the high priest could succeed in extracting a confession of Jesus' Messiahship or Sonship with the Father, while standing in the presence of the Council, they would have succeeded (in their eyes) of making Jesus guilty of blasphemy against the living God–a crime punishable by death. (cf. John 10:30-38)

## MATTHEW 26:64

The Lord Jesus replied to the high priest in words of great wisdom and discretion, *"You have said so..."* 'i.e., these words are yours, not mine. Whether the import of your question is true or false is for you to decide, in view of the claims already made by me and the truths already taught by me. However, I will not reiterate these claims here, for that would merely provide you with an excuse to condemn me (falsely) for blasphemy.'

The Lord's dignified answer must have placed the high priest in a dilemma. He had expected to have been able to condemn the Lord Jesus outright, but the Lord had seen the trap and had wisely sidestepped it, refusing to provide the high priest with the slightest excuse for condemning him while at the same time responding to the question put to him under oath.

Yet, the high priest should not have imagined that he had the final say in this matter, or that the Jewish religious authorities could determine the Lord Jesus' ultimate destiny. Thus, turning upon the high priest, the Lord Jesus thundered at him with all the majestic power and authority of God the Son: *"...But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."* (Matt. 16:27; 24:30; 25:31; Mark 13:26; 16:19; Rev. 1:7)

This profound statement must have struck the high priest like a thunderbolt from heaven. It had been serious enough if the Lord Jesus had claimed in the presence of the Council to be the Christ and the Son of God. However, to assert categorically—and with divine power and authority—that they would see the Son of Man seated on the right hand of Power...

To the high priest, these words of the Lord Jesus could mean only one thing: Jesus was claiming not merely to be the Son of God, but also to be fully equal with God (signified by his being seated at the right hand of Power–i.e., God (whose name the Jews would not pronounce).) (Heb. 1:3; 12:2) Furthermore, Jesus was claiming that he would come from there on the clouds of heaven (an expression used only of YHWH when coming from heaven to earth, either in mercy or in judgment.)

## MATTHEW 26:65

(Mark 14:63-64)

Now, completely beside himself with rage, the high priest rose from his seat and tore asunder his priestly garments. Although this was in complete violation of the Law of Moses (Lev. 21:10), the high priest considered that he had heard enough. Losing all self-control, he rent his holy vestments and accused the Lord of blasphemy. Jesus had just claimed that he was the Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Man (as prophesied by Daniel (Dan. 7:13-14)). He had claimed also that he would be seated at the right hand of the Father ('the right hand of Power'), and the place and position of absolute pre-eminence and sovereign rule over the entire creation. (Ps. 110:1; Mark 16:19; Acts 2:33-36; Eph. 1:20-22; Heb. 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22; see also Col. 1:15-19)

Thus, appealing to the Council, the high priest cried out for them to bear witness to the Lord Jesus' claims, and to dispense with the need for any further witnesses against the holy One of God.

Here, we see at work the hand of unregenerate and ungodly men in religious guise, and holding positions of power and authority in the religious hierarchy. Undoubtedly, these religious imposters were acting out their own wicked purposes to dispose of the One who was the Way, the Truth and the Life. However, they were also acting under the influence of Satan who was intent on destroying the Saviour of the world before he could achieve his Father's objective. Needless to say, both the power of ungodly and hypocritical men and the power of the evil one would fail abysmally in their intended vile task.

## MATTHEW 26:66

Now, standing before the Council in his torn robes, the high priest cried out, "*What is your judgment?*"

We have noted already that this was an unlawful assembly, convened and conducted at night in contravention of the law. However, now we see a further breach of the law where the Presiding Officer addresses the Council inappropriately dressed in his shredded robes, or even without his outer robes. The high priest calls for judgment; but God had passed judgment already upon the high priest for his violation

of his holy laws concerning the office of the priesthood. Nevertheless, the Council responds to the high priest, *"He deserves death."*

The members of the Jewish religious Council–including scribes and Pharisees–had also understood Jesus' words as an unequivocal assertion of deity and equality with God in heaven. To the Jewish Council members, such claims would have constituted blasphemy of the highest order. And, according to the Law of Moses, the penalty for blasphemy was death.

The Law of Moses stipulated death by stoning. (Lev. 24:11-16; cf. John 10:31-33) However, the Jews had been forbidden by the Roman authorities from carrying out any form of capital punishment. Any person found guilty of a capital crime by the Jewish Council was to be handed over to the Roman governor for trial under Roman law. If found guilty under Roman civil law—not Jewish religious law—that person would be executed by the Roman powers.

## MATTHEW 26:67-68

However, some of those standing near the Lord Jesus began showing the utmost contempt for him and for his claims to be the Son of God. They spat at him–despising his name and ridiculing his claims. They struck out at him with their hands or fists, or slapped him across the face. In all of this, these people showed their utter contempt for the Holy One of God, and utterly despised his assertion concerning his association and equality with God in heaven.

We must remember that these malicious acts of violence were not being perpetrated by a disorderly mob, but by certain members of the religious Council. Only the high priest, elders, and members of the Sanhedrin would have been present at this assembly, with perhaps some members of the temple guard. Either way, their actions were completely unlawful and criminal.

As they struck him, the assailants taunted the Lord Jesus, inviting him to prophesy correctly which one of their numbers had assaulted him. This seems to imply that several of these wicked men had been assaulting the Lord Jesus simultaneously so that it was difficult to determine which individual had delivered which blow.

It is astonishing to realise that the Lord Jesus endured such hostility of sinful men against himself without responding or reacting. (Cf. Heb. 12:2-3) As the eternal Son of God, he could have called upon the vast armies of holy angels to destroy these evil men (Matt. 26:53), or to destroy the world; or he could have spoken the word and struck down his tormentors on the spot. Yet, this would not have accorded with the will and purposes of God for his Son (Matt. 26:54), but would have played directly into the hands of Satan. Jesus had come into the world to make atonement for the sins of his people. To achieve this, he needed to lay down his life voluntarily at the cross. (John 10:15,17-18) The Lord Jesus was determined to accomplish this, even although he knew that the way of the cross would be a way of suffering, and that these sufferings would include the scorn, ridicule, contempt, abuse and hostility of sinful men and women–many of whom he would die to save. To this end, we need only consider the remarkable conversion experience of the virulently hostile and bitter antagonist of Christ–Saul of Tarsus; later to become the apostle Paul. (Acts 9:1ff)

## PETER'S DENIAL

***Matthew 26:69-75***

*(Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:55-57; John 18:16-17,25)*

### MATTHEW 26:69

While the Lord Jesus was being abused and reviled by sinful men inside the high priest's palace, Peter was still sitting outside in the courtyard waiting to learn what was to become of his Master. While Peter sat warming himself at a brazier, a servant girl approached him. *"You also were with Jesus the Galilean",* she asserted.

This servant girl refers to Jesus as a Galilean, either because she knew that he came from Nazareth in Galilee or from his distinctive Galilean accent (Jesus having been brought up in that region).

### MATTHEW 26:70

Peter, however, vehemently denied the girl's claims. Indeed, Peter protested so loudly and vigorously that the entire surrounding company of soldiers and others were soon aware of his emphatic denial of and disassociation from the Lord Jesus. Peter, however, went even further: He declared categorically that he did not know what the girl meant, or to whom she was referring.

### MATTHEW 26:71-72

Greatly shaken and alarmed by this close call, Peter rose from where he had been sitting and made his way across the open courtyard to a place near the entrance. However, even as he stood there, another servant girl remarked to those standing nearby, *"This man was with Jesus of Nazareth."*

Clearly, many of the people whom had seen the Lord Jesus and his disciples on earlier occasions–including this girl–were able to remember and identify at least some of the Lord's disciples; much to Peter's consternation and discomfiture. Thus, deeply concerned for his own safety, Peter swore with an oath that he did not know Jesus. "*I do not know the man*," he asserted strenuously. 'You are greatly mistaken. I have no knowledge of this man Jesus. I have never been associated with him at any time, as I have just declared to you under oath.'

### MATTHEW 26:73

Not long afterward, a group of bystanders approached Peter. Perhaps this was the same group to whom the second servant girl had spoken. If so, and considering her words to them, they now came up to Peter and challenged him directly, *"Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you."*

These bystanders were positive that Peter was a disciple of the Lord Jesus. Not only had they overheard the words of the servant girl to Peter, but they had overhead also Peter's loud and vehement denial. However, that denial had betrayed his Galilean accent–the same accent as that of the Lord Jesus. Yet, almost everyone else present in the courtyard on that day would have had a Judean accent, which was quite distinct from that of Galilee.

## MATTHEW 26:74A

Now, completely exasperated, Peter expostulates with the utmost vigour, "*I do not know the man."*

To reinforce this disavowal, Peter invokes a curse upon himself and utters his denial accompanied by a solemn oath. This implication of the imprecation being that–if his words were not truthful (which they were not)–then the woes or afflictions involved in the curse would fall upon him in full measure.

In the Bible, a 'curse' was not a pejorative, obscene or malicious word or from of speech. Rather, a 'curse' was the opposite of a 'blessing'. In the same way that the Lord rewarded his people with blessings (or 'good things') when they trusted and obeyed him, so also the Lord rewarded his people with curses (or 'bad things') when they disbelieved and disobeyed him. These curses could involve the temporary suspension of God's fellowship and favour; withdrawal of the good blessings or benefits provided by his hand, including the good produce of the land; or affliction on the nation by means of war, famine or plague. Curses on individuals could involve the loss of property or possessions, or affliction by illness or disease (distinct from those illness and diseases that are common to all mankind as a result of the fall). Peter may have invoked upon himself a curse similar to one of curses on individuals in his desperate but futile attempt to deny his association with the Lord Jesus.

## MATTHEW 26:74B-75

At the very moment that Peter uttered his third denial, the rooster crowed. Then, immediately, Peter remembered the words of the Lord Jesus, *"Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times."* (v.34)

The realisation of his denial now struck home to Peter's heart and conscience. In public, and under oath, he had denied any knowledge of his Lord and Saviour–the One whom he had professed to love and serve. Indeed, only a short time earlier when Jesus had revealed that Peter would betray him later that night, this disciple had replied by saying, *"Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!"* (v.35)

Where, now, was the brash Peter's bold confession? Where, now, was his willingness to sacrifice his life along with his Master? At the very moment his Master might have expected his support, Peter is found standing in the courtyard denying with oaths and curses that he has any knowledge of the Lord Jesus, or that he is his disciple.

Soon, when the significance of the events sank into his mind, Peter retreated out of the courtyard, probably to seek some solitary spot. There, completely dejected and dismayed, Peter sat down and wept bitterly.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 27

## JESUS HANDED OVER TO PILATE

***Matthew 27:1-2***

*(Mark 15:1; Luke 23:1; John 18:28; cf. Acts 4:24-28)*

### MATTHEW 27:1

Verse 1 begins, *"When morning came..."* This implies clearly that the preceding events, which had taken place during the night, had been unlawful. However, the high priest and other members of the Council were well aware of this irregularity. They knew that they could not pronounce a final decision until the regular hours for convening an assembly: i.e., during the day. Any decision they announced at night might very well be annulled and rescinded by the Roman authorities. Hence, the chief priests and elders waited until the break of day. Then, at first light, the Council conferred together against Jesus, arranging when he should be put to death.

In this respect, the options opened to the Jewish authorities were very limited. The Council could pronounce the death penalty, but under Roman law they were prohibited from carrying it out.[60] Only the Roman authorities, represented by Pontius Pilate, had the power to authorise and implement capital punishment.

### MATTHEW 27:2

Knowing that they lacked the authority to put Jesus to death, the members of the Council ordered the Lord Jesus to be bound securely. Then, they led him away from the 'house' or palace of the high priest to the court of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.

Why they found it necessary to bind the Lord Jesus defies explanation. The Lord was not likely to attempt to escape. He presented no threat to the Council members or to the officers transferring him to Pilate. Yet, if the Lord Jesus had determined to exercise his sovereign and almighty power to free himself, his bond could not have held him and his captors could not have restrained or detained him. Thus, these bonds were needless and futile.

[60] Had it been possible for the Jews to exercise the death penalty for blasphemy, they would have done so by stoning–not by crucifixion. However, this would not have accorded with the prophecies concerning Jesus or with his own prophecies concerning his death.

## JUDAS COMMITS SUICIDE

***Matthew 27:3-10***

### MATTHEW 27:3A

Whatever entered into the mind of Judas Iscariot is difficult to imagine. He had plotted deliberately to betray the Lord Jesus. He had accepted the specific sum offered to him–the price of a slave. He had waited for an opportune moment to inform the Jewish leaders of the Lord's whereabouts, and then he had led them with an armed mob to the Garden of Gethsemane.

All of this had been calculated and premeditated. Judas had had more than enough time to consider the consequences of his evil deed and to repent; but he made no attempt to do so.

Now, however, Judas saw that Jesus had been condemned to death by the Jewish Council. At this point, the betrayer is said to have 'changed his mind' (or experienced a change of heart). This may have been an expression of regret or remorse, as it was with Esau (Heb. 12:16-17). However, it was most certainly not an expression of true godly sorrow leading to repentance. (2 Cor. 7:10)

Nevertheless, while professing remorse, the betrayer attempted to return the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, "*I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.*"

Granted, Judas had sinned. Granted, he had betrayed innocent blood, or a completely pure, holy, just and upright life. Now, seeing Jesus under a sentence of death, Judas feels remorse and guilt for his wickedness. But his remorse or guilt-ridden conscience will never achieve the forgiveness of his sin. It will never take away his sin or cleanse his accusing conscience. It will never result in his reconciliation with God. Judas had gone too far. In effect, he had despised, rejected and trod underfoot the atoning Sacrifice that God had provided for the forgiveness of sins. (Heb. 10:29-31) Now, all that remained for the son of perdition (John 6:70-71; 17:12; cf. 2 Thess. 2:3) was for him to be delivered to eternal suffering.

### MATTHEW 27:3B-5

The chief priests and elders, however, remained completely unmoved and unconcerned. They had finished their business with Judas. The transaction had been closed when Judas had accepted the thirty pieces of silver and then had betrayed the Lord Jesus to an armed mob. Now, in accordance with the objectives of the religious leaders, Jesus was now a prisoner in bonds and on his way to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.

"*See to it yourself,*" the chief priests and elders had retorted to Judas. (v.4) Thus, in despair, Judas cast the thirty pieces of silver onto the temple floor. Then, he left the house of God, went outside, and hanged himself. Unable to experience or express true repentance, and completely overwhelmed with a sense of his sin and guilt, Judas could not bear to live with what he had done. Thus, he took his own life. But his name would live on–in infamy.

### MATTHEW 27:6-7

When the chief priests and elders had refused to accept it, Judas had cast the money onto the floor of the temple. However, this money now created a dilemma for the religious leaders. According to their un-

derstanding of the law, such money–known as 'blood money'–could not be deposited in the temple treasury since the temple and everything within it was holy or hallowed.

Thus, after conferring together, the chief priests and elders decided eventually to use the money to purchase a plot of land known locally as the potter's field. They intended to use this land as a burial place for strangers or foreigners in their midst.

### MATTHEW 27:8

Because it was bought with the money paid to Judas Iscariot, that field became known as the 'Field of Blood' (Gk., ἀγρὸς αἵματος or Ἀκελδαμάχ, (i.e., '*Hakeldama')* (Acts 1:19)). At the time the Gospel of Matthew was written, the field was still known locally by that name and probably continued to be called such for many subsequent generations.

### MATTHEW 27:9

At this point, Matthew tells us that the actions of the chief priests and elders fulfilled Jeremiah's prophecy concerning the potter and his field. Apparently, Matthew was alluding to and combining the prophecies of two Old Testament prophets: Jeremiah and Zechariah. (Jer. 19:1-13; Zech. 11:11-13) By inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Gospel writer was showing how these two related prophecies were connected with the purchase of the potter's field for thirty pieces of silver. (Jeremiah had spoken of the potter, and Zechariah had spoken of the thirty pieces of silver thrown to the potter in the house of the LORD).

## JESUS QUESTIONED BY PILATE

***Matthew 27:11-14***

### MATTHEW 27:11

Meanwhile, the Lord Jesus had arrived at Pilate's judgment hall, and was standing now before the Roman governor. The Jews had accused the Lord Jesus of blasphemy for claiming to be the Son of God and to be seated at the right hand of Power (a clear reference to the inexpressible Name of the Lord God). Under Jewish religious law, blasphemy was a capital offence, and required death by stoning. Nevertheless, the Jews had been forbidden from carrying out the death penalty themselves. Anyone accused of a capital crime had to stand trial before the Roman courts. In Israel at this time, the Roman authorities alone had the power to sanction the death penalty. Thus, determined to have Jesus executed, the Jews had brought the Lord before Pilate for judgment.

It is highly unlikely that Pilate would have acceded to the Jews' demands for the death penalty on the grounds of blasphemy. This was a religious offence and, under Roman law, it did not incur capital punishment. Therefore, realising that Pilate might not condemn Jesus for blasphemy, the Jewish religious authorities laid before the Roman procurator another accusation: Jesus had claimed to be 'the King of the Jews'. If true, this accusation was potentially much more serious. Such a claim could be construed as presenting a threat to King Herod. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, Herod saw himself as the king of the Jews; therefore Jesus would be seen as threatening to usurp Herod's position and authority. It presented a threat also to the Roman government and the *Pax Romana* or Roman Peace–for it implied the possibility of a Jewish uprising under Jesus and a rebellion against the Roman authorities.

Pilate himself may not have taken these threats too seriously. Nevertheless, he now questioned Jesus to determine whether or not he did claim to be the King of the Jews. Thus, Pilate asked the Lord Jesus, *"Are you the King of the Jews?"* 'Are you lawfully appointed by your God as Ruler over the Jewish people?'

At this stage, Pilate need not have considered Jesus as posing any threat to the civil administration. The Roman governor may simply have seen Jesus' alleged claim as an assertion to kingship of a religious and spiritual nature over the Jewish people. So long as this claim or the implied authority did not impinge in any way upon civil or military matters which fell under the authority of Rome, then Pilate would probably be little concerned about Jewish religious matters or claims to religious kingship. (Of course, if Pilate had been aware of Jewish history, he would have known that Jewish kings of the past acted in both the civil and religious spheres–although this would not apply in Jesus' case.)

Nevertheless, Pilate expected Jesus to give him an unambiguous answer to his question. However, Jesus replied with the apparently enigmatic phrase, *"You have said so."*

These words were very similar to those used by Jesus in his earlier reply to the high priest. (Matt. 26:64) The answer should be understood in the affirmative. Nevertheless, the Lord Jesus phrased his words deliberately in such a way that Pilate would have understood the Lord's reply as, 'These are your words (or, 'That is what you have said'). You must determine for yourself whether your question to me should be answered in the affirmative or the negative.'

Thus, the responsibility lay with the Roman procurator to decide personally whether or not Jesus was the King of the Jews; and, if so, what this claim and position implied.

## MATTHEW 27:12

Following the Jesus' somewhat enigmatic answer to the Roman governor, the chief priests and elders then began to accuse the Lord Jesus before Pilate. However, the Lord had been examined already in the presence of these religious leaders and he had provided a similar answer to their high priest. Therefore, on this occasion, the Lord Jesus did not respond to their accusations, but remained silent.

## MATTHEW 27:13

Jesus' silence, however, perplexed Pilate. He had listened intently to the catalogue of alleged crimes and misdemeanours that the chief priests and elders had brought against the Lord Jesus. However, as the number of alleged offences multiplied, the Roman governor could not comprehend why Jesus refused to answer his accusers or refute their allegations. Thus, in his perplexity, Pilate asked Jesus, *"Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?"*

## MATTHEW 27:14

Jesus, of course, knew that the chief priests and elders could not accuse him legitimately of a single offence–either by breaking the law of God or by breaking the civil law. Every single accusation that the religious leaders had brought against the Lord had been falsified or fabricated, or was a supposed breach of their man-made rules and regulations and therefore not contrary to God's law, or was a flagrant distortion or misrepresentation of the truth.

Even when they accused Jesus of blasphemy for claiming to be the Son of God, or to be seated at the right hand of Power, there accusations were groundless; because the Lord Jesus was indeed the Son of God and he had come from the Power (God) above and would return there.

Therefore, although the chief priests and elders accused the Lord Jesus of many offences in the presence of Pontius Pilate, the Lord had no case in law to answer, for he was guiltless of all offences. Thus, Jesus declined to answer Pilate's question. Nothing could be achieved by attempting to answer ungodly men or to refute their malicious and unfounded accusations. Therefore, to the Roman governor's astonishment, Jesus offered no defence but remained silent in the presence of his accusers.

## THE CROWD ASK FOR BARABBAS

***Matthew 27:15-26***

*(Mark 15:6-8; John 18:39-40)*

### MATTHEW 27:15-16

At the Feast of the Passover, it was Pilate's custom to release to the people one prisoner whom they chose. At this time, the Roman governor had in custody a notorious prisoner known as Barabbas. Barabbas had been involved in robbery, insurrection against the government, and murder. Under Roman law, this man was facing the death penalty.

### MATTHEW 27:17-18

When, according to custom, the crowd had assembled before Pilate's judgment seat for the release of a prisoner, the Roman procurator was ready to present them with a choice of two prisoners–Jesus or Barabbas. Pilate knew that the Jewish religious authorities had delivered Jesus to him out of envy and with unfounded and malicious allegations against him. Pilate would have been happy to release Jesus but he feared the reaction of the crowd. If he displeased the Jewish leaders and people, word to this effect might reach the Emperor in Rome. Consequently, for perceived incompetence in handling Jewish affairs, Pilate might be dismissed from office or transferred from his present post.

### MATTHEW 27:19

Furthermore, while seated on the bench, word reached Pilate from his wife advising him strongly to have nothing to do with 'this just man'. Pilate's wife had been troubled greatly by a dream concerning this matter, and now she feared that her husband would become involved in a situation that would result in a miscarriage of justice. Perhaps, too, Pilate's wife believed that Jesus' case should be heard by the Jewish religious Council or Sanhedrin alone and not by the Roman civil law courts or the Roman procurator. Therefore, in her anxiety, she pleaded with her husband to wash his hands of this case.

With these considerations in mind, Pilate had asked the assembled crowd, *"Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?"* (v.17)

## MATTHEW 27:20

Perhaps, naively, Pilate had expected the crowd of ordinary Jewish people to choose Jesus (as opposed to the choice of their leaders). However, in this, the governor was greatly mistaken. With malicious intent, the chief priests and elders of the people had already persuaded the crowd to request the release of Barabbas and to demand that Pilate destroy Jesus.

## MATTHEW 27:21

Unable to believe his ears, Pilate asked the crowd again which of the two he should release to them. Once again, the crowd cried out with one voice, *"Barabbas!"*

The people, it seems, would rather have a robber and murderer released for them than the holy, spotless, Son of God. Such even today is the attitude of all those who cherish their sin and their evil way of life, who relish their spiritual darkness, and who do all in their power to keep the light of life from shining into their hearts and exposing their evil deeds. If they cannot kill the message, they will endeavour to kill the messenger.

## MATTHEW 27:22

Unequivocally, the crowd had called to Pilate for the release of Barabbas rather than Jesus. This now placed Pilate in even more of a dilemma. If the crowd had called for the release of Christ, the King of the Jews, then Pilate would not have had the problem of dealing with Jesus' case. Now, however, the Roman governor found himself having to discharge a notorious and guilty criminal and to hold in custody One whom he knew was not guilty of any offence.

In exasperation, Pilate asked the crowd, *"Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?"*

To this question, the crowd shouted back in unison, *"Let him be crucified!"*

The chief priests and elders had done their evil work well. The religious leaders had so persuaded the people of Jesus' guilt that this crowd was now convinced that He who claimed to be the Christ the Son of God was indeed worthy of the death penalty. Therefore, they called out vehemently to the Roman governor for Jesus' execution. Since Jesus was now in the hands of the Roman authorities, this would be by crucifixion–a slow and agonising form of death.

We must remember that many of the crowd who now were calling for Jesus' crucifixion had once been counted among those who had gathered around the Lord Jesus listening to his teaching. Some might even have made a superficial profession of faith in Christ. However, once their minds had been poisoned by the lies and distortions of the chief priests and elders, these same 'followers' now turned against the Lord Jesus, demanding that the holy Son of God be put to death.

## MATTHEW 27:23

Nevertheless, Pilate could not fully understand their irrational and vicious reaction. Their leaders had brought Jesus before him, accusing the Lord of many sins and misdemeanours. Yet, Pilate knew that their accusations were malicious and groundless, and that they had delivered the Lord to him out of envy

or jealousy. The Roman governor knew too that the Lord Jesus had not committed any offences under Roman law for which he could be accused or condemned.

Pilate tried once again to determine why the crowd wanted an obviously innocent man executed. Therefore, when the crowd continued to clamour for the Lord's execution, Pilate responded, *"Why, what evil has he done?"* The Roman governor was attempting to get the crowd to name at least one crime that Jesus had committed which was worthy of death. However, the crowd were completely unable to do so. They merely called out all the more hysterically, *"Let him be crucified!"*

Of course, many of the Jews present would be thinking that Jesus merited the death penalty for the sin of blasphemy against God. This indeed was a capital offence under Jewish law, but it was not recognised as such under Roman law. In any event, the Lord Jesus had not committed blasphemy but had merely asserted his rightful claims in relation to God his Father.

Knowing, therefore, that Pilate was unlikely to impose the death penalty on the grounds of alleged blasphemy, the Jewish leaders had tried another approach: They had accused Jesus of claiming to be the King of the Jews. This could be seen both as a challenge to Herod (the recognised political 'king of the Jews') and to the Emperor in Rome. If this accusation could be substantiated, then it could be construed as treason against the Roman Emperor or of threatening insurrection against the State. Both offences carried the death penalty. However, although the Jewish leaders had attempted to bring this charge against the Lord Jesus in the hope of achieving his condemnation and death, Pilate had remained unconvinced by their arguments and accusation. His own examination of the evidence and of the Lord Jesus in person would have satisfied the Roman governor that the Lord's kingship posed no threat to the empire, since the Lord had been speaking of a spiritual kingship rather than a political one.

## PILATE YIELDS TO THE CROWD'S DEMANDS

***Matthew 27:24-26***

### MATTHEW 27:24

As the angry crowd continued to clamour for Jesus' crucifixion, Pilate realised that he was making no headway with them. Indeed, he perceived that the crowd was becoming increasingly restless, and that any further delay in yielding to their demands might well result in a riot. Therefore, fearing the consequences of civil unrest, Pilate gave in to the crowd's demands. However, in a vain attempt to distance himself from their evil actions, Pilate took a basin of water and proceeded to wash his hands. To Pilate (and to his wife (v.19)) this symbolised his disassociation from the crime about to be committed, and his supposed personal integrity in regard to the actions about to be undertaken at the insistence of the Jewish mob. As he washed his hands, the Roman governor declared, *"I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves."*

Pontius Pilate was disclaiming any responsibility for the death of the Lord Jesus and placing that responsibility firmly on the shoulders of the Jewish people. However, as we shall see, the vacillating Roman governor would be just as guilty of Jesus' death as any of the Jewish leaders or people.

## MATTHEW 27:25

When Pilate had disclaimed responsibility, the crowd had replied, *"His blood be on us and on our children."*

This, of course, did not reflect the views of the entire Jewish nation, as many of the ordinary people continued to believe on the Lord Jesus and they would never have associated themselves with those calling for Jesus' destruction. However, it reflected the view of the ungodly religious leaders and the wicked mob calling out to Pilate for the death sentence to be imposed on Jesus.

If this evil assembly intended their invocation as a solemn and formal oath or curse, this was a most foolish and irresponsible imprecation that they brought down upon themselves. It was one thing for the perpetrators of Jesus' death to accept responsibility for their crime against the Christ of God. However, to involve their children in that crime for generations to come was a sin of the utmost magnitude and wholly indefensible. Yet, such was the hatred of this mob for the Son of God that they did not pause to consider what might be the consequences of their grave sin and unbelievable folly.

## MATTHEW 27:26

Once Pilate believed that the Jews—especially, the religious hierarchy—were going to accept full responsibility for anything that happened to Jesus, the Roman governor then released Barabbas to the crowd–as they had been demanding. Pilate then ordered the Roman soldiers to scourge the Lord Jesus with the studded and spiked lash or whip before taking him out to be crucified.

Here we see the hypocrisy of Pilate. He had declared publicly that Jesus was an innocent man. He had washed his hands publicly of any responsibility for harm to that innocent man. Yet, Pilate is still prepared to order Jesus to be scourged–in complete violation of Roman law which forbade and condemned the punishment of innocent victims. Furthermore, and despite his disclaimers, Pilate must have made out the formal authorisation, including the death warrant, which enabled the soldiers to take Jesus outside the city walls and crucify him–as a criminal! Therefore, humanly speaking, Pilate was as guilty as the Jews for this miscarriage of justice and for the consequent death of the Lord Jesus.

# JESUS MOCKED

***Matthew 27:27-32***

## MATTHEW 27:27

Pilate then committed the Lord Jesus formally to the charge of his soldiers. A detachment of these soldiers then escorted the Lord Jesus into the praetorium or governor's palace (i.e., headquarters).

(During the final stages of the mock trial, Pilate would have stood outside the palace doors to address the Jews, since they would have been unwilling to enter the governor's judgment hall.)

Having escorted Jesus back inside the praetorium, the soldiers then assembled many of their remaining number attached to the praetorian guard–perhaps as many as 200 men or about a third of a cohort. (This large number would be required to protect Jesus from the angry mob while conducting him to the place of execution outside the walls of Jerusalem.)

## MATTHEW 27:28

The soldiers then stripped Jesus of his own clothes and clothed him instead with a scarlet [61] robe. The scarlet (or purple) robe was the colour and symbol of royalty, and the soldiers were about to mock the Lord Jesus for his claim to be the King of the Jews. Little did these men know that the One whom they were clothing with the royal robe was indeed the King of the Jews and King of kings!

## MATTHEW 27:29

Not content, however, with putting this robe on the Lord Jesus, the soldiers also platted a crown for his head. However, this was a crown of thorns–woven from branches of the wild thorn bushes. At this point, the pain must have been excruciating; for we must remember that Jesus had been scourged a short time earlier with the Roman lash, and that the sharp metal and bone fragments embedded into this leather whip would have inflicted severe lacerations and other wounds on the Lord Jesus.

At this point, the soldiers placed a reed in Jesus' right hand, symbolising the sceptre of royalty, dominion, power, and authority. Pretending that they were acknowledging him as king, the soldiers knelt down before the Lord Jesus, mockingly declaring, *"Hail, King of the Jews!"*

## MATTHEW 27:30

As if this cruel mockery were not bad enough, the soldiers then spat on the Lord Jesus, expressing their utter contempt for his Person and for his claims. This, perhaps, was the worst form of derision that the soldiers could have inflicted on the holy One of God; and it showed clearly just how vile these men were, how greatly their sin had been exposed by the Light of the world, and how desperate they were to attempt to cling to their evil way of life and to continue serving the prince of darkness–the god of this world. (John 3:19-20; 16:11; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2; 1 John 5:19)

The soldiers then snatched the reed out of Jesus' hand and began striking him on the head with it. This was another sign of contempt; for soon the reed would become the broken reed or 'sceptre', symbolising the breaking or destruction of Jesus' kingship, power, and authority. Yet, how greatly mistaken were these soldiers in supposing vainly that they could destroy or set at nought the power and the glory of the King of kings and Lord of lord! To the glory of God the Father, Jesus would yet be highly exalted and be given a name above every name in heaven and in earth. (Eph. 1:20-23; Php. 2:9-11; see also Acts 2:32-36)

## MATTHEW 27:31

When they had finished mocking and despising the holy Son of God, the soldiers stripped the Lord Jesus of the scarlet robe and replaced it with his own clothes. Then, they led him out of the praetorium and headed outside the city wall to the hill called Calvary or Golgotha (known as *'the Place of a Skull'* (Mark 15:22)), where they intended to crucify the Lord Jesus.

[61] s*carlet:* The other Gospel writers describe this as a 'purple' robe. However, at this time, colours were not as easily distinguished as they are now. In these days, a royal robe of a red-violet hue could be described either as 'scarlet' or 'purple'.

## JESUS CRUCIFIED

***Matthew 27:32-44***

### MATTHEW 27:32

(Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26)

As they led Jesus out to the place of crucifixion, the soldiers encountered a man, named Simon, from the country of Cyrene in North Africa. Possibly, Simon was a Jew from that country who had been visiting Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. At any event, the Roman soldiers compelled Simon to carry–or, at least, to help support–the cross of Jesus. Being greatly weakened by the lashings he had received, and with his back covered with lacerations and other open wounds, the Lord Jesus would have found it extremely difficult and painful to bear alone the very heavy wooden cross or timber post.

### MATTHEW 27:33

(Mark 15:22; John 19:17)

At last, they arrived at Golgotha. Golgotha means 'Place of a Skull'. It is uncertain how it obtained this name. Some of the possibilities include the hill's physical resemblance to a skull; the fact that the place was near to burial sites, or simply the fact that Golgotha was so-called because it was the place commonly used for the crucifixion of criminals–the skull representing death.

### MATTHEW 27:34

(Ps. 69:21; Mark 15:23; cf. John 19:28-30)

Once at Golgotha, the soldiers offered the Lord Jesus some wine to drink. However, this was not ordinary wine but a very bitter mixture of vinegar with gall. It was intended as an anaesthetic; but when Jesus had received and tasted it (John 19:28-30), he refused to drink it. (Mark 15:23)

### MATTHEW 27:35

(Ps. 22:18; Mark 15:24-25; Luke 23:34; John 19:23-24)

Once the soldiers had raised Jesus up upon the cross, they sat down to await his death, which they knew would be slow and painful. While they waited, the soldiers gathered the Lord's clothing together and began dividing the various garments among themselves. However, when they came to the Lord's outer robe, which was woven in one piece, the soldiers decided not to divide this garment but to cast lots for it; thereby determining which soldier should receive the whole garment.

Little did the soldiers realise that their actions were in exact fulfilment of the Scriptures which had prophesied of this precise event centuries beforehand. As the psalmist David had declared:

> Psalm 22:18 ESV
>
> ...they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.

## MATTHEW 27:36

After dividing the Lord Jesus' garments among themselves, the soldiers *"sat down and kept watch over him there."* It was hardly necessary to place a watch over the Lord Jesus as he hung on the cross. However, it was possible that the soldiers were watching the Lord until they saw that he had expired. Then, they would be able to remove his body and return to their barracks.

## MATTHEW 27:37

(Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19-22)

It was customary for the Roman governor to place an inscribed plaque above the heads of prisoners being crucified summarising the crimes they had committed. However, since Pilate had been completely unable to find any fault with Jesus, he ordered to soldiers to place the following superscription above the Lord: *"This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."*

Pilate knew that this superscription would offend the Jewish leaders very considerably. However, this was his way of retaliating against them for forcing the Lord Jesus to be crucified without cause, and contrary to the principles of Roman law and justice.

## MATTHEW 27:38

(Isa. 53:12; Mark 15:27; Luke 23:32-33, 39-43; John 19:18)

As Jesus was hanging on the cross, two robbers also were being crucified with him–one on either side. As one of them was to admit later, they were being crucified justly for their crimes, but this Man [Jesus] had done nothing amiss. (Luke 23:40-41) Such was the testimony from a dying thief.

Once again, the crucifixion of these two criminals along with Jesus fulfilled what had been prophesied of the Lord centuries beforehand. For, in the prophets, it had been written:

> Isaiah 53:12 ESV
>
> 12 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death *and was numbered with the transgressors*; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors. (Emphasis added)

## MATTHEW 27:39-40

(Mark 15:29-30; Luke 23:35-39)

As was customary with a public execution, a number of people from the city and the surrounding areas made their way up to Golgotha to view the crucifixion. Some, such as Mary the mother of Jesus, stood by his cross out of genuine love and concern. The majority, however, had come to Calvary merely to stare and gloat at the crucified individuals and to express their contempt for them. Thus, as they passed by the Lord Jesus, the people shook their heads in disapproval, derided him as he hung on the cross, and taunted him with the words, "*You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross*." (v.40) 'Since you have the miraculous power

and ability to destroy and rebuild the temple in three days, then use that same miraculous power and ability to save yourself now!' Come down from the cross and we will believe you.'

In verse 40, Matthew reports the Jews as saying, *"If you are the Son of God..."* (v.40b) Often, the word 'if' bears the meaning 'since'. Hence, the sentence would read, "Since you are the Son of God..." However, in this instance, it is entirely possible that the 'if' was intended to cast doubt on Jesus' divine Sonship. We must remember that the last thing the Jewish people expected was for their promised Messiah to suffer and to die–especially by crucifixion. The Jews had expected a conquering Messiah who would overthrow the Romans and set up his kingdom on earth. They believed that their Messiah would be a king (like David) and that he would reign gloriously over the entire world (or at least, the world as they knew it).

However, when the Jews and their leaders saw Jesus being put to death, they convinced themselves that this could not have been the promised Messiah–even although it was they who had engineered the Lord's death! Clearly, the Jewish people and their leaders had failed to understand the true significance of their own Scriptures. For these Scriptures spoke clearly and repeatedly not only about the sufferings of their Messiah but also about his death, his resurrection and the glory that should follow. Even in this passage before us we have seen just two examples of Old Testament prophesies that had just been fulfilled in Jesus' suffering and death: one concerning the parting of his garments while he hung on the cross, and the other concerning his being counted among the transgressors while being crucified with them. (Ps. 22:18; Isa. 53:12)

## MATTHEW 27:41-42

Not only did many of the common people deride the Lord Jesus, but most of the religious leaders did the same. Those who should have known their Scriptures (the chief priests, scribes and elders) joined with the crowd in hurling taunts and abuse at the Lord Jesus as he hung on the cross. In their case, envy and jealousy motivated their actions. They could not stand to see the crowds flocking to Jesus to hear his teaching, or to witness the vast numbers he had forgiven of their sins and had healed of their diseases. Therefore, they had determined to have him put to death–under the pretext of blasphemy against God and treason against the emperor. Now, as the Saviour hung on the cross, these Jewish leaders vilified him and taunted him by calling out, *"He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him...*

It was a specious assertion to state that Jesus could not save himself. He had gone to the cross voluntarily with the express purpose of atoning for sin by the shedding of his blood or the sacrificing of his pure and sinless life for sinners. Of course, he could have saved himself; either by his own inherent power or omnipotence, or by calling upon myriads of holy angels to deliver him. However, this was exactly what Satan–and his emissaries among the religious leadership–wanted him to do: For, by saving himself from the cross, the Lord Jesus would not be able to die as a Substitute for sinners, making atonement for their sin and reconciling these redeemed sinners to God.

The chief priests, scribes and elders added to their taunts by claiming that if Jesus came down from the cross, then they would believe in him. This is a wholly deceitful statement. Throughout the period of his life on earth, the Lord Jesus had performed numerous signs and wonders in public, including the raising from the dead of Lazarus and others. These religious leaders either must have witnessed some of these miracles with their own eyes or heard of them from competent and reliable witnesses. Yet, in spite of this

overwhelming testimony to Jesus' Person, power and glory–and to the fact that the Father in heaven had sent him and equipped him–these religious leaders refused to believe the evidence. Indeed, they attributed the Lord's power to work miracles to Satan himself. If, then, these intelligent but spiritually obtuse men refused to believe such compelling evidence over a period of three-and-a-half years, neither would they have believed in Jesus had he come down from the cross.

### MATTHEW 27:43

The chief priests, scribes and elders continue with their cruel taunts. Remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, and his complete trust in God, the religious leaders torment him by suggesting that God is not able or willing to deliver Jesus from the cross. Of course, the Father was able to deliver his Son; but it was not his will to spare his only Beloved Son from the agonies of the cross. The Lord Jesus had submitted willingly to his Father's plan and purpose for the redemption of sinners, and he knew before coming into this world that it would cost him his life. Nevertheless, the Lord Jesus must have been deeply grieved to hear his Father in heaven being taunted and reviled by these hypocritical 'religious' men–and these same men were the religious teachers of Israel!

To add insult to injury, the religious leaders remind Jesus of his claims to be the Son of God. Of course, this was the truth. Jesus had claimed as much in the presence of the Council. However, the Jews repudiated this claim and refused to accept that the Lord Jesus was God's Son or the Sent One of God, the Messiah. Therefore, when they use the expression on this occasion, they are doing so in jest–not believing for one moment that Jesus is really the Son of God.

### MATTHEW 27:44

Observing the vile taunts being heaped upon the holy One of God by the chief priests, scribes and elders, the two criminals being crucified alongside Jesus began to mock him also. Probably, in the language customary to common thieves and murderers, they hurled abuse at him as he hung upon the cross.

Yet, what the Lord Jesus endured at the hands of wicked and sinful men was of little account compared with what he endured at the hands of his Father–a righteous, holy and just God. The sinless Son of God was dying on the cross to make atonement for sin; but, in the process of atoning for sin, he also bore the wrath of God against sin and against the sinner, in whose place the holy and sinless Lord Jesus was suffering and dying. Thus, as we shall see in the next verses, the heavens indicated the total separation of God from sin and from sinners while their punishment was being borne on the cross by the holy Son of God.

## JESUS FORSAKEN BY HIS FATHER

***Matthew 27:45-50***

### MATTHEW 27:45

(Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44)

As Jesus hung on the cross, an extraordinary darkness encompassed the entire land from the sixth hour (12 noon) until the ninth hour (3 PM or 15.00 hours). The wrath of the Almighty, which was being poured

out upon his Beloved Son, possibly coincided with an eclipse that plunged the land into an unusual degree of darkness which occurred during normal daylight hours.

This expression of God's righteous wrath and judgment spoke both of God's holy and just anger against sin and against the state of the world, which was lost in the darkness of sin. The holy, sinless Lord Jesus was bearing God's curse against sin, and the punishment for sin and sinners, on his own body on the tree. (1 Pet. 2:24) However, since the Most High and Holy God could not look upon iniquity (Hab. 1:13), therefore Jesus was left alone on the cross to suffer and die for sinners by the shedding of his blood on their behalf. This becomes evident in the next verse:

## MATTHEW 27:46

Toward the end of this period of great darkness, the Lord Jesus cried out, *"Eli, Eli, lema sabacthani?*" that is, *"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"*

Never on any previous occasion throughout the eternal ages past had the Lord Jesus experienced separation from his Father in heaven. They were united eternally in fellowship with each other and with the Holy Spirit. Now, however, as he hangs in excruciating pain upon the cross, being smitten by the rod of God's judgment and wrath against sin, the Lord Jesus experienced for the first time utter abandonment by his Father. Thus, Jesus cries to his Father with absolute and inconsolable anguish and desolation, *"Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"*

## MATTHEW 27:47-48

(Mark 15:35-36)

On hearing these words, one of those standing nearby (probably, one of the soldiers) thought that he might be able to alleviate Jesus' very obvious physical and mental pain and distress. Thus, he ran to fetch a sponge (a marine plant), soaked it with the sour wine or vinegar kept at the location to act as an anaesthetic, placed the sponge on the end of a reed or hyssop branch, and offered it to the Lord Jesus. (John 19:29-30)

## MATTHEW 27:49

Other people standing near the cross, however, misunderstood the cry of the Lord Jesus. They thought he was calling for Elijah. Therefore, they awaited the imminent appearance of this prophet of God to deliver the Lord Jesus from the cross.

How little these people had understood the teaching of their own Scriptures and of the prophet Elijah. Had they known their Old Testament Scriptures, as they should have done, they would have realised that Elijah had served the LORD in his day. Furthermore, they should have known that–in fulfilment of the Scriptures–another had appeared in the spirit and power of Elijah: namely, John the Baptist (Luke 1:17), and that John had preached to them the message of repentance and preparation for the coming of the Lord to his temple. (Mal. 3:1) However, they had refused to hear or believe their own Scriptures, or the words of God's prophet, John the Baptist. Therefore, these people had turned their backs on the way of salvation and on the Saviour of lost men and women.

## MATTHEW 27:50

(Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46; John 19:30)

As the people stood gazing at the Son of God in his agony, the Lord Jesus cried out once more–this time, yielding up his spirit to his Father in heaven. Thus, we see that the Lord's death was not determined by man, but by himself and by his Father. The Lord Jesus voluntarily yielded up his spirit only when the work of atonement had been completed and when he had paid in full and forever the penalty due to sin. When this work was accomplished once-for-all, then–and then only–did the Lord Jesus submit his spirit to his Father and expire on the cross. (John 10:11,15,17-18)

## MATTHEW 27:51

(Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45)

At the very moment that the holy Son of God completed the work of redemption and yielded up his spirit, the veil of the temple was rent in two–from top to bottom. This veil separated the holy place from the most holy place. No one was permitted to enter the most holy place, except the high priest–and he could do so only once a year bearing the blood of the atonement which he took into the holy place with him to sprinkle on and before the mercy seat and there to intercede with God on behalf of the people. On no other occasions could the high priest come before God into the most holy place, nor could any other person in Israel. (Lev. 16:2-34)

The veil spoke very clearly of the fact that God would never permit sin or sinful mankind into his presence or allow them to enjoy fellowship with him while their sins remained unforgiven. Hence, the reason atonement was made for the people once every year by the high priest. However, the Lord Jesus had just made atonement for sin once-for-all, when he died on the cross. Therefore, there would be no further need for the annual Day of Atonement, for the high priest, or for atoning sacrifices in any shape or form. To demonstrate the end of the old era and the coming of the new, the veil separating the holy place in the temple from the holy of holies was torn in two from top to bottom–thus indicating that God, not man, had torn down the veil. (Heb. 9:1-28; 10:1-23)

From this point on, the Jewish high priest was not required to approach or intercede with God on behalf of the people, or to take with him the atoning blood into the most holy place. Now, through the shed blood of the Lord Jesus, any repentant and believing sinner could approach the most high God directly, and enjoy fellowship with him because of the work accomplished on his behalf by the Lord Jesus on the cross, and by the Lord's subsequent resurrection and exaltation to glory. Now, the veil was redundant, as also were all the typical atoning sacrifices of bulls, goats and lambs which had been offered for so many centuries previously.

In the second part of the verse, we are told that the earth shook and the rocks split. Earthquakes and other natural phenomena are common enough; however, all these things are in the hands of the Lord (or under the providential control of the Lord). The timing of these events indicated God's power at work in the natural realm, and his total control over natural events–disposing and arranging them as he so pleases. This explains the exact timing of the eclipse, of the rending of the temple veil, and of the earthquake to coincide with the Lord's sufferings upon the cross and his work of atonement for the sins of men and women.

## MATTHEW 27:52-53

One of the effects of the earthquake was the fracturing of the rock-hewn tombs, or sepulchres. This in itself would not be unusual under the circumstances. However, the hand of God is seen when dead believers within these tombs were raised to life. Leaving the tombs still wrapped in their grave clothes, these resurrected saints then made their way into Jerusalem where they were seen by many people. Undoubtedly, these believers would die again later, but this was a foretaste of the final resurrection to come.

## MATTHEW 27:54

Throughout the period that Jesus had been hanging on the cross, a Roman centurion and some of his men had been guarding the scene. A centurion[62] was nominally in charge of 100 men (although this varied). This demonstrates that it was not an ordinary Roman soldier or legionary who stood guard at the cross, but an officer.

The centurion and his detachment who were keeping watch experienced the phenomena that had been occurring throughout the afternoon; from the eclipse of the sun to the earthquake and everything associated with these events. We must remember, too, that this centurion would have been one of those men present at Pilate's judgment hall, and who either witnessed the other soldiers mocking and beating the Lord Jesus. Indeed, the centurion may even have permitted the men under his command to participate in these acts of cruelty and derision.

Now, however, as they stand beneath the cross–and having just experienced the demonstration of God's power in providence and having heard the cries of the Lord Jesus–the centurion and his men are brought to their senses. Filled with awe, and speaking for them all, the battle-hardened centurion cries out, *"Truly this was the Son of God!"*

If this warrior believed anything, it would have been in the Roman gods such as Jupiter, Juno, Mars and Venus. However, here he is confessing that the Christ who has just surrendered his spirit to the Father is the Son of God: i.e., that Jesus is the Son of the Jewish (and Christian) God, YWHW (or the LORD, sometimes transliterated, *Jehovah*).

This is a remarkable confession from a pagan Roman officer. Granted, some Roman centurions and other Roman soldiers had professed faith in Christ during his ministry on earth; but we have no record of this man confessing Jesus' Sonship before this point.

## MATTHEW 27:55

At this point, we learn that many of those who stood in close proximity to the cross were women. Apart from John, Jesus' disciples are conspicuous by their absence. However, it seems that many of the women who had followed the Lord Jesus and ministered to him, now stood at a short distance from him as he hung on the cross. These faithful followers of the Lord were not to be deterred by the shame in the eyes of the world of associating with the Crucified One; nor did they fear the displeasure of the civil or religious authorities, nor the disfavour of their families. They had come to minister to the Lord by their pres-

[62] centurion: *centurio* from Lat. *centum*, one hundred.

ence in his dying hour; and they would remain with him until he had expired on the cross. Such was the courage and faithfulness of these dear saints of the Lord; and their faithfulness would manifest itself again when they ministered to the Lord Jesus after his burial.

The mention of Galilee indicates that some at least of these women had followed the Lord from the time of his ministry in that province. They knew the Lord was known as the despised Nazarene or Galilean; yet they had been convinced by his message of salvation and life, and had determined to follow him wherever he went.

### MATTHEW 27:56

Matthew names a few of these faithful and courageous followers of the Lord Jesus. One was Mary Magdalene. This Mary felt a debt of deep gratitude to the Lord since Jesus had released her from the torments and bondage of demon possession. (Luke 8:2). Indeed, so great was her subjection to the powers of evil that Luke, the physician, says she was possessed by 'seven demons'–probably, a reference to complete (represented by 'seven') control or demonization of her person and personality. By the grace of God and the divine power of the Lord Jesus, however, Mary Magdalene had experienced total deliverance and cleansing from these vile spirits. Now, in love and gratitude, she had decided to follow Jesus and remain within him throughout his ministry on earth.

Also mentioned is Mary (the wife of Cleopas) and the mother of the sons of Zebedee (James and John) and also of James and Joseph. (Matt. 10:2-3; Mark 15:40; John 19:25)

## JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA REQUESTS JESUS' BODY

***Matthew 27:57-61***

*(Mark 15:42-47; Luke 23:50-53; John 19:38-42)*

### MATTHEW 27:57-58

We now learn that one of the most respected members of the Council or Sanhedrin was prepared to profess publicly his faith in Christ. Until this point, Joseph had been a secret disciple of the Lord Jesus; not willing that his faith in Christ should become known to other members of the prestigious Jewish Sanhedrin. Now, however, Joseph determined to take his stand, openly professing his allegiance to the now-crucified Redeemer. What he had failed to do during the Lord's lifetime, he would not fail to do in his death: he would honour his Lord and Saviour by affording him a fitting burial and place of rest.

Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy man. One of his possessions included an expensive rock-hewn tomb or sepulchre which he had intended for his own use. Now, however, Joseph determined that the Lord Jesus should be laid in that unused tomb, rather than in one of the common graves prepared for crucified criminals and for foreigners to Israel.

With this in mind, Joseph made his way boldly into the presence of Pontius Pilate to make a formal request for Jesus' body. It is probable that Joseph was able to enter Pilate's presence with little or no difficulty because of his standing in the Sanhedrin and perhaps also because he was a man of some material

means. Although, initially, Pilate was surprised to learn that Jesus' was dead so soon,[63] he readily granted Joseph's request.

As soon as Joseph was in possession of the necessary documents ordering the release of Jesus' body, he took them and presented them to the Roman centurion at the cross. The soldiers then handed over the body to Joseph of Arimathea.

### MATTHEW 27:59-60

As soon as he had received custody of the body, Joseph took it–probably, with the help of some others–and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud in accordance with Jewish burial custom. Having prepared the body for burial, Joseph then laid it within his own new tomb which had been cut into the rock. Therefore, the tomb was completely inaccessible, except from the front entrance. At this point, Joseph and his friends secured the front entrance by rolling against it a large or great stone. This stone would have been of sufficient dimensions and shape to have wedged in and blocked the front of the tomb. Joseph of Arimathea then left the scene.

### MATTHEW 27:61

However, two women had remained at the tomb, (indicating, incidentally, that Joseph had not buried Jesus alone but in the company of others). After Joseph left, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph sat down opposite the tomb.

## SOLDIERS GUARD THE TOMB

***Matthew 27:62-66***

### MATTHEW 27:62-64

Reference is made now to 'the next day' or the day of Preparation. The next day was the Saturday or Sabbath. However, Jewish sacred (as opposed to civil) chronology reckoned a day to run from sunset to sunset. Therefore, the day of Preparation began on Thursday at sunset and continued until Friday at sunset. The Sabbath began on Friday at sunset and would end on Saturday at sunset, when the beginning of the next day would commence.

As the Passover Sabbath drew near, the chief priests and Pharisees sought an audience with Pontius Pilate. Consistently, during his lifetime, these religious leaders had refused to believe the words of the Lord Jesus. Now, after his death, these same sceptical and unbelieving leaders grow concerned about something the Lord had prophesied: viz., that after three days he would rise again from death. (Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22) Therefore, anxious that no reports of a supposed resurrection should reach the ears of the general population, the chief priests and Pharisees beseeched Pilate to secure the tomb against possible intruders.

[63] *dead so soon*: Crucifixion was a lingering and painful form of execution. Criminals could hang on the cross for many hours before finally expiring. Thus, in order to hasten their death, the Roman soldiers would often break the legs of their victims –although they did not do this with the Lord Jesus because he had already given up his spirit voluntarily to his Father.

The religious leaders imagined that—if the tomb was not sealed securely—some of Jesus' disciples would come by night and remove the body. However, in their present distressed and demoralised state of mind, the last thing the disciples would have thought of doing was to remove their Master's body from the tomb. To them, he was dead; and removing his body to claim he had risen would have been a pointless and forlorn exercise. The disciples had not yet understood Jesus' teaching concerning his resurrection. Furthermore, to have made their way out of their present hiding place and through the city to the tomb would have risked recognition and arrest by the authorities as those who had been associated with Jesus.

## MATTHEW 27:65-66

Pilate then instructed the chief priests and Pharisees to use the military guard already assigned to them for the purpose of securing and watching the tomb around the clock. The religious leaders had their own temple police; but probably the guard referred to here was a detachment of Roman soldiers from the nearby barracks which had been assigned to the religious authorities.

These soldiers made their way quickly to the tomb. On their arrival, they sealed the great stone against the rock. Then, they took turns to maintain a 24 hour guard at the tomb, separated into several watches. Each watch would consist of four soldiers who would remain on duty until relieved by the next watch, three or four hours later. It was therefore impossible for the tomb to be disturbed. Even if the soldiers had fallen asleep–a scurrilous accusation perpetrated later by the religious leaders–no one could have broken into the tomb without causing a great disturbance and awakening the soldiers. If, as others alleged, the soldiers had fled the scene–which they would not have done unless they had witnessed the risen Lord coming forth from the tomb–they would have been charged with gross dereliction of duty and subsequently executed.

# GOSPEL OF MATTHEW CHAPTER 28

## THE EMPTY TOMB

***Matthew 28:1-8***

### MATTHEW 28:1

The phrase, 'after the Sabbath', means after the Sabbath had passed and the next day had begun. According to Jewish sacred chronology, the Sabbath ended at sunset on Saturday evening. Therefore—from that point until the following sunset—the day was now Sunday or the first day of the week.

Very early on the Sunday morning—just before dawn—two of the Lord's followers, Mary Magdalene and Mary the wife of Cleopas made their way through the twilight to the tomb of the Lord Jesus.

Once again, this shows something of the devotion and faithfulness of these two women—a trait that was characteristic of other women who followed the Lord Jesus. Unlike most of the male disciples (apart from John) who had remained in hiding behind locked doors, the women who followed the Lord Jesus did not desert him when he was arrested, tried, and crucified; or when his body was laid in the tomb. Even now, two of these women were making their way to the tomb to attend to Jesus' body—although they had not yet established how they would remove the very heavy stone from the entrance.

### MATTHEW 28:2

As it transpired, however, there was (or had been) an earthquake of some magnitude since the Lord's body had been laid to rest in the tomb. This was an example of the Lord providentially arranging the course of nature at his word of command so that the earthquake took place at this particular location at this particular time, thus breaching the seal that held the great stone against the entrance and dislodging the stone from its position. Simultaneously, a glorious and holy angel of the Lord rolled back the stone and sat on it near the entrance to ensure that the now-opened tomb remained undisturbed.

### MATTHEW 28:3-4

In common with other holy angels, this angel is described as having an appearance like 'lightning': i.e., the absolute and unsullied brilliance of God's majestic glory and holiness was reflected to some extent in the appearance and demeanour of these holy messengers. The verse tells us also that his clothing was white like snow. This speaks of the absolute holiness, righteousness, purity and transcendence of the God whom these angels serve and worship, and of his total separation from sin and impurity. Thus, although not looking upon the glory of God directly, anyone seeing these angels would be seeing a little of God's majestic glory in his servants; and to view even this level of God's glory would be overwhelming and likely to strike terror and awe into anyone in their presence unless reassured by their words and actions.

However, for the battle-seasoned Roman soldiers, such a sight was too much. In stark terror, they froze and remained for a while completely immobile and unable to act. Soon, however, they recovered sufficiently to flee from the presence of the awe-inspiring holy angel. Execution at the hands of the emperor was preferable to the terrors now apparently threatening them by this holy being from heaven.

## MATTHEW 28:5

Undoubtedly, the women who had just arrived at the tomb to discover this glorious holy being seated there were equally amazed and terrified. However, before they could flee from the scene, the angel of the Lord addressed them with comforting and reassuring words, *"Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified..."*

The first words uttered to the women were those that they most needed to hear at this time: *"Do not be afraid..."* It was natural for the women to be filled with awe, fear and foreboding in the presence of this most glorious messenger from God. It must have been terrifying to stand in his presence. However, the angel had said, *"Do not be afraid..."* and the women responded to his reassuring and comforting words; for they were the words that had the authority of a servant sent from God to minister to his people. (Heb. 1:14)

The angel adds, *"...for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified..."*

The angel of the Lord knew why these two women had come to the tomb. He was fully aware of their devotion and faithfulness to their crucified Saviour and Lord. And he knew that they had come to the tomb even while his disciples had remained hiding in the city. However, the angel is about to announce the most remarkable news to these two Marys:

## MATTHEW 28:6

To their astonishment, the angel tells the women that Jesus is no longer lying in the tomb. What thoughts must have raced now through their troubled and anxious minds? If his body was no longer in the tomb, what had become of it? Who had taken it? What had they done with it, and where had they laid him?

Now, utterly inconsolable at these words, the women's grief would have intensified unimaginably if the angel had not added immediately, *"...for he has risen, as he said..."* Now, the women must have stood before the angel in shock and amazement. The Lord has risen?! Yes, the Lord had told them often that he would rise again from the dead. However, at the time, his followers had not understood his words, and did not realise that he was speaking of a literal and physical resurrection of his body from the dead. Now, however, a holy angel of God was telling these women that Jesus had risen from the dead. Surely, then, it must be true if God's angel says so.

At this point, the angel adds, *"...Come, see the place where he lay..."* As yet, the women had not entered the tomb. Now, however the angel invites them to witness for themselves that the Lord's body is no longer present in the grave. Now, they could see where he had lain. They could see the folded grave clothes, but they could see no sign of the Lord anywhere within the tomb. Thus, they were convinced of the angel's words. Now, they believed that the Lord had arisen; that their Master was alive.

## MATTHEW 28:7

The holy messenger of the Lord now sends these two women with a message for his disciples. The two Marys were not to linger at the tomb, but were to return immediately to the city of Jerusalem. Then, they were to locate Jesus' disciples—probably, still hiding behind locked doors—and tell them that the Lord

Jesus had risen from the dead, and that he would meet them in Galilee. The disciples, therefore, were to make their way to that province where they would see their risen Lord face to face.

The expression at the end of the sentence, *"See, I have told you"*, is not a redundant or superfluous expression. It emphasises the divine source of the message, both to the women and to the disciples. Speaking on behalf of God in heaven, the angel was announcing with authority from God and as the glorious and holy messenger sent from God's divine and majestic presence that his Son had arisen from the dead, as he had foretold.

## MATTHEW 28:8-9

The two women wasted no time, but immediately obeyed the command of the angel. Still deeply apprehensive at their encounter with the holy angel, and yet consumed with joy to learn that the Lord Jesus was alive, they rushed back to the city to find the Lord's disciples and tell them this great news.

As the two women made their way quickly along the dusty road, they encountered a stranger in their path. However, as they drew closer, the stranger greeted the women. Immediately, they must have recognised his voice and realised that it was their Lord and Saviour who was approaching. As soon as the Lord drew close enough, the two women fell on their knees to the ground, taking hold of the Lord's feet in an act of wholehearted allegiance, homage and worship. With their own eyes, they had seen the Lord now alive from the dead. Now, they realised what he had meant when he had spoken of rising again.

## MATTHEW 28:10

The Lord Jesus, however, did not want the women to remain with him at this moment. They had been on their way to tell the Lord's disciples the glorious news of his resurrection. Now, that they had seen the Lord with their own eyes, they would be able to provide a first-hand eyewitness account to the fact of the Lord's resurrection. Therefore, the Lord Jesus reassures the two women with the familiar words, *"Do not be afraid".*

The sight of the living Lord Jesus standing before them must have filled these two women with awe, wonder and deep trepidation. Although the angel had told them that the Lord Jesus had risen from the dead, and although they had looked upon the empty tomb, their mind would scarcely have been able to comprehend the implications of this momentous truth. Now, however, as they knelt in the very presence of their Saviour and Lord, they knew that he was alive—and yet, their minds must still have been in turmoil at this apparently inexplicable turn of events. They had seen their Lord Jesus crucified. They had watched as he was laid in the tomb. They knew that he was dead. Yet, now their Lord stands before them very much alive.

Knowing their confused state of mind, the Lord utters these comforting words, *"Do not be afraid."* You have no cause to fear or to be in turmoil of mind. It is I. I really have risen from the dead, as I said. However, you must continue on your journey to tell my despairing and frightened disciples—my brothers—of my resurrection.

Having instructed the women to go on their journey, the Lord tells them to let his disciples know that he would meet them in Galilee. This is not to preclude his prior appearance to his disciples in Jerusalem. However, this took place privately, in the upper room. It was not the Lord's intention to appear again

publicly in Jerusalem or Judea. Again, the Lord had no intention of revealing himself to anyone other than his own disciples and in a location far removed from the city of Jerusalem which was still seething with Passover pilgrims from many different lands. In addition, Jesus wanted time to instruct his disciples privately, before commissioning them to carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth and before leaving them to ascend into heaven. Therefore, in accordance with his Father's eternal plans and purposes, the Lord intended to meet his disciples in the quieter area of Galilee, where he had ministered for much of his earthly life.

## THE GUARDS BRIBED

### MATTHEW 28:11

While all this was taking place, some of the guard which had fled the scene of the resurrection re-entered Jerusalem and went immediately to the chief priests to tell them what had happened. It may be argued that these soldiers should have reported in the first instance to the Roman barracks nearby. However, it is likely that this was a detachment of Roman soldiers that been assigned or seconded to the religious authorities for maintaining order around the temple precincts, in conjunction with the temple police. This would be especially important at festivals such as the Passover, when a very large influx of pilgrims required the presence of auxiliary officers—although, as Gentiles, the Roman soldiers would not actually enter the temple building itself.

It must be assumed, therefore, that when they contacted the chief priests, the guard did not enter the temple but made their way instead to the palace of the high priest, or that they contacted the chief priests through the office of the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate.

### MATTHEW 28:12-13

As soon as the chief priests learned of the Lord's resurrection, they called together the Jewish elders to confer with them. Ultimately, the chief priests and elders agreed on a plan to explain away the missing body: Firstly, they would bribe the soldiers with a sizable and persuasive sum of money. Secondly, they would instruct the bribed soldiers to tell the people that Jesus' body had been stolen away secretly by his disciples, who (supposedly) had come by night and removed it while the guards slept.

If it were not such a serious matter, this plan would be laughable. It is riddled with flaws, inconsistencies and illogicality. Some of these are listed below:

- For the guard to have accepted this bribe (which apparently they did) implicated them in a deliberate deceit and wilful covering up of events. For they had been present and had witnessed at first hand the earthquake, the appearing of the angel, the removal of the stone and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Therefore, although being fully aware of the facts, they were fully willing to deny the facts and to falsify the truth.

- To say that the Lord's disciples had taken away the body was ludicrous. At that moment, the disciples of the Lord Jesus were hiding behind locked doors, terrified that the same fate would befall them as befell their Master. They were utterly convinced that Jesus was dead, that they would never see him again, and that if they put in an appearance in public they would be arrested and tried as followers of the Lord. Therefore, for these despairing and terrified men to have made

their way from Jerusalem to the tomb, to have attempted to force entry into the tomb in front of the 'sleeping' soldiers beggars belief and is not worthy of further refutation.

- Again, supposing contrary to all logic and common sense the disciples had overcome their fear and made their way to the tomb to remove their Lord's body, they could not possibly have entered the tomb. Until the earthquake, the tomb entrance had been blocked by a great stone. That stone had been sealed by the guard to make it impossible to remove without a great deal of time and effort. However, if the disciples had attempted to expend this amount of time and effort removing the stone, why would the 'sleeping' guards not be awakened by the considerable disturbance? We might say, of course, that the guards had been drugged or were in a coma! If so, how did they manage to flee the scene?

## MATTHEW 28:14

It was only a matter of time before word of these events reached the ears of Pontius Pilate. It would be enough for him to contend with the reports of the Lord's resurrection; but to learn that some of his soldiers had been bribed to report a lie would have infuriated him. Not that he would have been unwilling to support a falsification of the truth, but rather that he would have been enraged that the soldiers had agreed to accept this bribe from the chief priests, contrary to Roman law and military guidelines. However, the chief priests and elders had considered this eventuality, so they assured the guard that they would take steps to ensure that their actions would not incur trouble for them with the Roman governor.

## MATTHEW 28:15

Satisfied with the religious leaders' assurances, the guards accepted the bribe willingly and gratefully. Their pay as soldiers was relatively meagre; therefore, this sizeable bribe would provide them with quite a substantial income, at least for a time.

Therefore, having taken the money, the soldiers then ensured that word spread around the city concerning the supposed spiriting away of the body by the Lord's disciples. Since it came from a generally creditable source, many of the people believed these untruthful reports and became convinced that the disciples had removed the body from the tomb. Indeed, rather than accept the fact of the resurrection, this wholly fictitious account of these events has been passed on through many succeeding generations of Jewish people.

In passing, we might observe that the Jewish religious authorities could very easily have disproved the resurrection and supported their claim simply by locating and producing the body of the Lord Jesus. Under the circumstances, the civil and military authorities must have conducted a widespread and thorough search for the missing body—and yet, inexplicably, they failed to find it! It had been missing for only a few hours. In the timescale involved, there was no time to hide it elsewhere while at the same time, concealing the newly-created hiding place, and absolutely no reason why the body could not have been located. It was in the interest of the religious and civil authorities to discover the body and to discredit the reports of a resurrection. Why could they not do so? Why did they need to resort to bribery and fictitious accounts of these events if the resurrection of the Lord Jesus was not true?

## THE GREAT COMMISSION

### MATTHEW 28:16-17

We return for a moment to the two women whom the angel had sent to Jerusalem to announce the good news that Jesus was alive. On their arrival, these women had told the eleven disciples of Jesus' resurrection and of the fact that they had met him on the road. A short time later, the Lord would appear to these disciples personally while they remained in the upper room, still behind locked doors. On the Lord's first appearance, Thomas was not present, and when told by the other disciples that they had seen the Lord, Thomas expressed deep scepticism and unbelief. However, when the Lord appeared again to his disciples a week later, Thomas was present on that occasion and was utterly convinced of his Lord's resurrection. (John 20:18-20, 24-29)

In accordance with the message given by the women, the eleven disciples made their way to the mountain or hillside in Galilee where they expected to meet again with the Lord Jesus. When the Lord Jesus appeared to the disciples, they worshipped him. However, the verse also tells us that some of them doubted. It is unlikely that Thomas was involved here, as he had been convinced utterly of his Lord's resurrection when he had seen him in the upper room. However, perhaps some of the other disciples wondered whether the Man now standing before them was the same person that had appeared to them in the upper room. It is possible that the Lord's appearance was altered in some way since his resurrection and in his pre-exalted state. This may account for the failure of the two on the Emmaus road to recognise the Lord initially (Luke 24:13-35), and for the woman at the tomb to recognise her Lord until she heard his voice. Undoubtedly, however, these doubting disciples would be convinced whenever the Lord drew closer to them and they could hear his familiar voice.

If any of the five hundred disciples who had not previously seen the risen Lord in the upper room were present on this occasion then it is entirely possible that some of their number could have doubted the identity of the Lord Jesus initially. But, again, they would be convinced once they had seen him at close quarters and had heard his voice.

### MATTHEW 28:18

The opening words of this verse imply that the Lord Jesus had been standing apart from his disciples by some distance. Now, however, as he is about to speak to them, he comes up or draws close to them. Now, the disciples should be able to see and recognise their Master clearly, both by his resurrection appearance (which the Eleven had witnessed in the upper room) and by the sound of his voice.

Then, the Lord Jesus uttered these words to his followers:

*"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me..."*

These are astonishing words for anyone other than the Son of God to utter. No one in heaven or earth has all authority (or exercises divine sovereignty) over the entire creation except God alone. Therefore, by uttering these words, the Lord Jesus was asserting categorically that he was equal with God the Father, and that the divine sovereignty that belonged only to the Father had been given to him. This, of course, is completely consistent with the fact that Jesus is the eternal Word or Logos, and that the Father

has created all things through the Son and for the Son, and that the Son is pre-eminent over the entire created universe.

Having asserted his power and authority as God the Son, the Lord Jesus now continues to address his disciples:

## MATTHEW 28:19

(Mark 16:15-16)

*"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations…"*

These are not the words of some religious leader merely, but the command of the eternal sovereign God now manifest in the flesh. A religious leader's words might be disregarded with impunity. However, those whom God the Son commands to make disciples of all nations are not at liberty to disregard his word. God has expressly commanded that the Gospel must be preached to every nation under heaven, and it would be wilful rebellion for the Lord's people to disobey this command.

Granted, not every child of God is called to proclaim the Gospel in some foreign land or to labour in some mission field. Nor is every child of God commanded or expected to preach to a church or to pastor God's flock. The command that the Lord issued above was addressed primarily to those who were his apostles; the first ambassadors for Christ in the world. However, many of the Lord's people are neither called nor equipped to serve in a preaching or teaching capacity. Yet, the principle of personal evangelism still applies to them. We all must witness to the resurrection of Christ and to the truth of the Gospel in one form or another—whether as a missionary, a church pastor or other leader, or personally to our relatives, friends and neighbours.

We must bear in mind that Christianity is not one form of true faith among many. Rather, it is the only true faith; the only way to the true and living God, and the exclusive means of salvation and eternal life for any person on this earth. (John 14:6)

*"…baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit…"*

This phrase would be nothing short of blasphemous if it were not absolutely true. The Lord Jesus is here linking the name of God the Father with his own name and with that of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Lord is asserting categorically that all the characteristics that pertain to God the Father pertain equally to God the Son and to God the Holy Spirit.

This is an undisguised claim by the Son to supreme and absolute equality in power, glory and eternity with the Father and with the Holy Spirit. Thus, this reinforces the command that the Lord Jesus is now giving to his disciples—preach the Gospel to all nations, baptising all believers in the name of the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit.

## MATTHEW 28:20

*"…Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you…"*

What message were the disciples to preach to the nations? The Gospel, of course, was fundamental. However, the disciples were not to stop at making known the way of salvation and eternal life—essential

as this was. They were to teach the people everything that the Lord Jesus had taught his disciples during his time on earth. This is one of the reasons why so much of the Lord's teaching has been committed to writing, in the form of the Gospel narratives (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), and also why the apostles and other expounded the Lord's teaching and presented it in the form or epistles or letters to the churches and to individual church leaders.

Collectively, the Lord's teaching and the preaching and expositions given by the NT disciples is known as the 'apostles' doctrine.' It was this teaching in its entirety that the apostles were to present to the believing community worldwide (or to the church). The teaching of the Lord Jesus and of his apostles would form the basis for the inception and growth of the New Testament church or community of believers worldwide.

*"...And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

These are the final words of the Lord Jesus to his disciples as recorded by Matthew (although, Jesus spoke again later to those watching his ascension into heaven).

The word, *'behold'*, draws attention to the significance or importance of the statement to follow. Essentially, it means, 'look with the utmost diligence to me, and listen to what I am about to say', or, 'look at me steadfastly, and listen most carefully'.

*"...I am with you always..."*

Although the disciples were as yet unaware of it, the Lord Jesus was about to leave them to return to the right hand of his Father in heaven. The Lord had spoken often to his disciples about this event, but they had failed to understand his words, just as they had failed to understand that he must be crucified, buried and rise again the third day—until after it had happened. Now, the Lord knows that the disciples will become distraught when he leaves them—at least until the Holy Spirit comes upon them in power at Pentecost. Therefore, to reassure them now and for the remainder of their lives one earth, he utters these most comforting words, *"...and behold, I am with you always..."* Indeed, the Lord Jesus was about to leave his disciples to return to heaven. Yet, at the same time, Jesus would never leave them, but would be with them forever. Of course, the Lord Jesus would not be with them in the flesh as he had been for the past 3 years and more. Rather, he would be with them in the power and presence of his Holy Spirit, who would come upon them at Pentecost to equip them for their great task, and who would remain with them forever. The apostle John explains these matters in his Gospel at some length, and the events at Pentecost are covered by Luke in Acts 2:1ff.

Once again, this demonstrates the equality of the Son with the Holy Spirit; for the Person who would remain with the disciples throughout their lives (and with every other regenerate child of God) would be God the Holy Spirit, or the Comforter whom the Lord Jesus would send to act in his place. Thus, those who know the Lord Jesus as their Saviour are never without his immediate power and presence in their lives—in the Person of his Holy Spirit.